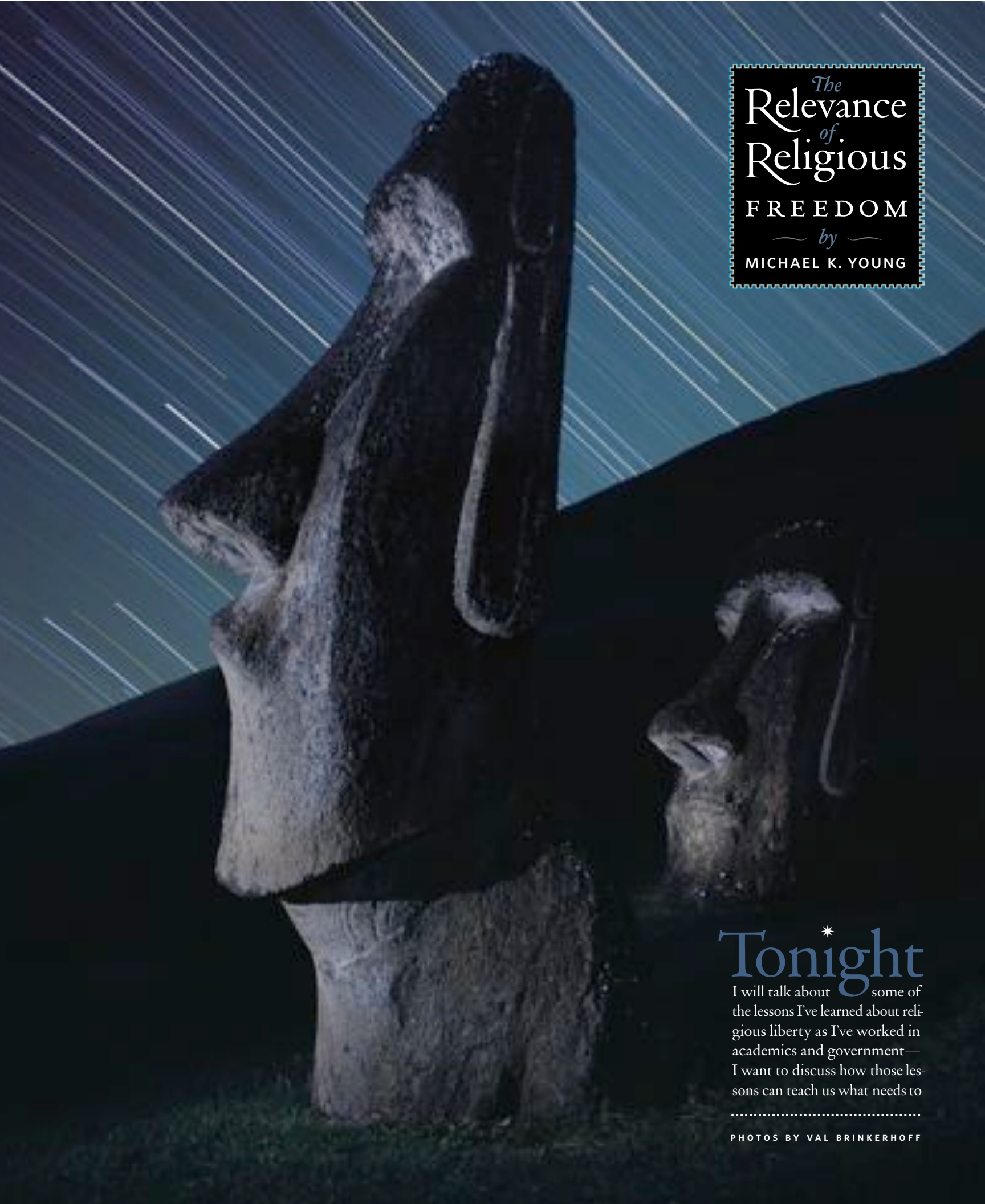

The Relevance of Religious Freedom

by MICHAEL K. YOUNG

Tonight I will talk about some of the lessons I've learned about religious liberty as I've worked in academics and government—I want to discuss how those lessons can teach us what needs to

PHOTOS BY VAL BRINKERHOFF

be done, and how we as committed members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can fill those needs.

I've spent 25 years as an academic studying Asian economic trends, political trends, and human rights, and I spent four years in government service in the George H. W. Bush administration. The timing in that administration gave me an opportunity to work closely on the issue of German unification as well as on some significant trade and human rights treaties. After my work in the Bush administration, I returned to Columbia University to direct and organize a program on international human rights and freedom of religion. I also served on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a statutorily created watchdog commission designed to give the State Department, the NSC, and the president advice on how to integrate issues of human rights more deeply into our foreign policy, especially issues related to freedom of religion. Through all of this I was an observant, dedicated, committed member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Each of these roles informed my understanding of the world and particularly of people who are religiously observant and hope to remain so.

What did I learn from academics and government? Religion is very important in every geopolitical event I have ever studied or participated in. For instance, in the 1930s and '40s, the Japanese government manipulated an indigenous set of morals and ethics into a religion that became known as State Shinto, a form of the Shinto religion allowing the government to control the priests and the doctrine and eventually to manipulate the religion into a form of nationalism.

We all know the role that the Catholic Church played in the solidarity movement in Poland, but lesser known is the role that the church has played in Germany. There has been a religious influence in a number of different countries such as Hungary and Russia. China had an extraordinarily extreme reaction to Falun Gong, a combination of Daoism and Buddhism, and repressed the religion with enormous ferocity. Why were the Chinese so concerned about this seemingly harmless form of meditation? It has to do with the astute sense of history that Chinese leaders have possessed as they have seen political movements derived out of religiously based organizations. For example, the White Lotus Rebellion, the Taiping Rebellion, and the Boxer Rebellion all came during times when the present government was viewed as morally corrupt and relatively weak, so alternate sources of loyalty began to develop. In each instance the Chinese government reacted and successfully suppressed the rebellions, only to lose power within a few years because the cost of suppression was so high and because the very rise of the movements demonstrated the fundamental weakness and invalidity of that government. Chinese leaders are no fools. They understand the threat that something even as innocuous as Falun Gong presents to them.

So here is point one: Throughout my career in academics and in government, I have seen again and again that religion is important—profoundly important—to virtually every major geopolitical event. It seems like a simple point, but it is the first point, and one not shared very commonly by many policy makers around the world.

The second point I want to make I learned from my experience at Columbia as well as from my work on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Again, this commission was created by Congress to provide input into our foreign policy formation process that would ensure that our foreign policy was better designed to advance human rights, particularly human rights related to freedom of religion. This was in part because of congressional mistrust of the State Department and of the administration. We had a chance to study religion and how it was being treated in a variety of countries around the world and to then formulate ideas about how those repressed people might be helped by our persuading their governments to repress them a little less vigorously.

So what did I learn from that? I learned that religion is important not only to geopolitical movements but also to individuals. Geopolitical movements are amalgams of people's preferences, their views, and their beliefs. Religion is important geopolitically precisely because, to the vast majority of the world's population, religion is profoundly important individually: Why are we here? Where did we come from? How do we live a life with meaning and purpose? How do we raise our children? What do we teach our children? What happens when we die? The most basic human elements of human dignity are found in those sets of questions—what it means to be human—and, therefore, to individuals, religion is profoundly important. It is how we define ourselves. We are not defined by the government; we are not defined by our external circumstances. Religion is the opportunity for us to reflect and define ourselves.

This is important to governments precisely because it is important to individuals, who act collectively as a nation. People who are religiously observant necessarily have an allegiance to something higher than the state. And for some governments it is very threatening to know there may be organizations out there more likely than the government to secure the allegiance and the adherence of their members. It also means that those who are religiously oriented believe there are some areas of life into which the government can't intrude. There are things an individual can do that the state cannot suppress and is not entitled to suppress. That's why religion is important to governments, particularly governments that seem to be insecure or authoritarian. Religious liberties are often the first rights to be suppressed—the canary in the coal mine of human rights. (I use that analogy and nobody under the age of 40 ever understands it, so I'm going to ask you who are under 40 to ask your parents what "canary in the coal mine" means.) Suppression of religion is an early warning signal of more repression to come. Religion is fundamental and profound; therefore it is threatening in some ways to governments that are themselves insecure in their power.

While on the commission I learned that governments are capable of extraordinary repression and can be remarkably vicious. I met persecuted people face-to-face: Christians in China, southern Sudan, Vietnam, and North Korea; Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium; Muslims in India and Gujarat; Buddhists in Vietnam, Laos, Pakistan, and Mahis; Jews in Iran; Scientologists in Germany; and members of the Unification Church in Japan. Many were persecuted, humiliated, and discriminated against, and, believe me, there is significant

This article is adapted from a talk presented at Campus Education Week at Brigham Young University on August 21, 2007.

death and torture out there. The reasons for suppression vary from government to government, but they are in the end very relevant to what we think about as we think about the world going forward.

Authoritarian governments are one example of governments that are often insecure with respect to religion. They impose and maintain social and political control, their leaders aren't chosen by the people, and people have little say over state decisions. Religion can be seen in those cases as an alternate source of loyalty and therefore very threatening. Examples of nations with such governments are North Korea, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and China.

Then there are governments that on their own cannot garner adequate support and so rely on some identification with the majority religion to remain in power. These are countries that may establish official religious laws conforming to the main religion but apply them to everybody, whether a person is a member of that religion or not. There is often an overlap between official authority and religious authority.

My third point is that governments are divided between majority and minority religions and don't have the authority, the power, or the capability to mediate between those religious differences. Think of Indonesia and the tremendous outbreak of violence there in '98 or the conflict in Malacca in '99. Think of the slaughter of the Muslims by the Hindus in Gujarat, India.

I was asked a year ago if I would be willing to do a presentation for the Area Committee of the Church, which consists of a number of General Authorities who help watch over Church activities throughout the world. It includes a number of members of the Twelve and the Seventy. I was told to cover a few countries in 10 minutes, leaving some time for questions and answers. I talked about Russia and the former Russian republics as well as countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Interestingly, it was a useful exercise because, as I looked at the patterns of repression, I realized that governments that suppress religious freedom for reasons relating to political control may do it quite differently from governments that do it in an attempt to repress intercommunal violence. The former countries are actually loosening their restrictions around the world. One may look at China, Vietnam, and Cambodia—not free, to be sure, but certainly freer than they were a decade ago. On the other hand, countries that control religious expression because of concerns over intercommunal violence—such as Pakistan, India, and Turkey—are getting substantially worse in terms of freedom. Circumstances have an enormously powerful impact on how governments deal with the issue of religious freedom.

This is a point that I want to turn to now. The other thing I realized in the course of this presentation was that the world is in a very good place in terms not only of religious freedom but of many things. We read the newspapers and we continue to think the world is a violent, disastrous, terrible place going downhill. But let me read you some statistics. As we think about human rights, let me cite some important statistics from a report by the Human Security Centre at the University of British Columbia. It found that by the end of the Cold War in 1990, armed conflicts had declined by 40 percent around the world. The number of deadly conflicts—those that kill more than 1,000 people—have declined by 80 percent. Civil wars have dropped by 80 percent. The number of military coups has dropped dramatically. Genocides have dropped by more than 80 percent. Not only that, the number of people killed in an average conflict has dropped extraordinarily. In 1950 the number of people killed in an average conflict was 38,000. Today it is 600. From 38,000 to 600 is a 50-fold decline. Now, for those who were killed, I don't mean to diminish the horror and the terror of war as it does exist, but what we have to understand is that we are in a very different place than we were even 15 years ago. I can talk about a substantial decline of the number of refugees, and the list goes on.

Now, why is that the case? Well, part of it has to do with the end of the Cold War. Also, countries are no longer fighting segregate wars through smaller countries, and that has dramatically reduced the need for battles in Nicaragua, Iran, and other places. Additionally, the decline is due to the spread of democracy. I think at the end of World War II there were approximately 20 countries that you could have identified as having most of the characteristics of a democracy. Now the number is close to 90. That's an extraordinary difference.

Professor Amartya Sen, a Nobel lawyer and economist at Harvard, spoke at our university recently and made the point, quite profoundly I thought, that no two democracies have ever fought a war against each other. Tom Friedman, who wrote the famous book *The World Is Flat*, describes it differently. He said, "No two countries with a McDonald's have ever fought a war against each other." But whatever the touchstone is, the point is that the world may be in a place where there's more opportunity to do good than at any time since the end of World War II. That is an exciting development.

Nevertheless, the third point I want to make is that this challenge is complex. This is what I learned at Columbia. The program we designed was to bring the secular human rights community—which is not faith-based, and, indeed, is sometimes a bit dismissive of expressions of faith—together with the religious liberties community—which is generally faith-based and somewhat mistrustful of the Godless humanists who run the secular human rights community. One of the things we learned as we tried to bring these groups together is how complicated these issues are. It's very easy to agree that people should stop killing each other, but after that it becomes more complicated.

For instance: head scarves. On the one hand, we say it should be a matter of freedom whether somebody wears a head scarf or not. On the other hand, some say that to reject the head scarf is a political signal of rejection of certain fundamental values for which the government stands. So maybe they should be able to stop head scarves and not allow driver's license pictures of people showing only their eyes. If you start from the supposition that covering one's head is a sign of respect and a reflection of a view that perhaps people, men in particular, will be less tempted if they don't see anything and therefore more capable of living their religion, then this becomes a different issue, an issue that if put in the context of pornography we perhaps will begin to understand in a different way.

And there are issues relating to proselytization, for example. You may have seen the recent article in the paper about how the World Council of Churches has created protocols on proselytization. There is a concern in many developing countries that rich religions are coming in, buying up converts, and disadvantaging the indigenous religion that may not have the resources to do that. Well, that sounds plausible, but isn't the most profound purpose of religion to perform work for the needy? Isn't that the message of every single major sermon in the Book of Mormon?

It's easy to think that our Church doesn't really confront any of those issues because we are very respectful in proselytizing. But in Europe one finds that there is an increasingly powerful gay and lesbian movement with perfectly appropriate people demanding rights. What are some of the mechanisms they are thinking about for enforcing that? Well, organizations that may not provide equal rights would not be entitled to government benefits like the right to establishment, the right to own property, and the right for tax deductions. Well, this is appalling, we think. Yet here in the United States we have done precisely that with respect to racial discrimination. In a major case, Bob Jones University's tax-exempt status was denied,

and deductions given to Bob Jones University were no longer considered tax deductible, because of the school's racial discrimination. These are complex, difficult issues that require serious, sustained thought.

Religion is profoundly important intellectually. We cannot understand geopolitical movement, economics, politics, and history without taking seriously the role and the nature of religion in the process. I think, by and large, the academies in America, and indeed the world, have failed. Religion has been largely written out of the curriculum. That's not as important as the fact that as a powerful component of various intellectual disciplines, rebellion is almost totally absent. That has to change.

FOUR-FIFTHS OF THE WORLD'S PEOPLE ARE PROFOUNDLY RELIGIOUS, AND RELIGION MATTERS

4|5

ENORMOUSLY IN THEIR LIVES. WE CANNOT STRUCTURE POLICIES WITHOUT TAKING THEIR VIEWS SERIOUSLY.

We also must take religiously oriented people seriously. We can no longer dismiss their claims and their concerns. Four-fifths of the world's people are profoundly religious, and religion matters enormously in their lives. We cannot structure policies without taking their views seriously. That's very hard. That emphasizes my third point: *These are complex and difficult issues.*

Let me conclude with one last thought. It comes from a longtime membership in our Church and an enormous amount of thought about what that means. What I've concluded, a bit to my surprise, is that freedom of religion is not merely a practical, prudential, and wise policy. It is in fact profoundly theological, and it may be more theological than it is practical and political.

Let me give you a couple examples of this in the Book of Mormon. First, take Alma's interaction with the anti-Christ Korihor in chapter 30 of the book of Alma. Korihor begins to preach against the prophecies that had been spoken by the prophets. The Book of Mormon makes it clear, however, that this was not a concern of the law. Even before we learn how pernicious Korihor's teachings were, we learn that "the law could have no hold upon him" (Alma 30:12). Now, in case we miss the point, the scriptures tell us that "there was no law against a man's belief" (v.7); this is beginning to get kind of repetitive. But they don't leave it at that; three more verses say it was strictly contrary to the commands of God that there should be a law that should bring men onto unequal grounds. This teaching is not prudential—this is a commandment. But it's a commandment because it is essential to keep people on equal grounds. And the very next verse tells us why: "For thus saith the scripture: Choose ye this day, whom ye will serve" (v.8). In other words, this command from God is essential; it's predicated on the most profound principle of all, and that is agency. Anything else, whether it's designed to give us choice or someone else choice, even if it's a choice we don't like very much, is contrary to the commands of God. In fact, this is said in the context of Korihor, who is saying things about as repugnant as one can imagine.

Pahoran says the same thing in Alma 61 when he gives that tremendously temperate reply to Moroni's rather intemperate letter to him. As you recall, the Lamanites were knocking at the door while some grasping Nephites were attempting to take over the country. Moroni is very unhappy; there are no supplies coming. At this point he writes a rather scathing letter to Pahoran. Pahoran writes a scathing letter back, but he puts it in a drawer and then later writes a more temperate letter. In it he says that he understands the problem and wants to send supplies, but he can't because he's defending his people. Would Moroni come and beat back the Nephites who are trying to destroy the kingdom? But Pahoran doesn't want to leave the other people undefended, so he says to send Lehi and Teancum to contend with the invaders. He urges Moroni to give them "power to conduct the war . . . according to the Spirit of God" (v.15). Not a surprising injunction to be given to such spiritual people! He goes on to say that this spirit "is also the spirit of freedom which is in them" (v.15).

I'm going to stop here and just say that as I look at the world, I stand back and think that not only have I had an intellectual and a professional interest in religious liberty, but for me there is a sense of religious urgency to this mission as well. I feel like when the last day comes, be it my last day or the world's last day, I want to be found with my shirtsleeves rolled up. I want to be found with sweat coming down my brow. I want to be found with my lip a bit bloody from the fight to protect not only my freedom and your freedom but also the freedom of everyone around the world, because even if others make choices with which I profoundly disagree, the imperative to give them the same opportunity that I have is one that finds profound and important support in the scriptures—it is an obligation that goes to the very heart of the gospel. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Michael K. Young is the president of the University of Utah and the former dean of the George Washington University Law School.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VAL BRINKERHOFF

Page 14: *Mary and Baby Jesus with Stars and Pillars*, 1436, Duomo, Florence, Italy. Page 15: Moai Statues, 1400, Easter Island, South Pacific. Page 17: Towers, north view, San Diego California Temple, 1993. Page 18: Middle period temple, 1100, Bagan, Myanmar (Burma). Page 19: The Blue Mosque, 1617, Istanbul, Turkey.