

Growing Up Mormon

Why Not Go to a Christian College?

By Eugene England

Short essay expounding the benefits of studying at a religious versus a secular college or university. This essay is also the second installment of England's *Dialogue* column, "Growing Up Mormon."

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I DID MUCH OF my growing up as a Mormon while doing graduate work or engaged in teaching and administration at Stanford University. Though not a full-blown multiversity on the Berkeley or Minnesota model, Stanford moved rapidly in that direction in the 50s and early 60s. Like many colleges and other large universities that have developed far from their roots as, in some sense, religious colleges, Stanford has been thoroughly secularized. And, in what seems more and more an inevitable consequence, the liberal arts tradition of humane education there is dead and the community is fragmented.

At Stanford there was generally the freedom to ignore religion that I had found earlier at the University of Utah (Utah also evidenced and apparently still does a quaintly obsessive freedom to *attack* the religion of the local culture). But, except in certain undergraduate religion courses (which, significantly, were the most popular and effective general education courses), there was no encouragement at Stanford toward the exploration and expression of students' deepest held values and loyalties seen as religious or even ethical phenomena. As a part-time teacher in the L.D.S. Institute for Stanford students I found the faith of those I knew seldom challenged constructively or even in any direct way at all on the campus. The Institute and the student wards attempted to help young Mormons confront the intellectual and social environment at Stanford with mature faith and ideas and ethical feelings, but for many it served, necessarily but I think regrettably, as a mere haven from the indifferent if not hostile world of the university. Yet, it was educationally and religiously irrelevant factors like the impact on L.D.S. parents of student radicalism and co-ed living groups that seemed to cause the undergraduate population of Mormons at Stanford to decline steadily.

In 1968 I began to teach across the bay at California State College at Hayward, one of the state's numerous public liberal arts colleges. There I found a less elitist faculty and a somewhat less elite and much more diversified student body than at Stanford. But I also found much of the same professional ambition and jealousy and lack of effective concern for teachers and for teaching that could reach out to the

spiritual and moral dimensions and needs of students, could encounter them as whole persons and bring them into some sense of community. I found many students, including Mormons, retreating, disassociating their academic life from their feelings, their life decisions, their search for ultimate meaning and values. I began to think about what the alternatives might be for young Latter-day Saints who might not want or might not be able to go to Brigham Young University or Ricks but who still wanted a genuinely humane education in which they could integrate faith and learning.

Then quite out of the blue I was offered a chance to go to St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota as the Dean of Academic Affairs. When I left the campus at Hayward to fly to Northfield, we were just a few days into the Cambodia-Kent State crisis of May, 1970. The student strike at Cal State had taken the form not only of pressure for restructuring of classes to make them more relevant to the situation (which I favored) but also of bands of students roaming the halls, smashing windows and doors, and intimidating professors so that classes could not continue. At St. Olaf I found the students also on strike and just as concerned about the issues—working as hard or harder to turn out information and argument through a strike center in the student union, but also praying together in strike meetings; cutting their hair, dressing up, and going door to door in the town to present their anti-war arguments to the silent majority; interrupting a mass meeting of the whole college community in which the issues were long and forcibly debated to present the president of the college, whose administration building they had temporarily liberated, with a birthday cake. In Northfield I was given a copy of an essay by a student explaining why when he heard the news of the Kent State killings he had returned to his room to fast and pray for a few days before acting rather than immediately joining the protest meetings and marches, with their tendency toward stereotyping in order to blame and hate. As I was interviewed for the position I was—well—surprised to find in both faculty and administrators a naturally expressed concern for the religious and moral dimensions of life and education that was both challenging to and in many ways compatibly instructive to my own views. But it was a pervasive spirit that I had felt in no other place but Brigham Young University that surprised me most and captured my heart. Even though I had traveled to St. Olaf with a good deal of skepticism about such a radical change in my vocation and living environment and friends, I began to take the possibility very seriously. And after my wife Charlotte had flown out and felt some of the same spirit, as we talked and prayed about the decision as a family we did have a feeling of direction.

We have not been disappointed. The town has typical mid-western advantages of decency and security, with access to a rural and even wilderness world. And the Church experience in a small, struggling branch—with three or four responsibilities apiece beginning at age twelve, and many opportunities to teach the gospel and see it accepted by those around us—has been mainly very good for our family. My particular work at St. Olaf has engaged me in something I am deeply concerned about and which is part of my point in writing this. St. Olaf, like many colleges, is still vitally involved in a church connection and a religious tradition. But it is going through a kind of identity crisis; it has worked, especially in the past ten years, to

upgrade itself in purely professional terms as a liberal arts college. It has a fine faculty, many of whom have significant research and publication accomplishments and prominence in their fields. Most are committed to good teaching. At the same time, there is an increasing feeling that this college's particular tradition and its connection with the Lutheran Church ought to provide a healthy basis with which to achieve and offer students something unique among liberal arts colleges. Are we to be Christian in name only (merely as a way of providing certain support for the budget) or is there some radical sense in which Christian perspective and commitment should inform all the college's plans and decisions? Many younger faculty have been involved in the new academic revolutions of the 60s which are questioning many of the accomplishments and even the aims of traditional higher education. At St. Olaf we are concerned about the fact that in the 60s smaller colleges began, following the lead of the universities, to place a greater emphasis on research and publication which often lead to a de-emphasis on teaching. We are also concerned about external demands for vocational preparation and "objective," secularized instruction which tend to depersonalize education and make it unresponsive to the students' need and concern for development of his whole personality, including his thirst for answers to ultimate questions relating to his whole living process.

In preparation for St. Olaf's centennial in 1974 a special study has been commissioned to inquire into the college's identity and goals and to propose a plan of development for the next ten years. At the same time that this study is being conducted, a good deal of attention is being given to improving teaching, including the process of recruiting and developing the faculty. We have been trying to define the kind of faculty we want and to determine whether we can project an image that will attract specific kinds of people. One tentative expression of the criteria proposed at a Goals Conference last spring is the following:

We are concerned to find scholars for whom academic competence is more than the technical mastery of a subject matter, but is more deeply rooted in some understanding of their discipline's involvement in the broader human issues that arise out of man's struggles to understand himself and his world. This might be catch-phrased a "meta-disciplinary perspective." Second, we are concerned to find scholars who take seriously, as a matter worthy of debate, Christianity's unique perspective on any attempts to deal with these human issues.

Partly in response to this formulation, the philosophy department has developed a letter to prospective applicants which advertises its criteria for appointment and retention, one of which is this:

He should be a person concerned with the religious and moral dimensions of life and learning, who takes very seriously the relation of religious commitment and moral values to the thought and conduct of himself and his students. The Department does not wish to appoint persons who are hostile to religious commitment, who regard such matters as peripheral to their work, or who are disinterested in religious questions. . . . We do not insist on a particular answer to the

religious question or to the question of the relation of religion to learning, but we are seeking persons who will take both questions seriously, who are prepared to discuss them, and who will 'keep them in mind when considering the work and program of the College.

It is easy enough for me to see much besides these forms of self-examination and search for religious identity without creedalism that makes St. Olaf spiritually alive. Daily (non-compulsory) chapel is not always well attended but does provide an impressive opportunity for many students and faculty to gather together regularly to confront each other, in the context of their shared academic life, with their religious faith and moral concern. There is a marked freedom in and out of the class for students to question and express the ultimate and personal implications of what is being presented or discussed. And members of the community often engage in the small, spontaneous, graceful acts of faith and openness, trust and love, that create a religious community—an invitation to a faculty committee to pray together over a problem, a proposal by a faculty member that a group of faculty express their Christian faith by living at a mutually agreed upon standard of living and donate their surplus to good causes, a personal essay by a faculty wife in the student newspaper expressing her faith in and appreciation of Christian concepts of premarital chastity and the meaning of sex in marriage, a note of encouragement left in a mailbox, a student making an appointment to ask, "What makes you the way you are?"

It seems to me that these factors and many others make St. Olaf and colleges like it exceptionally good places for Mormon students (and faculty members) to be. Enrollment at L.D.S. Church colleges is being held steady so that with a growing Church population an increasing percentage of young Latter-day Saints must go elsewhere. The Church encourages them to go to schools close to their home for the first year or two, but for some this is not always possible and for others not desirable. I think a particularly good situation for them to experience would be a place like St. Olaf. I believe that young people from the mission fields or other places with little concentration of Mormon culture or without a teenage Mormon peer group should go to a Church college or one where there is a strong, thriving institute. But Utah Mormons or others raised in centers of strong Mormon culture in the West can contribute much to and benefit much from a different kind of setting. Such a student here at St. Olaf would find his spiritual life invigorated by the special closeness and need for active, humble service in a small branch. He would find his religious and moral concerns and perspectives challenged but not disdained, taken seriously, argued with and responded to. It has been my experience that that is by far the best situation for developing real faith. At the same time such a student would find a college atmosphere with its own spiritual dimension where he can learn and share with other people, some of whom have a different kind of faith with similar strength to his own and many others who are actively seeking to question or find faith. Faculty members would find some of the same opportunities for themselves and their families to serve the Church and in addition could prepare to serve it even better by entering into serious dialogue with other committed Christians about their faith and the nature of Christian education.

Part of my motivation in this thinly disguised plea is selfish. It does get a bit lonely here in some ways without the constant opportunities for deep gospel brotherhood and the life-filling satisfactions of a full Church program that a Mormon community provides. But I guess I would make that fact part of my appeal—that the Church needs building in areas like this in order that the young people growing up and living here may have an even better opportunity to develop all dimensions of their faith. Small branches are extremely good for building a certain kind of humble interdependence and embattled faith, but some of the programs of the Church which diversify our talents and strength and broaden our vision of the Gospel are crippled by lack of numbers and training. At the same time, centers of Mormon population, especially in Utah, are flooded with talented, experienced people with plenty of opportunities to take the Gospel for granted. Many of you could find at places like St. Olaf College and the Faribault Branch the satisfaction of being greatly needed and the challenges to faith and action which continuing commitment and growth seem to depend on. I'm asking you to come for your sake and ours.

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