

Dialoguing toward understanding

EUGENE ENGLAND'S CALCULATED RISK: THE STRUGGLE FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

By Charlotte Hansen

IN A RECENT LECTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF Utah, Krista Tippett, host of the NPR radio show, *Speaking of Faith*, argued that religion needs a place in the public university. During the twentieth century, most people practiced their religions privately, she said, not imagining that intelligent public religious discussion could occur without proselytizing.¹ But academia is now beginning to recognize religion and spirituality as an essential part of any discipline, and religious studies programs are being established in many U.S. universities. This new development is one that Eugene England envisioned in the 1960s when he began to see how fruitful a dialogue between the secular and spiritual could be.

England was an influential professor of English and Mormon literature who taught at Brigham Young University from 1977 to 1998, and at Utah Valley State College (now Utah Valley University) from 1998 to 2001. He was a pioneer in Mormon literature studies, responsible for many important publications, a teacher of numerous Mormon studies classes, and a founder of academic religious studies programs.

Of the many issues that England emphasized in his writings and lectures, the theme that united them is the importance of dialogue. He often quoted Joseph Smith as saying “By proving contraries truth is made manifest.”² He believed that in exploring opposing ideas and questioning assumptions, seekers can better understand each other, themselves,

and God. Though England made a strong case for the importance of dialogue, he met opposition, perhaps aptly, at both secular and religious universities.

Influenced by prominent contemporary scholars—including Lowell Bennion, Sterling McMurrin, and Jack Adamson—England began developing his interest in dialogue when he attended the University of Utah during the 1950s. In 1964, while he was a graduate student at Stanford, the U.S. headed into the Vietnam conflict, and the civil rights movement became a national phenomenon. England became politically active, helping organize anti-war rallies and petitioning for fair-housing laws. He felt his actions and the relatively liberal views driving them were aligned with core Latter-day Saint doctrines. However, administrators at the LDS Institute, where he taught, warned him that if he wanted to keep teaching, he was not to lead discussions on the ethics of violence. England wrote later,

I saw more and more how relative are the terms liberal and conservative. I found I could change from one to the other simply by walking across Stanford Avenue from the university to the Institute building. On campus, among graduate students and anti-war and civil-rights activists, I was that strange, non-smoking, short-haired, family-raising conservative; at the Institute, I was that strange liberal who renounced war and worried about fair-housing and free speech.³



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By 1965, instead of trying to fit either stereotype, England began to create his own path. Recognizing a need for a space where Mormon intellectuals could publish and engage with their questions, he co-founded *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* with several other graduate stu-

dents. Though the journal was widely considered a liberal publication, England saw himself as basically conservative. He said he helped to start *Dialogue* “for the express purpose of helping young LDS students, like those [he] taught each day at Stanford, build and preserve their testimonies.” He saw exploration as a necessary part of building and preserving one’s testimony: “The very principles I accept as definitive of my life warn me to be continually open to the revelation of new possibilities for my life from both God and man.”⁴

In his first *Dialogue* editorial, England acknowledged that though important, faithful questioning also carries a risk. The best way to encounter that risk is to engage in skillful dialogue with others. “Dialogue is possible if we can avoid

looking upon doubt as a sin—or as a virtue—but can see it as a condition, a condition that can be productive if it leads one to seek and knock and ask and if the doubter is approached with sympathetic listening and thoughtful response.”⁵

THIS IDEA OF dialogue is what motivated England to champion academic freedom; only through an honest and charitable exploration of opposing opinions can truth be found. England concluded his first editorial:

My faith as a Mormon encourages by specific doctrines my feeling that each man is eternally unique and god-like in potential, that each man deserves a hearing and that we have something important to learn from each man if we can hear him—if he can speak and we can listen well. Dialogue is possible to those who can. Such a dialogue will not solve all of our intellectual and spiritual problems—and it will not save us; but it can bring us joy and new vision and help us toward that dialogue with our deepest selves and with our God, which can save us.⁶

As one who knew the difficulties of being both academic and religious, England wanted to help students gain a constructive vision of how to be a Mormon intellectual. In an address to Brigham Young University students in 1974, he stated:

I use [the term intellectual] in an essentially neutral way, as descriptive of your gift from the Lord that makes you delight in ideas, alive to the life that goes on in your mind as well as outside it, that makes you question set forms and conventional wisdom to see if they really are truth or only habit . . . I use the term intellectual to refer to the gift from the Lord that makes you curious about why as well as how, anxious to serve Him by being creative as well as obedient.⁷

President Hugh B. Brown, one of England’s mentors and an unwavering *Dialogue* supporter, had likewise encouraged intellectual students to use this gift:

We call upon you students to exercise your God-given right to think through on every proposition that is submitted to you and be unafraid to express your opinions, with proper respect for those to whom you talk and proper acknowledgment of your own shortcomings . . . We are not so much concerned with whether your thoughts are orthodox or heterodox as we are that you shall have thoughts.⁸

However, England also pointed out the responsibilities that come with such a gift:

Those who think they see something wrong with an institution—such as the Church—are the ones who



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bear the burden of doing something about it, something effective, something that takes cognizance of their responsibility to other people and how they can respond to them; that they have no right to withdraw and throw rocks.⁹

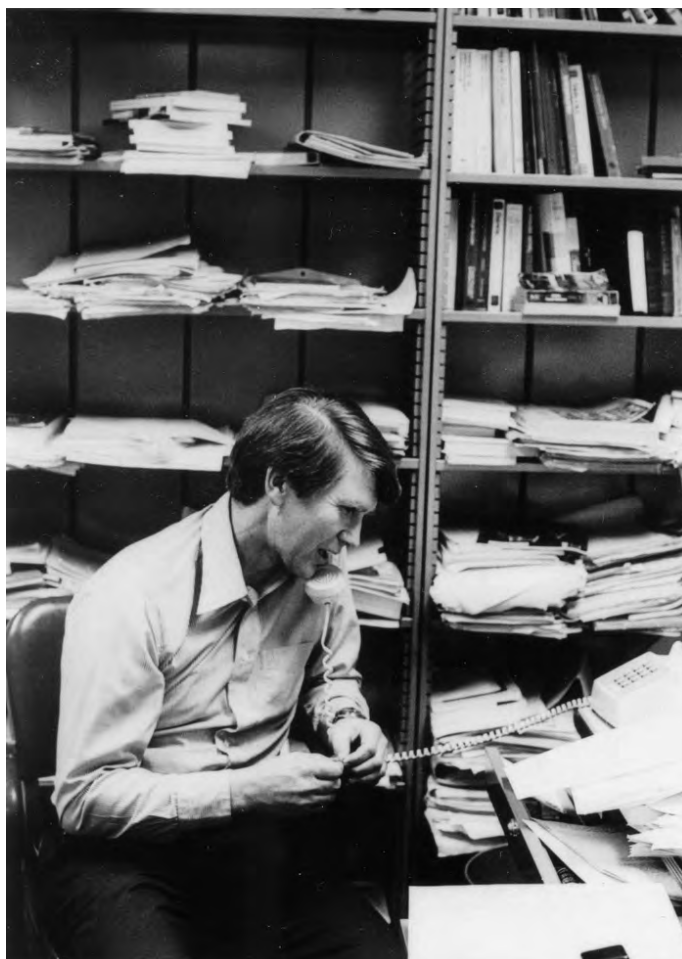
IN 1977, WHEN England started teaching at BYU, he was delighted to find a unique and invigorating type of academic freedom: the freedom to talk positively about one's religious beliefs—to integrate them unapologetically into academic discussion. He believed that if BYU could take its motto seriously—enter to learn, go forth to serve—it could be the greatest university in the world. England said he felt a deep shock of recognition at BYU: it was home.

To begin with, BYU met England's high expectations. The first bumps in the road came when his application for tenure to full professor was delayed because English department colleagues didn't value his work in Mormon literature. Instead of focusing only on American literature and Shakespeare, he had spent much of his time promoting in-depth study of Mormon literature, which he saw as BYU's unique responsibility.

In 1989, in response to a growing number of academic freedom controversies at BYU, England wrote articles about the issue for the *Daily Universe*, the official campus paper, and the *Student Review*. "Recently a chill has come over my heart," he wrote. This chill began when he read in BYU's 1986 accreditation report that administrators were advised not to publish in *Dialogue* nor participate in Sunstone Symposia. The directive seemed to imply that these publications and forums were more dangerous than even non-Mormon publications with openly anti-Mormon content. He was also bewildered about why the *Student Review* could not be placed on stands on campus when one could easily pick up "newspapers that openly attack our values and sometimes BYU and the Church." If BYU was not willing to confront these issues, England admitted he had a "doubt, small but chilling, whether BYU, the Christian university [he] chose twelve years ago, is yet as Christian or as much a real university as our prophets hope for us."¹⁰

He worried that BYU was fostering an atmosphere where people's integrity and loyalty were judged according to specious evidence, where people were held prisoner by isolated actions or words:

Human beings cannot be reduced to an action, a political or intellectual position, a quotation in a newspaper, an essay or story they have written. Each of those, even if clearly and fully seen (which is impossible, since we always see only partially, from a particular point of view), is still only part, a static part, of what is a constantly dynamic, complex, failing, and repenting potential god. We are never less—and actually much more because of our infinite potential—than the complete sum of our his-



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tory, our stories, a sum which is constantly increasing, changing, through time.¹¹

"The proper model for opposition in all things," England wrote, "is . . . the educational ideal provided by Lehi and Milton and Lippmann—an open marketplace of ideas, where we seek out those who disagree with us as best helps in improving our research and thinking, where we constantly create opportunities for public clash of ideas through debates, open forums, independent publications and seminars, etc."¹²

In 1990, England was asked to not write for the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* because one of "the Brethren" objected to his contributing. Then general memos circulated

through BYU asking professors to contribute to official Church magazines, but not to *Dialogue* or SUNSTONE. In response, England wrote:

We are given numerous signals, sometimes direct commands, which suggest that those [non-official] publications and the people who write for them are singled out for special disapproval—although it is not at all clear who disapproves nor why. There are mixed signals and what seems a double standard.¹³

In 1992, during a Sunstone Symposium session, England learned about the Strengthening Church Members Committee. He was aghast at this information and told the audience that members of the LDS Church should object to such a committee. Later, he learned that some apostles sat on the committee. He immediately and personally apologized for unknowingly “criticizing the Brethren.” However, the incident had lasting damaging effects.

In 1998, England was asked to retire from BYU without protest though he was given no justification for this action. Six months before England retired from BYU, he gave an address to the English department, calling for reconciliation. He told the story of his life, explaining that when he applied to teach at BYU in the 1970s, he was often seen as being too liberal, but because he promoted Mormon literature, he was also branded a conservative.

Now, twenty years later, I find myself labeled as a liberal, publicly attacked and privately punished, not for violating the academic freedom document prescriptions against criticizing Church leaders or opposing Church doctrine, but for violating cultural taboos that are mistakenly made into religious issues: for publicly opposing war, for exposing my own and other Mormons’ racism and sexism, even for teaching nationally honored but liberal Mormon writers.¹⁴

In this last attempt at reconciliation, England asked, “Why are we shaking ourselves apart over something so relative and relatively insignificant—differences between us that could actually be a source of strength if we could combine them positively and learn from each other through dialogue?”¹⁵ England expressed his love for his colleagues, even those who had publicly attacked him, and he also asked for forgiveness from the very people who had led to his forced retirement. Then, he finished by giving a Samoan repentance and reconciliation blessing.

S OON AFTER RETIRING in the spring of 1998, England began to teach at Utah Valley State College (now Utah Valley University). Named as the school’s first Writer in Residence, he began teaching Mormon literature and English classes while helping develop programs for the college’s Center for the Study of Ethics. He was also in-

strumental in creating a Mormon studies program, one of the first in the nation. England participated in ecumenical dialogues, promoted discussions on postmodernism and feminism, and began publishing in *Dialogue* and SUNSTONE again.

In two short years, his programs at UVSC were well established and even began receiving grants. He continued to argue in media outlets for freedom in Utah higher education.¹⁶

In his final Sunstone Symposium address, “Calculated Risk: Freedom for Mormons in Utah Higher Education,”¹⁶ he argued that the University of Utah was the institution with the greatest academic freedom in Utah during the 1960s; BYU took over that title in 1980; and in 2000, UVSC “may be the place both faculty and students have the greatest opportunity for genuinely free and productive intellectual inquiry.” Pointing out that the majority of the University of Utah student body is LDS, England encouraged the students and faculty to foster healthy discussions that address Mormon culture and history. He also lamented that despite BYU’s “golden age” in the 1980s, many of its faculty and administration were defeated by the culture wars of the 1990s.

He acknowledged that academic freedom is a risk, but a necessary one:

Academic freedom is not an inherent natural right, nor a basic Constitutional right protected under the First Amendment. It is a calculated risk, a privilege granted by society, which pays the taxes and gives the contributions which make possible our very expensive higher educational system, a risk taken because society has come to accept that academic freedom serves the long-term best interests of society. Both academic freedom and tenure have been recognized by most thinkers to have serious disadvantages, but most also believe the benefits accrued to society are well worth those disadvantages: it is a calculated risk and always fragile, in danger of being misused or diminished.¹⁷

While quoting from Walter Lipmann’s essay, “The Indispensable Opposition,” England grew emotional. His voice wavered—one of the few times in all his recorded presentations where this occurs. The brain cancer that caused England’s death not long after was probably affecting his emotions, but I also think his response shows how important this subject was to him:

We must protect the right of our opponents to speak because we must hear what they have to say . . . [Pauses] . . . Because freedom of discussion improves our own opinions, the liberties of other[s] are our own vital necessity . . . Freedom of speech . . . may not produce the truth . . . But if the truth can be found, there is no other system which will normally and habitually find so much truth.¹⁸



“Why are we shaking ourselves apart over something so relative and relatively insignificant—differences between us that could actually be a source of strength if we could combine them positively and learn from each other through dialogue?”

England worried that contemporary Mormons were failing their heritage because of their unwillingness to take the calculated risk of “free exploration and expression which Mormon theology itself claims is necessary for individual salvation—and which existed, even at the highest levels, in earlier times.”¹⁹ He shared his hope that the faculty at UVSC could navigate “the Scylla and Charybdis that we must pass between” to find a working balance of faith and reason in their studies. And to the students, he said:

Assume that college will challenge [your] thinking

and cause [you] to reassess [your] culture values, because that is precisely what higher education is for. It is to move us from being provincial to being citizens of the world...Otherwise, our world and even our Utah society are condemned to continue in prejudice and discrimination and even violence.²⁰

Within a year of this lecture, England died from brain cancer. Even though he has been gone for almost ten years, his words and example remain influential. We should continue to fight for what England risked so much to defend: the calculated but valuable risk of dialogue and academic freedom on our college campuses and within religious institutions. All voices and cultures should have an equal opportunity to be analyzed and integrated. Our cultural assumptions need to be challenged. Only through this process can we gain the type of education that will help us live in our diverse world. Mormon intellectuals have an important responsibility in moving these improvements forward. Through struggling to express and understand our core beliefs, and through struggling to understand one another, we can come closer to creating the fruitful learning environment that England envisioned on university campuses—both religious and secular.

NOTES

1. Krista Tippett, “Speaking of Faith,” Sterling M. McMurrin Lecture, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, 10 November 2009.
2. *History of the Church*, 6:428.
3. Eugene England, “‘No Cause, No Cause’: An Essay Toward Reconciliation,” *SUNSTONE* 121 (January 2002), 33.
4. Eugene England, “The Possibility of Dialogue,” *Dialogue* 1:1 (Spring 1966), 9.
5. *Ibid.*, 10.
6. *Ibid.*, 11.
7. Eugene England, “Great Books or True Religion? Defining the Mormon Scholar,” *Dialogue* 9:4 (Winter 1974), 37.
8. Quoted in Eugene England, “‘No Cause, No Cause’: An Essay Toward Reconciliation,” *SUNSTONE* 121 (January 2002), 34.
9. Eugene England, “Dialogue—The Idea and the Journal,” address given at the Salt Lake Institute of Religion, 30 September 1966, 8. Manuscript at L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.
10. “Reflections on Academic Freedom at BYU: Prior Restraint and Guilt by Association,” *Student Review*, 12 April 1989, 9.
11. Eugene England, “On Spectral Evidence, Scapegoating, and False Accusation,” *Making Peace* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 27.
12. “Opposition in All Things—Even at BYU,” *Student Review*, 13 April 1990, 8, 10.
13. Letter from Eugene England to Rex D. Pinegar, 6 May 1991, Eugene England Papers, J. Willard Marriott Library Special Collections, University of Utah.
14. Eugene England, “No Cause, No Cause,” 35.
15. *Ibid.*, 37.
16. This Sunstone presentation, which was given in August 2000, has never been published. Notes for this presentation found in Eugene England Papers, J. Willard Marriott Library Special Collections. You can listen to the audio recording of this presentation by going to the *SUNSTONE* website, sunstonemagazine.com.
17. *Ibid.*, 13.
18. *Ibid.*, 14.
19. *Ibid.*, 16.
20. *Ibid.*, 18.