

Book Reviews

BRYAN WATERMAN and BRIAN KAGEL. *The Lord's University: Freedom and Authority at BYU*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998. xii; 453 pp. Illustrations, index. \$19.95.

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In recent years, the BYU community has wrestled with the question of the University's purpose and mission perhaps more than at any other time. Among the motivating factors for this recent introspection are the increasing profile of the Church and the University in the world, the growing diversity of BYU students and faculty, changes in society that draw Latter-day Saints ever farther from the mainstream of Western academic culture, and the ever-decreasing percentage of LDS students who can attend BYU. To this list can be added the extensive self-study that was undertaken in conjunction with the University's once-a-decade accreditation review in 1996 and—perhaps as much as anything else—a series of widely publicized dismissals of controversial faculty members.

The story of BYU's recent history and its response to these issues is a fascinating one that deserves to be told. Bryan Waterman and Brian Kagel, authors of *The Lord's University: Freedom and Authority at BYU*, have stepped forward to tell that story. Unfortunately, their version is very different from the one that would be told by most informed observers.

The Lord's University is a discussion of the efforts of BYU, its board of trustees, its faculty, and its administrators to ensure that the University remains in harmony with the mission and beliefs of the Church. The one-sided tone of this new volume is revealed in Signature Books' cover announcement: "If church-sponsored schools exist to instill orthodoxy, then Brigham Young University gets high marks. However, in achieving this goal, BYU has increasingly limited speech, the press, the right to assemble, and due process. . . . From public pronouncements and intimate conversations, hearings and rallies, closed-door meetings, debates, and P. R. posturing, the authors offer an impressive chronicle of two decades (1980s–90s) of turmoil at the nation's largest religious university."

The first half of the book establishes some historical "contexts" with treatments of Latter-day Saint education in general, women and feminism at BYU, the student newspaper, and the honor code. The second half deals with matters of academic freedom and the cases of individual faculty members who were dismissed from the University (Cecilia Konchar Farr, Gail Turley Houston, and David Knowlton¹) or chose to leave it (Brian Evenson²). The stories of those individuals are the real focus of the book.

In some ways, *The Lord's University* is an impressive volume. It discusses issues that are as interesting and important as they are controversial, and no other book covers the same topics. At almost five hundred pages in a fairly small font, the book is obviously the fruit of a great deal of research conducted over a long period of time. Eight of the ten chapters have more than a hundred notes, and most have many more than that. The authors, former editors of the off-campus *Student Review* (Waterman) and the on-campus *Daily Universe* (Kagel), write well. Crafted in a lively, journalistic style, their book is easy to digest and holds the reader's attention.

But *The Lord's University* is hardly the "first-rate," "excellent" study that the endorsements on the cover proclaim.³ As a work of history, it falls short, suffering from major flaws that result from the bias of the authors, the sources they use, and the way they use them.

That the authors have a bias is not in itself a problem; most writers have a point of view and want to bring others to it. The problem comes when the reader is not made sufficiently aware of an author's bias or when an author's end goal directs the one-sided selection of the evidence while giving the reader an illusion of objectivity. A careful reader of *The Lord's University* (including the notes) cannot accuse the authors of the first of these transgressions, but they are clearly guilty of the second.⁴

Waterman and Kagel are hardly dispassionate observers. In the preface, they write about their cooperation during their student editor days to promote mutual objectives:

Early on we realized that our rival editorial positions provided us each with advantages the other did not have: Kagel had a good working relationship with BYU public communications officials; Waterman enjoyed the confidence of faculty members who might have been a little leery of an editor from the official *Universe*. . . . Waterman would occasionally have information to offer Kagel for immediate release; Kagel sometimes had news he was not allowed to print, which he would sometimes share with Waterman. (vii)

As a student—or "student activist," as he identifies himself (227)—Waterman was a participant in some of the matters discussed in the book.⁵ Some of the references to him are to his letters to the editor of the *Daily Universe*. In those letters, as cited or quoted in the book, he says that "there were many times during his mission when he had used *Sunstone* and similar publications to answer church critics" (185), states that "the Spirit attending the session [of a *Sunstone* Symposium] was more intense by far than any Sacrament meeting or fireside I have attended in years" (198, n. 47), asserts that as the result of the termination of a faculty member his BYU diploma "has taken a severe beating" (227), and admonishes that we spend "less time attacking others' beliefs" (185). This admonition seems odd coming from the coauthor of a long book that seeks to discredit the

point of view of various BYU administrators, board of trustees members, and most of the faculty and students. Waterman is identified as one of “the primary architects of the student protests” over the firing of controversial faculty members (252, n. 114; vii). A picture of him leading a protest is included in the book (fig. 17).

With respect to the sources used in *The Lord's University*, significant problems should be clear to careful readers. The notes make it apparent that the authors relied heavily on newspaper articles that seem to have been carefully selected to suit the objectives of their book.⁶ The problem with news-media sources about sensitive BYU matters is that the information available to the media is almost always one-sided. The University rarely talks about the cases of faculty who are denied promotion or tenure. Thus most (and in some cases all) of the information available to the press comes from those who have been disappointed by University decisions or from their supporters, who obviously have a perspective which differs from that of the institution. In many cases, those supporters have sought out the press to promote their perspective,⁷ while the University either remains silent or is compelled to react with reticence to what has been stated by those critical of its decisions. This situation may make for interesting news stories, but it obscures reality and certainly does not serve the needs of writing good history.

The authors give lip service to the fact that their sources were uneven: “Because so many of these cases played out in the media—with only limited communication between faculty and administrators—we tried to focus attention on the ways in which the stories unfolded to the public” (ix). But they choose not to acknowledge that these limitations seriously weaken their work: “Our objective was to tell the stories as the documentation suggests they happened” (ix).

In their preface, the authors express their thanks “to several key players in our story—Cecilia Konchar Farr, David Knowlton, Gail Turley Houston, Brian Evenson, and Scott Abbott, . . . for letting us subject them to rounds of interviews and inquiries regarding their cases” (xii). Yet in the book's hundreds of endnotes, there are very few references that acknowledge such a personal communication as the source of specific information.⁸ Readers of *The Lord's University* are thus rendered unable to cross-examine the authors and their sources regarding undocumented (and thus unchallengeable) assertions.

Even more problematic, however, is the fact that the authors wrote the book apparently without even attempting to interview key players from the University's “side”—especially President Merrill J. Bateman and vice presidents Alan L. Wilkins and James D. Gordon III.⁹ This is a stunning weakness in a book that seeks to deal with recent history, especially given

how important these three administrators were in the cases discussed and how frequently the book mentions them and their activities.¹⁰

Thus the sources used by the authors combine to create a work sorely lacking in balance. In *The Lord's University*, it is not difficult to tell who the “good guys” and the “bad guys” are. The protagonists are depicted as being victims of restrictions on their academic freedom—and usually as victims of heavy-handed tactics, if not conspiracies, on the part of the University. Well-known BYU administrators are presented in a negative light for their roles in difficult decisions: Bateman, Wilkins, and Gordon, earlier BYU officers Rex E. Lee and Bruce Hafen, and others such as Todd Britsch, Randall Jones, and Richard Cracroft. That the authors and their supporters view the work of these well-respected citizens of BYU as in some way sinister shows how out of touch they are with the world they attempt to describe in their book.¹¹

The “good guys” in the book are the selected faculty protagonists, who were joined in more recent years by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), both its local chapter and its national organization. The AAUP, described by Gordon as having “a history of antipathy toward religious institutions” (406–7), is depicted in the book as the defender of academic freedom against the heavy hand of BYU administrators. Faculty members who disagreed with University decisions invited the national AAUP to investigate BYU, leading eventually to the University’s censure (445–46). As BYU was preparing for its once-a-decade accreditation review, local AAUP members wrote to the accreditation agency to lodge their grievances (379), continuing what seems to me a pattern of trying to change policy by seeking to embarrass the University with outside institutions or in the public press (see 334, 338).¹²

Waterman and Kagel express much of their agenda in *The Lord's University* through the words of those whom they choose to quote or through what they set forward as the perceptions of others. One ongoing thread is the suggestion that BYU cannot retain the kind of sensitivity it has to the interests of the Church (my interpretation of their arguments about academic freedom) and be a real university. The authors identify what they call “the fear of some observers that BYU was becoming more like a Bob Jones University than a Notre Dame” (194–95),¹³ and they suggest that “free inquiry” and “academic freedom”—now implicitly curtailed—can be achieved only if the University goes in new directions (4). They take for granted a “national bias against BYU” (15) that is neither documented nor provable. They maintain that “BYU more than ever remains determined to deviate from contemporary academic models” (13) without demonstrating why it would be desirable to follow those models. And they argue that the University does this “at the expense of . . . national reputation” (13).

Waterman and Kagel claim that recent media coverage of BYU “rested on an underlying presumption linking the school’s peculiar religious identity and notoriety for conservative politics with limited inquiry and, hence, inferior academics” (2). But if BYU is known for “limited inquiry” and “inferior academics,” why are only the authors and their friends on the faculty aware of it? Many BYU professors are among the best at their disciplines in the world. Hundreds of BYU faculty members from a variety of fields travel to conferences, engage in cooperative research with colleagues from other institutions, and interact on the highest levels within their disciplines around the world. Because they achieve scholarly excellence and are respected, Brigham Young University is respected also. The fact of the matter is that a bad reputation for BYU serves the interests of the in-house critics as a means of putting pressure on the University to change. The experience of good scholars all across the campus shows the assertions of Waterman and Kagel to be nothing more than useful myths for those who disagree with the mission of BYU.

The point of contention between *The Lord's University* and Brigham Young University is academic freedom, the idea that professors should be free to research and teach where their evidence leads them, without fear of coercion or constraint from external sources. Academic freedom seeks to assure the integrity of research by protecting it from social, political, or institutional influences that have a vested interest in its results. While it is likely that all BYU faculty members believe in academic freedom, for Waterman, Kagel, and their faculty friends it appears to be the virtue that outranks all others, and thus any infringement of it strikes at the heart of what higher education is all about. According to the AAUP, the quest for truth and knowledge requires “complete and unlimited freedom to pursue inquiry and publish its results,”¹⁴ and the professor’s highest responsibility is “to the public itself, and to the judgment of his own profession.”¹⁵

But BYU, like other institutions, believes that it too has rights that must be protected. The University’s 1992 Academic Freedom document, viewed unfavorably in *The Lord's University* (187–202), spells out the rights of the institution alongside those of faculty members. The bottom line is that BYU belongs to the Church and represents the Church’s interests. Behavior or public pronouncements that seriously counter those interests are not acceptable from persons in the University’s employ. Waterman and Kagel write as though this were an issue unique to BYU. Yet all institutions have their limits—even those that would be held up as models by Waterman and Kagel. Professors who publicly advocate racism or specific religious beliefs, who deny the Holocaust, or who promote similar unpopular points of view find their institutions to be less congenial to academic freedom than they had supposed.

The major leitmotiv of *The Lord's University* is that the interjection of the interests of the Church into scholarship at BYU results in limitations on the faculty's freedom. In harmony with the book's overall tone are such statements as "academic freedom merely survives at BYU without fundamental support by the institution" (177);¹⁶ "the university was going through an 'academic holocaust' in which students were the primary victims" (204);¹⁷ BYU "needs to show the world it is not afraid of information and knowledge" (227);¹⁸ "the future for academic freedom at BYU is very weak indeed" (338);¹⁹ there is "a 'distressingly poor' climate for academic freedom" at BYU (415);²⁰ and, ultimately, "BYU is an Auschwitz of the mind" (180).²¹

Still, the authors do concede that many at BYU believe they have freedom to research, write, and teach as they desire, and they quote President Rex E. Lee stating that BYU "actually enjoys a greater measure of academic freedom" than other institutions. "When it comes to matters that really count . . . our range of uninhibited academic freedom is both broader and richer than at any other institution in the world" (191). The authors and their protagonists clearly disagree, but theirs is by far the minority position. In a recent survey, an impressive 88 percent of BYU faculty respondents, many of whom have taught at other institutions, stated that they have *more* academic freedom at BYU than their colleagues have elsewhere.²²

Waterman and Kagel echo the idea that recent academic freedom controversies will cause good faculty to go elsewhere (13, 183, 194–95) and will "hamper BYU's recruiting efforts" (232), and they cite examples of those who have chosen to leave the University and who invoke academic freedom as the reason (192–93, 233, 272–73). But given the small numbers, those voluntary departures should be viewed as anecdotal; the predicted flood never took place. In fact, according to a survey conducted by UCLA, "85 percent of BYU's full-time professors rated their job as satisfactory or very satisfactory—a number well above national satisfaction averages of 64 percent at public institutions and 72 percent at other private schools" (244). Moreover, "BYU faculty members rated their job security at 83 percent, also higher than those at public and private institutions (70 percent and 71 percent, respectively)" (244). One who chose to leave BYU asked, "Who would want to come here in this kind of environment?" (232).²³ Well, apparently a lot of people would. Impressive young Ph.D.'s are seeking positions at BYU in record numbers, as also are many others who now are on faculties elsewhere. Rex Lee was right: "We firmly reject the notion that we must choose between being either a high-class university or a seminary" (191). The vast majority of BYU faculty are convinced that its religious and academic missions are not opposite poles but complementary objectives that can be accomplished together in the unique circumstances that are found at BYU.

Critics and friends of BYU are welcome to agree or disagree with the policies and decisions of administrators and review committees. Waterman and Kagel clearly share with their friends on the faculty a different view of BYU than that of current officers, board members, and most faculty and students. But beyond that there is a tone in the book that suggests that these decisions have been made in bad faith. My own experience of nineteen years as a BYU professor has led me to conclude, even when decisions were made with which I disagree, that the fallible persons who have been entrusted to make difficult choices have always done so with genuine integrity and with the best interests of the University, its students, and its individual faculty members at heart.

The picture painted in *The Lord's University* will not be one that is recognized by many members of the BYU community.

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1. David P. Wright and Steven Epperson are also included to a lesser degree.
 2. D. Michael Quinn and Martha Sonntag Bradley are also included to a lesser degree.
 3. Martha Nussbaum, University of Chicago, and O. Kendall White Jr., Washington and Lee University, respectively.
 4. My own point of view on the matters discussed in this review was formed in part by my participation in departmental, college, and university rank and status review committees. I was on the university committee from 1991 to 1995, during which time some of the decisions were made that the authors discuss in the book.
 5. Waterman's name appears nineteen times in the index.
 6. Of the media sources in the section on recent controversies (chapters 5–10), *Salt Lake Tribune* articles are cited about three times as frequently as *Deseret News* articles. While some might want to accuse the *Deseret News* of being overly apologetic with respect to BYU, my own observation of the coverage of BYU in recent years has led me to conclude that the *Tribune* has often been too willing to serve as the publicist for critics of the University and to accept at face value the accounts of those who have grievances against it.
 7. I assume that the student demonstrators sought press coverage for the June 1993 protests over the termination of Cecilia Konchar Farr and David Knowlton. Photographs of Waterman leading a protest appeared in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, the *Deseret News*, and the *Daily Universe*.
 8. Note 1 in chapter 6 states, unspecifically, "This chapter draws heavily on our interviews with many of the principals involved in the following drama." But see my following note.
 9. Waterman and Kagel state that although they had much "personal access" to certain faculty members, they were "denied" access to the accounts of BYU administrators (x). Perhaps this means that they were not allowed to see confidential records. In response to my question in a letter to James Gordon, Gordon stated, "During our time in the university administration, the authors have made no effort to contact Academic Vice President Alan Wilkins or me. During one meeting with President Bateman, Bryan Waterman asked some questions (see 413, n. 79). However, that meeting was not an interview for the book, but rather was just to get acquainted. Academic freedom and faculty issues are specifically my areas of responsibility. I have done numerous interviews

with the press on these matters, but these authors have never contacted me while I have been in the administration.” James D. Gordon III to Kent P. Jackson, May 19, 1999, in possession of the author.

10. President Bateman is discussed or mentioned on over fifty pages in the book, while Wilkins and Gordon are discussed or mentioned on about thirty pages each.

11. See Dean H. Reese Hansen’s comments on p. 232.

12. The local AAUP’s statement, “We have no punitive goal in mind” (390), rings hollow to me.

13. Scott Abbott developed this discussion earlier—with the same kind of overstatement and caricature—in his “One Lord, One Faith, Two Universities: Tensions between ‘Religion’ and ‘Thought’ at BYU,” *Sunstone* 16 (September 1992): 15–23.

14. American Association of University Professors, *Report of the Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure* (AAUP, December 1915), quoted in Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith, *American Higher Education: A Documentary History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 2:867.

15. Hofstadter and Smith, *American Higher Education*, 2:866.

16. D. Michael Quinn, as quoted in Waterman and Kagel.

17. Joanna Brooks, as cited in Waterman and Kagel.

18. Letter to the editor of the *Deseret News*, as quoted in Waterman and Kagel.

19. Brian Evenson, as quoted in Waterman and Kagel.

20. Statement from the national AAUP, as cited in Waterman and Kagel.

21. D. Michael Quinn, as quoted in Waterman and Kagel.

22. Keith J. Wilson, “Academic Freedom at BYU: The Faculty Responds,” *Religious Studies Center Newsletter*, September 1999, 5–6.

23. Tomi-Ann Roberts, as quoted in Waterman and Kagel.