Mitt Romney, BYU, and Abortion Rights

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Brigham Young University, founded in 1875, stands on a foothill overlooking Utah Valley, overshadowed by the sharp peaks of the Wasatch Range. It has approximately 30,000 students, ample funding, and keen desire to “stand as a beacon to the world.” The university’s mission statement, “Aims of a BYU Education,” declares: “The intellectual range of a BYU education is the result of an ambitious commitment to pursue truth. Members of the BYU community rigorously study academic subjects in the light of divine truth.” In many remarkable ways, the faculty and students of BYU live up to these ideals. The devil, however—and Mormons believe in him—lies in the details. What is truth? Does its pursuit allow diverse opinions on subjects of widespread concern?

Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate for Massachusetts governor and BYU graduate, says he supports gay rights and abortion rights. I can’t judge his sincerity, but I do know a few things about the positions on these matters held by his alma mater, which in 1998 accepted his gift $1 million to establish the George W. Romney Endowment in the Romney Institute of Public Management. Mr. Romney did not establish these positions, and he is not responsible for enforcing them. But his support of BYU effectively helps underwrite them, and so they are a legitimate subject of discussion as he seeks elective office.

I was an Associate Professor of German Literature at BYU in 1993, the year leading up to Mr. Romney’s unsuccessful bid for Edward Kennedy’s senate seat. Although Utah is thousands of miles from Massachusetts (in many respects), a charismatic, wealthy, and politically active Mormon is always big news in Mormon country. Reports that Mr. Romney, an active Church member, was taking a pro-choice position were slightly disconcerting to conservative Mormons, but given the matter at stake they could overlook that fact.

Officials at BYU, however, could not overlook a carefully stated pro-choice position of one of my colleagues, Cecelia Konchar Farr. Konchar Farr, an assistant professor of English, was personally opposed to abortion but supported its remaining legal—just as Mr. Romney did. She had been hired by the English Department to fill a need for a feminist scholar, but during her third-year review was turned down for a second three-year term leading to tenure on the grounds that she had spoken at a pro-choice rally at the Utah capitol and, what’s more, “politicized the classroom.” The Administration said she had violated BYU policy,
which explicitly endorses full academic freedom except where “faculty behavior or expression seriously and adversely affects the University mission or the Church.” As examples, the policy cites “expression with students or in public that: . . . contradicts or opposes, rather than analyzes or discusses, fundamental Church doctrine or policy. . . .” The chair of the English department wrote that Konchar Farr’s activist and pro-choice positions were "behaviors that move from difference to contention."

Following the dismissal of Professor Konchar Farr came the denial of tenure to English professor Gail Houston and the dismissal after the third-year reviews of anthropologist David Knowlton and historian Steven Epperson—all, in part, on the basis of charges of “seriously and adversely affecting the University mission” (Professor Houston on gender roles, Professor Knowlton on why Mormon missionaries were targeted by South-American terrorists, and Professor Epperson on Jewish/Mormon relations). In another incident, two sociologists, Karen E. Gerdes and Martha N. Beck, were ordered not to publish their study of Mormon women whose sexual abuse as children had been ignored by Mormon churchmen.

In response to growing concerns about academic freedom at BYU, I and several other faculty members formed a campus chapter of the AAUP. Like over 95% of the faculty, we were practicing Mormons who had chosen to teach at BYU because we wanted to help educate our co-religionists. Our disagreement was not with BYU’s distinctive religious and education mission; we were concerned rather with the university’s claim to have only clear and narrow limits on academic expression, when in fact we felt it enforced unwritten policies with disturbingly broad limits. For more details than I can provide here, see philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s 1997 chronicle of BYU’s failure to live up to its own vision, *Cultivating Humanity*. Nussbaum unflatteringly contrasts BYU with Notre Dame’s success at remaining true to its religious values while also encouraging vigorous debate on subjects like abortion and homosexuality?

In 1997, nearly a year before Mr. Romney’s gift to BYU, after an intensive investigation of the Konchar Farr and Houston dismissals, the AAUP published its report. One section is especially relevant here:
Numerous women, some in groups and some alone, spoke to the investigating committee about the hostile climate for women on campus. . . . Instead of being based on principles of intellectual freedom or doctrinal policies of the Church, academic freedom at BYU strikes the investigating committee as often subject to the political concerns of Church officials. . . . Faculty members who resist the pressure to alter or stop their research are at risk of losing their positions, as in the case of Professor Knowlton. . . . women who defend the civil rights of pro-choice advocates in extramural remarks are subject to nonretention, as in the case of Professor Farr. . . . Feminist faculty members who question the soundness of gender roles in the Church may be denied continuing status [tenure] . . . as in the case of Professor Houston.

Much more than an isolated violation of academic freedom, the investigating committee's inquiries into complaints at BYU have revealed a widespread pattern of infringements on academic freedom in a climate of oppression and fear of reprisals.

These findings were widely reported in the press in the fall of 1997 and the spring of 1998. Although the AAUP has no disciplinary authority, the BYU chapter members hoped that prospective students, faculty, and donors would turn instead to institutions that value academic freedom and support women as equal members of the community, thus putting pressure on BYU to live up to its own ideals.

It was in this climate that Mitt Romney made his donation to BYU’s Marriott School of Business. Interpreting that gift is complicated. Mr. Romney does not have to answer for everything that happens at BYU, and I imagine he doesn’t agree with all of BYU’s policies. The program in public management is a worthy enterprise, and it made historical sense to tie the Romney name to such an institute. And of course Mr. Romney has every right to donate his money to whatever institution he wishes.

What concerns me is not Mr. Romney’s intent, but the effect of his $1,000,000. The effect of that gift just months after the September/October 1997 issue of Academe that included the AAUP report, was to lessen the moral force of the AAUP’s censure. BYU’s Trustees and
administrators could easily have read Romney’s gift as a statement that women’s reproductive rights, gay and lesbian issues, and academic freedom are not issues of consequence to donors like Mr. Romney.

BYU has continued to thrive since the AAUP censure. In 1999 I was turned down for promotion to full professor by a Dean who found that my campaign in favor of academic freedom had exposed the University to “national ridicule” and by a Vice President who argued that my AAUP activities to “pressure the University to change policies of the Board of Trustees” violated “the standards of citizenship expected of a full professor at the University.” I sought and accepted a job at Utah Valley State College, a public institution where the law protects women and gays from discrimination and academic freedom is more than an empty slogan.

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