

Between Scylla and Charybdis: Championing Mormon Studies at Utah Valley State College

By Brian Birch

This reflection discusses the impact Eugene England made during his few short years on the campus of Utah Valley State College (now Utah Valley University). The school now sponsors an annual "Eugene England Religious Studies Lecture Series: Knowing Ourselves and Each Other." This essay appeared in the tribute issue *Sunstone* published shortly after England's passing.

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GENE CAME TO Utah Valley State College in 1998 as its first writer in residence. However, as one might suspect, Gene was not a person capable of playing only one role. In characteristic fashion, he became engaged in a number of projects beyond this capacity, including London Theatre Study Abroad and the well-known effort to establish a Mormon studies program on our campus. Gene approached each of these projects with remarkable energy and creativity and had the unique ability through his persistence and passion to inspire others to share in his vision.

I first came to know Gene personally when Scott Abbott and I organized the Academic Freedom Symposium at UVSC. Scott, who had known Gene while both taught at BYU, recommended him as someone who could greatly contribute to our effort to foster open dialogue regarding an issue that had become a concern on our campus. His remarks, entitled, "Calculated Risk: Freedom for Mormons in Utah Higher Education," were a passionate plea for Utah higher education to cultivate opportunities in the academic study of Mormonism. Lamenting the current situation in the state's major public universities, Gene remarked:

If we were talking about a university that was 70 percent Black or Jewish, the point would be immediately clear. If such a university . . . did not have courses in Black or Jewish culture (literature and history and sociology, etc.), most likely taught by Black or Jewish scholars, that university would be a laughingstock; in fact, its academic reputation might well be compromised and its accreditation in serious trouble. But, even more seriously, it would be failing to seize a great educational opportunity—that is, to engage the majority of its students where they can most directly and easily be reached,

that is in reference to their own culture and belief systems. Such a university would thus neglect material and approaches that could be a great help in achieving perhaps the main purpose of a college education, which is to understand, both critically and appreciatively, the diversity of human cultures, including one's own, and thus become a genuine citizen of the national and world community.¹

Inspired by recent events at Utah Valley State College, he sought to demonstrate that UVSC was at that moment, the Utah institution with the most academic freedom because of the willingness of the administration to acknowledge the largely Mormon student body and to address these issues in a way that is healthy for both Mormon and non-Mormon students. However, even a "calculated risk" can be dangerous. Employing Homer's famous metaphor for treacherous sailing, Scylla and Charybdis, Gene understood that this effort must be undertaken in a way that would avoid "the austere cliffs of secular disdain for religion" on the one hand, and "the whirlpool of cultural correctness" on the other. Gene could not have imagined how prophetic this analogy would turn out to be.

Gene's remarks became the catalyst for a vigorous discussion on our campus regarding how to approach the study of Mormonism in a sensitive, yet academically rigorous, manner. Before these events, Gene had been teaching a course in Mormon literature in the department of English and literature but wanted to expand Mormon studies into other academic disciplines. About this time, Gene approached the Center for the Study of Ethics for support in creating more programming related to Mormon studies. The center was enthusiastic but aware that the issue would be sensitive and needed to be approached with care.

A year earlier, I had proposed that the center support a religious studies program to address issues in religious diversity, including, but not limited to, issues related to Mormonism. Since our projects complemented each other remarkably well, Gene and I were able to work together planning events that addressed our interests and passions. Gene immediately went to work organizing conferences and lectures, writing grants, and petitioning for more courses dealing with Mormon studies. He organized the first Mormon studies conference complete with film reviews, poetry readings, and public lectures. Wayne Booth presented a provocative and controversial paper on the potential value of religious hypocrisy, William "Bert" Wilson discussed his continuing study of the way Mormon missionary folklore functions in Church and mission culture, and Gene presented a personal essay on his missionary work in American Samoa. In addition to public events, Gene applied for and received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities entitled "Enriching Humanities Curricula: Mormon Studies." The grant funded a year-long faculty seminar and lecture series. In his grant proposal, Gene argues: Mormons, like most others, seldom realize they are cultural beings, and studying their own culture is a powerful way to help them see how culture in general works as they examine somewhat objectively, in an academic setting, how their own culture operates in their lives.

In the proposal, Gene specified three objectives: 1) to combat anti-Mormonism; 2) to enrich the scholarly understanding of a part of Utah culture; and 3) to help

Mormons understand, appreciate, and critically assess their own culture. Over the next year, scholars from various disciplines were invited to present their work in Mormon studies and also to discuss the prospect of a formal program at a public institution. Presenters included Armand Mauss, Jan Shipps, Terryl Givens, Tom Alexander, Michael Austin, David Whittaker, and Janet Bennion.

Predictably, these events and proposals raised varying levels of apprehension, ranging from mild concern to open hostility. Some on our campus believed that Mormon studies was simply another attempt to proselytize and propagandize for a church that already dominates the cultural, civic, economic, and political landscape of Utah. Some went so far as to call the effort a violation of the First Amendment and a misuse of state tax dollars. On the other end of the spectrum were those who believed that any effort in Mormon studies not conducted under the direction or control of the Church was misguided, if not outright subversive. An example of this sentiment came in the form of a question during the Mormon Studies conference in which Gene was asked if he had received approval from the Church to engage in Mormon studies. With characteristic candor, Gene explained that Mormon studies should be placed alongside disciplines such as Jewish studies, African-American studies, or Islamic studies programs, which are not intended to promote the agenda of these groups, but to study them as cultural and social institutions using the tools of contemporary academic inquiry.

The entire project came under severe criticism in the aftermath of the 2000 Sunstone Symposium, in which Gene, Elaine Englehardt, and I participated in a panel discussion about the possibilities for Religious and Mormon studies at UVSC. During the question and answer period which followed, someone asked if racism might be an appropriate topic of inquiry for Mormon studies. Gene's response was eloquent and affirmative. He proceeded to explain the importance of the issue but cautioned that great care must be taken due to the sensitivity of the subject. The next day, the *Salt Lake Tribune* ran a front-page story quoting Gene as saying ". . . no less important [than favorable studies of Mormon health] is research on racist overtones evident in Mormon culture." This publicity set off a new round of debate on our campus regarding the potential controversies a Mormon studies program would bring to UVSC. Gene's remarks, taken out of context, were used as evidence that Mormon studies was primarily an attempt to agitate and criticize the Church. Others believed pressure from these types of issues would eventually cause the program to become weak on issues of cultural criticism. As a result of this debate, along with more practical considerations, it was determined that Mormon studies would be best treated as a component of the religious studies program, and to include it as part of the college's larger effort to study religious diversity in its many forms. This would allow controversial issues to be addressed in a larger context, thus avoiding the charge of a fixation on Mormon beliefs and practices.

IN THE MONTHS following these events, Gene began to act more sluggish and often expressed frustration at his lack of energy. At first, he thought he was suffering from mild depression, that the events of the past few years at BYU and UVSC were beginning to catch up with him. Undaunted, however, Gene displayed

remarkable courage, continuing to teach, direct his seminar, and participate in ethics center events. I was absolutely astonished by his tenacity in fighting off his symptoms and forging ahead with his projects. He maintained his creativity, intellectual energy, and optimism until the day he physically collapsed.

Although I knew Gene only for a short time, I have never met a person who was more misunderstood or under-appreciated by his own people. And yet in spite of these ordeals, Gene maintained the dignity and decorum of a true Christian. In addition to being a wonderful colleague, Gene was a mentor and friend to many of us at UVSC. I feel honored by this chance to tell a bit of the story of his brief but extraordinary tenure on our campus. Gene has had a profound impact on both my spiritual and academic life, and his presence will be felt on our campus for many years to come. We hope to continue his vision of open dialogue across religious and cultural boundaries.

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