

Claude J. Burtenshaw. The Student: His University and His Church." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (1966): 89–101.

# THE STUDENT: HIS UNIVERSITY AND HIS CHURCH

by Claude J. Burtenshaw

*The editors hope that this essay will encourage a range of thoughtful reactions to the problems of relating religious belief to secular education. Claude Burtenshaw has drawn both on his experience as Professor of Political Science and Dean of Students at Utah State University and on his associations while teaching classes in the Church.*

IN AN ATTEMPT TO ENCOURAGE WIDER READING ABOUT ISSUES raised in a class discussion, I once suggested that the students read an article which I referred to as a philosophic analysis of the subject. After the class a student asked if there were other materials that would be acceptable. "You see," he said, "I'm a member of the L.D.S. Church, and I promised my father that when I went to college I would not lose my testimony. Father was very much afraid that I would become like his cousin, who, while at college, studied philosophy or something, and it wasn't long until he lost his faith and quit attending church. I would prefer," the student pleaded, "to read something other than a philosophic book."

A junior student recently announced to his parents that he would not accept a mission call now because he had doubts about some of the doctrines and principles of the Church. "I don't feel the same about the gospel as I did a year or so ago. These doubts," he said, "were caused by some of my college courses."

I recently received a letter from a former student of mine in which he announced that he had discontinued his activity in the Church. This young man had been attending college for nine years; during five of them, while attending two different universities, he had been the L.D.S. branch president in the nearby communities. There seemed to be no bitterness, just a statement that he had some intellectual problems about church doctrine and philosophy that he could not settle and that, until he resolved them, he did not feel comfortable in church association.

These were expressions of L.D.S. students resulting from encounters with the university, and it seemed clear to these students that the Church and the university were two quite different organizations. Many students have found the university, with its many and varied academic, vocational, and social programs, to be most interesting and demanding in time and attention, requiring them to reduce their church participation while attending the university. To most students this is expected and acceptable and, consequently, is a manageable problem. But this is not the difference to which I am alluding. The problem I refer to is an intellectual one. The two organizations, church and university, approach and explain the world from two quite different perspectives. And even though our society accommodates both institutions, many students find the accommodation intellectually difficult, and some find it impossible.

The conflict between the two organizations is not readily seen since the Church owns and supports a system of higher education which is patterned after non-church university course offerings and, for the most part, employs teachers who have received instruction and degrees from non-church institutions. Moreover, church members are encouraged to seek knowledge from all sources.

Reluctantly does an L.D.S. student admit that he has a conflict; and when he does, ardent church members are inclined to deny him an opportunity to discuss his problem. A common response from the zealous member, when hearing about a wondering student, is to blame a sinister university faculty member who is "out to fight the Church." These faculty members, so states the charge, "delight in destroying young people's faith and are determined to poison young students' minds." Still others attempt to explain the expressed intellectual conflict as caused by an emotional disturbance or a hidden immoral act. I have heard students say, "It is wrong to have an intellectual conflict, because having such a prob-

lem is doubting, and a faithful church member never doubts." This kind of atmosphere and attitude is not conducive to the open exploration of intellectual problems that university attendance seems to require.

In this discussion I shall argue that it is appropriate for a believing L.D.S. student to deal openly with intellectual problems, if and when they arise. I shall further contend that intellectual problems will likely arise at some time in the mind of a curious, healthy student if he seriously pursues the university program. "The two organizations are extremely different," said one student as he began his senior year. "One teaches me to question and doubt; the other teaches me to accept and trust." I am not insisting, however, that every L.D.S. student must have conflicts, because some do not involve themselves in any kind of subject matter to a degree of serious concern. This was so with an alumnus of the university, an active church member, who recently said to me, "I got through the university and remained active in church without seriously considering intellectual claims of any kind. I laughed at my friends who claimed they were having problems."

Apparently, some university courses are more apt than others to arouse questions, and some students by temperament, ability, or past experience are more easily stimulated to intellectual inquiry and, consequently, to intellectual problems. The university staff, however, believing in its purposes, attempts to expose all students to its methods and broad areas of knowledge. The requirements for a degree, the general educational courses, a major and a minor, and the total hours, tend to stimulate all students intellectually. A student becomes aware of the university's perspective, often quite suddenly. One student said to me, "I really didn't have a conflict until I realized that the university did not accept church revelation as knowledge." And to this student the methods of the two organizations immediately became an issue for him. "How does revelation work, and is it reliable?" he asked.

Another student in a social science class, becoming conscious of the two organizations and concerned with the university's sensory methods, reasoned, "If the university relies on the five senses for information, how does it explain its discovery of a theory of world progress, and how different is this from the Church's theory or doctrine of eternal progress? What is the difference between the Church's method of divine inspiration and the university's method of reason?" In a discussion between two students, one of them argued that the Church's method of direct revelation was distin-

guishable from the university's method of man-directed inquiry. He later was forced to admit that the prophet and the researcher were both men and that it takes faith to accept either.

A student contending for the Church said, "The university cannot allow miracles or supernatural explanations. The Church relies on them. Jesus and Joseph Smith are meaningless figures to the university unless I can explain their activities as human and natural." Another young student reflected, "The conflict would be avoided if the method of each organization identified exclusive subject matter." The overlap of subject matter seemed to refuse him this kind of separation.

The simplest conflicts noticed by many students are about factual-like descriptions of the world. The student is taught to ask factual-like questions in both organizations, such as How old are the world and the universe? When did life begin on the earth? When did human earth life begin? How did life forms get to their present condition? Was there a flood? Was it a universal, world-wide one? How did human language originate? What is the origin of the American Indian? A student does not have to be very alert to detect a difference in the answers received from the two institutions, and he only has to be mildly concerned to wonder about the accuracy of the answers.

Some students' anxieties are aroused when they try to interpret the findings of these questions. The influence of the university is detected in the statement of these intellectual problems: If the earth life forms evolved, does this mean that each new form had a corresponding spirit? Which one of the evolving creatures was Adam? When did the Fall of man take place — before evolution began, during, or after? How can I accept the redemption function of Jesus when I can't really explain the Fall?

The broader, more general interpretations of human experiences are often in conflict. After a course in civilization or philosophy, students have voiced wonderment about the interpretation of events and the general meaning of history. The L.D.S. historical explanation, the student frequently believes, is a God-directed world from Adam to the contemporary prophet. The many other explanations presented at the university are often disturbing. Does man direct history? Can man be a free agent if the course of history is planned? Is there a predictable end to the world? How do prophets predict future events? Does the world have a built-in purpose?

While taking a course in American government, a student reasoned, "If the Constitution is divinely inspired, then its interpre-

tation must also be — but which court or judge is inspired? I'm confused by the many changes made by interpretations."

An introductory course in ethics has disturbed many students. In such a course the student finds many answers and many ways to answer questions concerning right and wrong or good and bad. What is a valid ethical or moral concept? One student said to me, "I am having difficulty believing that all our moral standards came from God through prophets." Another said, "If I should believe in biological evolution, I feel I must also believe in the evolution of goodness and right."



The instructors in the social sciences propose answers to current social problems. The church leaders, too, offer solutions, though usually not in an initiating role. In most instances they express opposition to or approval of existing or proposed programs.

A student spoke to me in a very alarmed manner when the First Presidency of the Church issued a statement against repeal of section 14 (b) of the Labor-Management Relations Act. They supported in their statement the "right to work" position. "This implies," said my friend, "that church leaders know how unions are best organized. I don't believe they do," he argued. "Does the Lord tell them about unions?" A student was concerned with what he thought was the Church's position about the proposed Medicare Bill. Another couldn't understand the Church's apparent stand on a U.S. agriculture policy. The student in each case felt his university classes were giving him a more acceptable answer to these social problems than the Church, and in each case the student wondered how the Church knew or discovered its position.

This raises a vital issue for some students: which institution, the Church or the university, is equipped to deal with social problems? The Church, historically, has believed that these are the issues with which it should be concerned. In earlier times the Church claimed doctrinally the assignment to manage all aspects

of the community. Has the world changed, and does the Church have a new assignment?

A most concerned student did not have a specific issue in mind but a general one when he stated, "I am learning at the university to think, investigate, read, and then form an opinion. The Church, however, seems to be saying to me to ask the leaders and trust their answer. Why should I be inquisitive and doubting at the university and not at church?"

\* \* \*

I think these are sufficient examples to establish my contention that L.D.S. students do have conflicts. The two organizations often disagree about facts and about the interpretation of the facts. It seems quite clear, too, that the two organizations disagree about the valid methods of inquiry. The serious student often feels a need to determine in which of these areas lies his problem, and to do this he needs a listener, one that will freely discuss his problems.

It is easy to understand the source of the eager student's problem. He listens to zealous teachers of both organizations who are convinced of the usefulness of their organization's methods and the accuracy and validity of the findings. Each organization claims to allow an area of activity for the other but often disagrees about the size and the exclusiveness of that area and frequently questions the accuracy of the findings.

Both organizations claim to be tolerant of skeptical members and investigators, allowing questioning. But both have their sensitive points. The university is impatient with the student who wonders about the value of the university to society or the value of an intellectual life. The Church is particularly sensitive to questions about its divine mission. Socrates and Newton, Jesus and Joseph Smith are founder-leader symbols, not to be questioned by the faithful L.D.S. university student. Regardless of research or investigation, an L.D.S. member must find Jesus and Joseph Smith the central and authoritative figures from which the Church receives its life and direction. And his university study must conclude with Socrates and Newton that the intellectually examined world will bring the good life.

Then the L.D.S. university student's predicament is clear: what to believe, how to manage his two memberships, how to square the two organizations. Some students I have known have lost interest in the Church; some have done their best to ignore the university; and, of course, some have fled from both. I am directing my discussion to those students who try to keep active member-

ship in both organizations and try to make their dual association compatible.

I must hasten to add that the intellectual problems are not the only ones that disturb and cause the student concern about church and university participation. The student is as complex as other people. All kinds of success and disappointment in social and academic experience change his ardor for activity and association. But I refer only to the intellectual concern and the need for settling conflicts. The intellectually anxious student may receive advice from a church leader or a university faculty member. The student, however, must make intellectual sense for himself; he must manage his own conflicts.

I have assumed a neutral role, a position that attempts to clarify a problem and identify alternative solutions. This is nearly an impossible task, for each reader will be watching for a solution favoring one of the organizations. I will try to avoid the dilemma by explaining a number of solutions which have been applied by students. I will classify the reconciling attempts into four categories; each one has been for its possessor a consistent intellectual position. Students, however, are generally not aware of alternative possibilities, and some students only roughly fit into a category. Some students change categories with issues and with age. The classification is mine, not the students'. The categories may be instructive for providing an intellectual framework from which a student may more clearly explore his intellectual problem.

\* \* \*

In category one I place those students who have resolved their intellectual conflicts by assigning the Church a superior role. A student once told me, "I had many intellectual problems until I realized that I believed the Church was true and this conviction could guide me to the true source of all knowledge. This belief places God as the source of all truth, and He has established His Church and appointed prophets as His method of revealing to man all that he needs to know." As I talked with the student, it became evident that he always read the scriptures to find the truth. When I inquired why he attended the university, his answer was clear. "God expects me to understand all I can about His revelations. I decided to be a geologist so I could more clearly understand the scriptural creation story. After four years of study I can explain what God did when He created the earth."

This kind of student seems to have solved his intellectual problem. To him the Church's position is as wide as the world; all



knowledge, physical, moral, practical, is within the province of the Church. Regardless of the nature of the question, he feels that if an answer is to be had the Church will give it or give notice when a right one has been given. Should the U.N. be supported? Is the U.S. Constitution divine? How old is the earth? What is a conscience? What is freedom? God has answered or will answer these questions through the Church in His own time. To any question that he or I could ask, he would first look in the scriptures for an answer. Expanding his understanding and increasing his appreciation should come from his university study and experience. "Since I know God's plan and can read the predictions of His prophets," he reminded me, "I can learn of the events and recognize them. This, I think, is my obligation as a church member. The university adds to my church awareness."

This kind of L.D.S. university student settles his intellectual problems by totally accepting what he believes to be the method and findings of the Church. The university has a role to play, but it is only a supporting one, not original. The Church is the primary human association for him, and eventually direct revelation to church leaders will establish God's community. Universities have been approved as have many other institutions, but one day they will likely pass away. This kind of student expects the university to provide the vocational training needed to pursue his livelihood. After assigning the Church the superior role, understanding his profession usually becomes his primary intellectual concern. A student of this orientation is often criticized for believing in the supernatural, but to him the supernatural is real, even natural.

\* \* \*

In category two I place those students who settle their intellectual conflicts by dividing the world into two parts and assigning a part to each organization. A very capable student at Utah State University, active in the Church, was recently questioned about his association in both organizations. Listen to his response: "I haven't found any insurmountable conflicts between my work at the university and my church; however, some people believe I have. A scientist must work with the physical objects and knowledge at his disposal; religion comes in a different realm. Faith and other things of the spirit can't be proven scientifically, and persons who try to do so are making a mistake." This student goes to church and with its methods explores and learns about the things of the spirit. The non-spiritual, the world of things and objects, he pursues and expects to understand at the university.

Some students have chosen to divide the world differently, into the moral and non-moral, assigning to the Church moral values. "After all," one student said, "God is only concerned with man's behavior. The church ritual and ordinances are only useful in helping us to know and obey His commandments. The main statements of God's revelation are the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount and all similar instruction about proper living." Other students make a division by simply distinguishing the religious from the non-religious, expecting the Church to provide a theology, explanations of God, the organization of the Church, the rituals and ordinances. The more sophisticated student borrows philosophic terms, natural and supernatural, sensory and supersensory, to divide the world and identify what is to be known and a proper method of inquiry into each realm.

Regardless of the division, these students expect the Church to function completely in its assigned sphere. Faith in the church organization and its leadership gives them an accepted means of participation. Seeking God and His ways, however, is not to be confused with seeking man and his worldly ways.

The physical science student makes a division more easily than other students, seemingly because the scriptures or the church leaders have not dealt directly with physical phenomena. The age of the earth and the process of Creation are notable exceptions. The student of the social sciences finds difficulties in making the division, but those who succeed seem to find usefulness in thus separating the church community from the non-church one. The church leaders have jurisdiction over the affairs of the Church, and the non-member community can be organized and developed in whatever manner is agreeable to its people. Theocracy is an acceptable governmental form for the church community, and democracy is an equally acceptable form for the outside community in which the student freely participates. The world of the future is unclear, somewhat doubtful, he says. When Jesus comes, it is quite possible he will come to the church community. He will not be a political king; the political kingdom of man will probably be kept separate during a millennial reign.

For all the students in this category the actual dividing line is not clear. The width of the two divisions varies, and the division is not always consistent. For example, to some students the questions Did Joseph Smith see God? Is Jesus divine? Does man have a spirit? even though factual, are exclusively the business of the Church. To many of the same students questions such as Should

the world control population growth? Should there be racial segregation? Should there be divorce? — even though moral — can be appropriately answered by the university. A generalization about those who divide the world is difficult; the variations are many.

\* \* \*

In the third category I place the students who are impressed with the university methods and with the non-supernaturalness of the whole sphere of existence. Miracle-like events are difficult for them to explain even though they can accept some for the right occasions. The church method of asking God for answers and seeking advice from church leaders seems inappropriate in most situations. They are usually happy with the social relationships and with study activities about brotherhood, morality, the good life, and programs that bring understanding to men of all races and nationalities.

Many of these students use the university methods of reason and science for proving the Church to be true. A student said to me, "I feel an obligation to test the Church, its claims and principles." When I asked how he intended to do this, he described a method acceptable to the university. This student had "proved" many things, the Book of Mormon from the purported archeological discoveries of Central and South America, the Word of Wisdom from the Surgeon General's Report, and temple marriage from sociological studies of American families. I recently read an article written by a very active L.D.S. student who established and "proved" his faith from an anthropological study. His writing "proved" that man needs religion and membership in a church. Mormonism and the Mormon Church satisfy more of these needs than any other church; therefore, Mormonism is true.

It is common for many students to claim that the Church is "practical" and to use this as a scientific method, a type central to the university, of establishing truth. The "practical" method is often claimed to have application in solving life's problems. This so-called pragmatic method is one used in much current university research and is, to many students, a method for determining the validity of the Church. Church instruction manuals occasionally present this method as one approved by Jesus. These writers contend that Jesus proposed this method when he said, "Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? . . . A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit." The Apostle Paul, too, is said

to have agreed with the method when he suggested that one prove all things and hold fast to that which is good. To these students, the good fruit and goodness are obvious to all people, and when a good thing is noted, that which caused it is good, too. A student friend of mine is convinced of the truthfulness of the gospel because of the Welfare Plan. He reasons, "Anyone knows that the Welfare Plan is doing a tremendous good in the world. This is the Church's program; the Church, therefore, must be good and true." Or as another student said, "Mormon youth are kept constructively active by its M.I.A. organization, and this is good. The Church planned this organization; it must, therefore, be true." One can add a number of good things the Church does, and in this fashion students often arrive at a very strong conviction of the Church's truthfulness.

Many students using this methodological frame of reference insist that the methods of the Church and the university are identical. Both organizations ask that their claims be tested and, in the end, the tests always are the same; they are human judgments. With this conclusion the intellectual conflicts vanish. The temple and the laboratory become equally respected. Prayer is a source of truth, just as any planned experiment is used to solve a practical problem. Something like this seems to happen when an L.D.S. student knows the gospel is true because he has proven, historically and scripturally, that the L.D.S. Church organization is identical to the primitive Christian one, the primitive church being the accepted model for the test. There appears to be a great deal of reason and scientific method used in establishing the religious proposition for a testimonial witness. The university method seems to be in wide use in resolving intellectual conflicts.

\* \* \*

A fourth and final category is an odd one, perhaps a questionable one, but I need it to cover some students who do not fit into the previous categories. In this one I place those students who have reservations about the methods and findings of both organizations. These reservations, however, are not the kind of a true skeptic, for the student's doubts do not force him to disassociation from either organization. He accepts uncertainties, admits he has unsolved problems, but these do not become a creed. And it is within the realm of uncertainties that the intellectual conflicts are resolved. Questions such as How old is the earth? Did man evolve? Is God the only God? When will the world end? do not concern this student so much as to require a final answer. The Church and the university give meaning to him, but the answers are never final

and therefore do not require that he decide which organization is correct. A student friend of mine, a historian, is certain that after he has done his best research, he really has not established a truth, only a probability. But this does not thwart his enthusiasm for his university inquiry; he continues to work and study even though to him his answers are doubtful. He seems certain that God's ways are not man's and occasionally doubts that man knows God's will, but he still finds satisfaction in church membership. He doesn't need or expect to resolve many of his intellectual problems. This student divides the world of exploration and discovery into two parts: a fairly certain realm and a nearly uncertain one; the uncertain realm of the Church is not too different from the uncertain areas of the university. Inquiries into such things as goodness, God, ultimate purpose, right and wrong, are not totally accessible to either method or organization, but this doesn't seem to interfere with his happy, healthy living.

Recently a very active church friend of mine wondered if the church leaders had not been unresponsive to the changing times. "The leaders keep talking about the national debt, labor management relations, and family problems as they did years ago. I believe," he said, "they will have to update their thinking." In the area of uncertainty he not only allows the leaders of both organizations to speculate, but he, too, does some. "The church leaders receive inspiration," another student advised me, "but not all the time or about everything, and I reserve the right of judgment of my own." Both of these students are active in the Church, and I think their intellectual conflicts are adequately resolved.

Students in the first three categories ask questions and are not satisfied until they are answered. This is not so, however, with the student in category four. He doesn't mind formulating a question that can't be answered; it is satisfying for him because he enjoys clarifying his problems. If I understand this student, the world to him is an enigma, at times impossible but challenging, and he is not disappointed because much is unanswered.

A student of this kind said to me, "I am not always accepted by my university colleagues; they occasionally call me an anti-intellectual." I would suppose his church friends may call him a skeptic, but he seems to feel comfortable in both communities. I asked a student of this kind where he thought the world was headed. "I really can't tell; I will wait and see," he said.

I have not doubted the sincerity of any of the students who have dealt with or solved their intellectual problems. My point has always been to help them think.

In talking about the student and explaining his problem, I have tried to keep detached. Probably, I should have created a fifth category, just for me — a place to stand while I identified others — but I think I have moved about through all of them, keeping my position hopefully concealed within the four categories.

This categorization, I believe, serves another function. Many attempts have been made to reconcile points of difference, such as religion and science, evolution and the Bible, psychology and conscience. Articles and books of this kind usually examine the subject matter, insisting that a closer investigation will find the truth, or the actual. But from my observation, a conclusion or reconciliation of conflicting answers is determined by the position taken about the problem. A student in category one may find quite a different answer to a conflict than a student in category three. The method and the organization greatly influence the answer.

The problem of an L.D.S. university student is difficult only because he is sensitive to the methods and purposes of the two organizations. If the university comes to believe less in its humanly explored and managed world or the Church becomes less faith-in-God oriented and less zealous, the problem may go away. I hope neither happens. I like them both.