Eugene England at Stanford: Conscience, Community, and Moral Formation

An Interview with Kristine Haglund

Kristine Haglund is the author of Eugene England: A Mormon Liberal *(University of Illinois Press, 2021) and a PhD student at St. Louis University writing on Mormon women's contributions to American culture. In this conversation, she reflects on Eugene England's importance as a Latter-day Saint intellectual, the role Stanford played in his moral and political formation, and the gifts of Mormon communal life that shaped his sense of responsibility to others.*

WELCOMED: For readers who may not know him, who was Eugene England?

Kristine Haglund: Eugene England (22 July 1933 – 17 August 2001) was one of the most important Latter-day Saint intellectuals of the twentieth century, and one of the first to try to publicly reconcile Mormon belief with commitments to progressive politics . He was a literary scholar, editor, teacher, and essayist, and he was also someone profoundly shaped by Mormon culture as a way of life. For him, the Church offered a disciplined, communal practice of caring for other people, taking responsibility, serving where one is needed, and being answerable to something larger than oneself. In my book, *Eugene England: A Mormon Liberal*, I try to show that his moral seriousness came from that formation as much as from books or ideas.

WELCOMED: What kind of formation do you mean?

Kristine Haglund: I mean the ordinary but demanding practices of Mormon life: teaching, serving, accepting volunteer assignments, raising families in community, and learning to think of your life as bound up with the needs of others. Mormon culture teaches that one is responsible for other people, that one's talents are gifts to be shared, and that discipleship is lived through work, care, and endurance. Gene lived those ideals. Even when he became critical of parts of the institution, he was loyal; for him, faith meant fidelity to commitments enacted through obligation, service, and love.

WELCOMED: What kind of person was he?

Kristine Haglund: He was intensely earnest, emotionally open, and hungry for meaning. He cared about ideas as well as people. He was warm and charismatic, and eager for new experiences.He wanted faith to make people larger, kinder, and more courageous. He believed that religious life should form conscience and deepen our capacity for charity. He made intellectual life feel inseparable from moral life.

WELCOMED: Why was Stanford so important to him?

Kristine Haglund: Stanford was crucial because it became the place where the responsibilities he had learned in Mormon life were tested against history. He arrived with a strong trust in America, in authority, and in the moral clarity of the world he had inherited. He was already a veteran and a father with small children. At Stanford, amid the Vietnam era and the struggles over civil rights, he had access to many international newspapers and could inform himself from new perspectives. In his unpublished autobiographical essay "Finding Myself in the '60s," he describes reading more widely, recognizing government deception, and feeling the moral structure of his world rupture. At Stanford his inherited duty became a more searching and difficult responsibility: not just loyalty, but conscience.

WELCOMED: Did Stanford pull him away from the LDS Church?

Kristine Haglund:. No, I think he never even considered moving away from the church. Stanford forced him to ask what fidelity really required. The LDS formation he had received had taught him to care, to serve, and to take moral obligation seriously. At Stanford, those same commitments pushed him to confront war, racism, and institutional failure more honestly. So this was a story of responsibility becoming deeper, harder, and more costly.

WELCOMED: What still feels alive in his legacy now?

Kristine Haglund: His insight that Christian virtues are developed in the process of living and worshiping with people whose difference from demands that you exercise patience, charity, maybe even a little long-suffering!. .The lay structure of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints means everyone gets chances to teach, serve, argue, repair, and try again.Gene believed that religion should form people who can stay in community, endure disappointment, and keep trying to love their neighbors well.

WELCOMED: Why should Stanford students care about Eugene England now?

Kristine Haglund: Because he understood something that universities often forget—that learning is a morally serious endeavor and it ought to change the trajectory of your life.. He often quoted the founder of the church who said that "by proving contraries, truth is made manifest."For Gene, every classroom was a place to talk to people who've read the same texts but understand them completely differently and learn to give each other grace for differences and to find commonality. In a moment when it is very easy to build a life entirely among the like-minded, that vision feels especially important.

WELCOMED: What can students here learn from him?

Kristine Haglund: I think students can learn how to hear others and be interested in their worlds even if they differ greatly. They can also learn that institutions form us most deeply through repeated practices: teaching, serving, debating, forgiving, making something together, and

enduring one another with charity. Eugene England saw that those ordinary practices shape the soul. That is something students at Stanford can recognize, whether they are religious or not.