



The Role of Humanities and Religion in Motivating Courageous Citizenship

George B. Handley, Brigham Young University*

This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

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Abstract

One of the obstacles to civic engagement is how broadly we are willing to imagine and define community. Will our sense of community include or exclude differences? Two resources that are vital to stimulating an imagination capacious enough to balance difference and belonging are religion and literature. This essay explores what both might contribute to a civic imagination that can sustain a healthy democracy.

On a study abroad to Spain this semester, my wife and I and our students were transformed by our visit to the Basque city of Gernika. Innocent civilians of Gernika were tragically bombed without notice during the Spanish Civil War in 1937 by German and Italian allies of Spain's soon to be dictator, Francisco Franco. Spain is a country with rich regional diversity that intersects with its deeply layered history of Roman, Visigothic, Arabic, and Catholic settlements. The political and cultural diversity of the country, however, has created challenges in its long history to cohere as a nation, and it certainly threatened Franco and his supporters. The Spanish Civil War was the result of a nation that had grown impatient with its own complexity and diversity and instead sought a "return" to an original and largely fictional homogeneity. The result was violent oppression, including against the beautiful culture and unique language of the Basque country in northern Spain.

Gernika's remarkable [El Museo de la Paz](#) shows a video of the leader of the Basque people at the time of the bombing, Jose Antonio Aguirre, saying: "The Basque people do not ask for vengeance. Their overwhelming desire is for peace and justice." The museum makes a compelling cast that although the writing of history focuses on the actions of the few individuals on the stage of world history who seek attention and power and incite conflict, the truer story of humanity is the story of peace. The story of peace, however, is harder to tell because it is the story of a collective of citizens who uphold it, day in and day out. For that reason, it is also easy for citizens to forget their indispensable role in upholding justice and sustaining peace.

We are gathered here because we recognize that America isn't doing so well in this regard. Political division and vitriol for enemies, real and imagined, are at an all-time high, and we are a nation at war. Far too many Americans, of course, get their news from pundits and social media reels and enjoy the thrill of lobbing rhetorical grenades at the other side, imagining to themselves that spectatorship is the essence of civic engagement. The many responsibilities and opportunities of American citizenship are reduced merely to voting, maybe making donations to a campaign or two, reading the news obsessively, and cheering or ranting according to one's preferences. This "political hobbyism," as Eitan Hersh calls it, feeds into the entertainment industry and neglects the ways in which real political power is built and sustained through robust civic relations, healthy institutions, and proactive and widespread engagement in good causes ([Hersh](#)).

On the other hand, of course, even more citizens understandably respond to the spectacle of contemporary politics with disgust and choose to withdraw altogether from the civic sphere. Apathy and tribalism are, however, equally wrong and equally threatening to peace and justice. Apathy creates the power vacuum that facilitates the ascendancy of political hobbyism with its predictable and packaged culture war strategems. Both approaches treat government as a

service, not as a responsibility. As Jon Alexander has argued, citizenship no longer connotes a sense of responsibility so much as the rights of the consumer ([Alexander](#)). We have forgotten the art of building political power as well as the art of what Harry Boyte calls public work, where we dedicate our professional and personal gifts to the higher cause of the polis ([Boyte](#)). Somehow, we lost the vision of an adventurous life of seeking to improve society as informed, courageous citizens and instead prefer spectating and doom scrolling.

I am not saying anything, I suppose, that people associated with Braver Angels aren't already aware of. It is the motivation for our efforts. The question, of course, is what could rekindle more widespread and principled civic engagement in our communities and in our nation? As a literature professor who also happens to teach at a religious university, I would like to offer some insights from literature and from religion that might provide a way forward. My thesis is this: literature and religion have an untapped capacity to inspire a civic imagination shaped by compassion and moral feeling and to foster a balanced commitment to the dignity of self and to the dignity of a plural society. Let me start first with literature.

Literature and Democracy

Our visit to the museum in Gernika coincided with the initiation of the American war with Iran. Over a decade ago, I hosted Alireza Taghdarreh, a self-taught Iranian translator of American literature, particularly of Thoreau and Emerson, to my home state of Utah. When he spoke at Brigham Young University, he made a most unusual claim:

I am convinced from my experience of reading Walden with so many American scholars over the course of a decade that hostility, anger and misunderstanding would be unknown between our nations if we picked up books and read them with each other the way that I and my American friends did for ten years. Let us allow Thoreau to sharpen our eyes on the value of love and friendship. ([Taghdarreh](#))

Ali returned to Iran, and I joined in the correspondence with him for the next ten years about our countries' great writers. We have done as he imagined our nations could do. We have read together, including a book I wrote about my Mormon pioneer and family history in Utah that Ali set about translating into Persian. I never imagined that my story would resonate with someone so far away in such a different context than my own, but it has moved me deeply to find a foreign reader who seeks understanding of my language, my religion, my region and my nation. In the process I have accustomed myself to his way of seeing and expressing things and have seen my own culture in a whole new light. We see each other as brothers, connected by invisible threads of spirit and imagination and goodwill. We pray for each other in our respective religious languages. There is no question that war is as far from the intents of our hearts toward one another as it could possibly be. And there is no question that no war for me personally has felt more real than this one, because I know and love one person surviving the streets of Tehran.

I suppose it is easy to dismiss Ali's idea here as too simplistic and idealistic, at least if we were to try to scale this model. That's fair. But reading has had broad social impact before. The modern novel contributed significantly to the rise of national identities because it helped to create what one historian called "imagined communities," where readers practiced seeing themselves as part of a larger imagined whole far beyond their own direct experiences ([Anderson](#)). Spain itself is

hard to imagine as a nation without the influence of Don Quixote, the first national best-seller in modern history. The British poet Percy Bysshe Shelley argued in 1821 that poets are “the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” by which he meant to suggest that literature shapes and exercises a vital moral feeling and imagination in readers ([Shelley](#)). This then creates the conditions from which laws and governments emerge and hold community together. Walt Whitman, of course, was animated by this principle, writing in *Democratic Vistas* that “great literature penetrates all, gives hue to all, shapes aggregates and individuals, and, after subtle ways, with irresistible power, constructs, sustains, demolishes at will” ([Whitman](#)). Without access to this power of literature to instill fellow feeling, Whitman feared a plural and democratic society would lose shape and identity and fail to cohere, leaving citizens with limited imaginations of the breadth of their civic community and limited affection for the whole.

Of course, these are romantic overstatements, in part because the national communities that emerged from literature’s influence were themselves imperfect models, at best, of democracy and universal human rights, just as imperfect as the imaginations of great writers themselves. They are also overstatements of literature’s power, especially in our day when many other influences shape and aggregate and divide far more powerfully than literature, and more often to negative effect. Nevertheless, maybe precisely because of the competition, we need to reconsider the collective moral shaping of the civic imagination that literature might still provide. In my teaching experience, literature still has exceptional power to shape the imagination and instill values that can produce a healthier civic spirit, *especially when I frame the act of reading for the students as a civic exercise*.

I tell them that great literature requires the reader’s full attention on the particularities of individual experience. Reading well makes you set yourself aside and see individual lives and places through a set of eyes that are not your own. You cannot easily bypass or flippantly judge the particularities of those lives and places but must instead practice attention and compassion for the one. And while literature asks us to be attentive to singularity, it achieves a sense of meaning for us because it also simultaneously projects a world, even a sense of the cosmos, into which all of its component parts and individuals fit meaningfully and indispensably together. In other words, literature helps us to wrestle with particularities *and* with the meaning and possibility of community at the same time. This, I submit, is its value to us today. C.S. Lewis once gave a very compelling description of this process:

Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. There are mass emotions which heal the wound; but they destroy the privilege. In them our separate selves are pooled and we sink back into subindividuality. But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like a night sky in the greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do. ([Lewis](#))

Lewis is describing the cultivation of a capacity to see ourselves in all of our uniqueness while, at the same time, in meaningful and even harmonious relation to the equally distinct and valuable differences of others. While America has learned in recent decades to see distinction and difference with greater clarity, we have grown gun shy about how to talk about or describe what might still unite us *in* our differences. We humanities professors can be faulted for this. We too

easily point out the limitations and even dangers of national or communal identity without talking enough about the necessary risks and even benefits of reaching for common ground. Lewis's last line strikes me as an idea that never caught on. Discovering community doesn't have to be an erasure of particularity, as we feared. He suggests that in literature and in worship, we are never more ourselves when we discover the selves of others. I think of how Ali and I relate. We belong to different faiths, nations, languages, and cultures but reading together taught us that we also belong to each other. It is not hard for us to imagine a community that includes both nations, both realities. If we should not bowl alone, we should not read alone either.

The experiment of democracy was an attempt to create what Paul Woodruff describes as "political harmony" out of undeniable diversity ([Woodruff](#)). This harmony is not agreement but rather a simultaneous recognition of difference and a commitment to the whole. In practical terms, according to Woodruff, this commitment consists of accepting the rule of law, accepting the rules of democratic process, and the pursuit of common goals. And it consists of believing simultaneously in both the value and the poverty of one's own views. Democracy requires the simultaneous sanctification of self-dignity as well as a recognition of self-insufficiency; in Lewis's terms, it recognizes individuality as both wound and privilege. Strong individual identities and stories without equally strong and shared ones, and democracy will fail.

We might say, then, that among our many ills at the moment, one is our failure to know how to live with conviction and identity in a plural society of competing convictions and identities. It is as if our only two choices are to either remain separate, individuated and self-interested or to demand that the whole become an extension of the self. Hyper-partisanship and apathy again are twin symptoms of the same problem. Both feel no answerability to a plural and diverse society. Authoritarianism becomes more appealing under such circumstances because at its core, authoritarianism exhibits an adolescent and violent impatience with the simple fact that different people think and act differently and that agreement is elusive.

Religion and Democracy

In a recent article, Rabbi Michael Holzman notes that religion has the same potential to inspire moral commitment to the broader differences in society if it too pivots and "connects... features of religion to the formation of civic character, the health of civic culture, and the survival of liberal democracy," even though he recognizes this may be a significant "leap of the imagination" for many ([Holzman](#)). By contrast, of course, much religious zeal of late has been given to a singular claim on the meaning of America, on American identity and history, and this narrows and more tightly circumscribes community and rejects rather than confronts the reality of difference. Alas, religion can help, but it can also hurt.

The difference would seem to be how well a religion can define and teach what Jonathan Rauch calls its own "civic theology;" that is, how well it can instill in believers a commitment to a plural society without the expectation of domination or what Holzman calls dominionism ([Rauch](#)). Like literature, religion tells stories. And these stories have great power to validate the experience of individuality as a privilege, helping believers to accept their worth and to create a community ethos around that experience. If religious stories also validate individuality as a wound, it can help believers understand why we all belong to and need one another. This is the

true measure of religion's moral authority and its value to democracy. Religions, like political parties, become tribal when they are tools of identity and self-justification rather than contexts for self-examination and moral action on behalf of others. Without this pivot to need a civic life, believers can be extraordinarily kind and compassion within the walls of churches and yet remain indifferent to or ignorant of the suffering and ills of our country. The good news is that all religious traditions have access to their own civic theology, if they will look for them, and that they have a power akin to that of literature to help believers see the dignity of individual life *and* the reality and value of pluralism.

Rauch identifies the various problems with an unholy marriage between religion and party but does not believe the solution is to ignore or get rid of religion. Instead, as a nonbeliever himself, he nevertheless advocates for more thick religion, as he calls it, something he sees in abundance in Latter-day Saint experience. Now by way of confession: I am a descendant of Mormon pioneers and a believer. I have taught for almost 30 years at the LDS church-owned Brigham Young University and have worked in the civic space for numerous nonprofits, and more recently, served 8 years as a city council member in the predominantly LDS city of Provo. I have not always been convinced we know how to do civics right. I see intrusions into my community of tribal identity, of white nationalism, and of both hyper-partisanship and apathy. And yet I learned something from Rauch about my own tradition and experience I had not fully recognized. He validated my struggle, but he also gave me hope I hadn't had.

I blame Rauch for inspiring me to start a new nonprofit, Engage: A Forum for Civic Renewal and to start the work, along with others, of excavating a Latter-day Saint civic theology. It seemed to many of us that the teachings were there, but we needed to help people connect the dots and gain experience. The good news is that I have witnessed a renewed civic spirit as we have begun to bring these principles to the fore and facilitate their practice. Our goal is to inspire our people to forsake political hobbyism and to engage.

Allow me to briefly share some of those teachings from my tradition. My intention here is not sectarian but civic. Consistent with other religions and with the founding principles of American democracy, Latter-day Saint doctrine emphatically celebrates the inherent value of human life, human potential, and human differences. It specifically celebrates constitutional democracy as uniquely suited to protect human dignity, facilitate the realization of human potential, and make the reality of human differences productive of universal moral growth. Democracy suits divine purposes because it spreads responsibility to all, simultaneously recognizing individuality as a privilege and as a wound, making us accountable to God for how we act in relation to civic society. A healthy democracy requires broad, principled, informed, and civil engagement by all citizens who are proactively and "anxiously engaged in a good cause" ([LDS](#)). In sum, Rauch is correct to identify in Mormonism a civic theology that recognizes pluralism, even if we have sometimes lost sight of it. That is, while Mormonism, like all religions, believes in its own unique claims to truth, it sees itself inevitably *and purposefully* caught in a pluralistic web of cultures, languages, and values scattered throughout the world. Mormonism, in other words, sees itself as unfolding through secular time toward a deeper and more full gathering of divine truth. It is a religion, in other words, that requires contact with otherness, even with the rest of the world, for a more complete self-realization.

This is, of course, doctrine, and not necessarily our lived reality. Perhaps out of concern for the incursions I mentioned, church leaders have given greater emphasis recently on the goal of peace and justice in the broader society. Urging us to avoid both anger and apathy, for example, former President Russell M. Nelson called members to be peacemakers who “build bridges of understanding rather than walls of prejudice” ([Nelson](#)). Current President Dallin H. Oaks invites us to “seek to moderate and unify,” especially on contested issues ([Oaks2021](#)). He warns us against seeking “total dominance for our positions,” but instead urges us to “seek fairness for all” and “to live peacefully in our pluralistic societies” ([Oaks2021Rome](#)). We must learn simply, he teaches, that across stark differences we still “belong to each other” ([Oaks2026](#)). While some Christians and some Latter-day Saints as well have adopted a dominionist approach to politics, he has advocated a different tack. He suggests that religion should remain independent of party and should instead motivate the individual citizen to be knowledgeable, to act independently according to individual priorities, with enough independence to change party and candidate votes when deemed necessary ([Oaks2021](#)). In essence, the gospel of Christ, as formulated by Mormonism, calls believers to not only stand up for our interests and our faith in public. *It is a call to exercise our agency to make government serve more people more effectively and more fairly.*

Holzman mentions that practices, liturgies, and rituals matter as much as teachings. Rauch sees the value of what he calls thick religion where practitioners take their religion seriously enough that it penetrates and shapes every relationship and dimension of life. Many of us in this effort at Engage have tried to point out to our fellow Latter-day Saints that our lay church structure offers direct experiences that position us to be especially helpful in reviving American civic culture. While most of America increasingly lives and associates with the those of similar income, party, and race, Latter-day Saints understand themselves called of God to love and make a community out of whatever group of individuals our geographical location assigns to us ([Bishop](#)). While most of America has become increasingly isolated and individualistic and fearful of compromise, our lay church life requires us to learn how to live, listen and work together as a single body. It has also inspired a great number of young people to leave home and learn to speak to total strangers on busses and in streets, even in foreign lands. I am especially convinced that Latter-day Saints who are serious students of the humanities have found the sweet spot: they are well prepared to understand the diversity and beauty of beliefs, languages, and customs that make up a plural society. Their religious fervor is tempered by their growing awareness of a diverse world, and their awareness of the world is focused by their faith. In my experience, when Latter-day Saints find a link between their intimate religious experience and their civic duty, life grows more abundant and fulfilling. In short, religion helps, not hurts. *My point is simply that religious leaders and humanities educators alike have a unique opportunity to inspire the responsibility both to understand differences and to establish shared and lasting values across them.*

No religion can afford to remain tribal and hope to maintain moral authority. Believers must learn to test our moral mettle and bring our goodwill to the broader and more diverse society of which we are a part. Believers want and have the right to share our beliefs, but we also have the responsibility to use our beliefs in self-sacrificing service of the wider society. While believers have often feared that entering a plural and secular civic sphere might diminish, water down, or

blunt the edge of our uniqueness, the lesson of literature as formulated by CS Lewis comes to mind. It might very well be in fact, as Jesus himself promised and as Lewis intuited, that we will truly find ourselves precisely in the moment when we lose ourselves, when we let go of fear and protectionism and instead seek to bless the whole world out of love.

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* George Handley is an author and professor of Environmental Humanities at Brigham Young University. He is a former city council member and Executive Director of Engage: A Forum for Civic Renewal.