THE POLITICS OF MORMON HISTORY

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Upon assuming the Leonard J. Arrington Endowed Chair of Mormon History and Culture at Utah State University, I have to acknowledge two special individuals upon whose broad shoulders I stand. The first is the chair's namesake, Leonard Arrington, the "godfather of Mormon history." Many if not most of the good things that have happened in the subfield of Mormon history over the past half century have their roots in Arrington's pioneering scholarship, leadership, and organizational vision. The second is my predecessor in the Arrington Chair, Philip Barlow, who embodies in every way the spirit of Leonard Arrington. The quality of Phil's intellect is matched only by the depth of his soul. Anyone working in the field of Mormon studies in the twenty-first century is deeply in debt to these two great scholars.

I have one more person to acknowledge, which will lead me into the actual body of my remarks. Why have we convened at this university in Logan, rather than in Salt Lake City or Provo? We can trace the origins of Utah State University, the state's land-grant university, back to a piece of legislation called the Land-Grant College Act, which was signed into law by Abraham Lincoln on June 10, 1862. The law's chief sponsor was Representative Justin Morrill, a Republican from Vermont. Born in 1810 in Strafford, Vermont, Morrill considered attending college but didn't because of the cost. When he entered Congress, Morrill felt the need to create public colleges so as to expand educational opportunity for

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more of America's citizens, especially from the agricultural and working classes. The purpose of these land-grant colleges, according to the legislation, would be "to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life."[1] I trust that Representative—and later Senator—Morrill would be pleased with the way that Utah State University has fulfilled that lofty mission.

However, I'm pretty sure that on this night, that faint noise you may hear in the distance is the sound of Justin Morrill rolling over in his grave. Universal liberal and practical education is one thing, but *Mormon history*? In the same legislative session in which Congress passed the Land-Grant College Act, Morrill also sponsored another, even more popular, bill that outlawed Mormon polygamy. In fact, President Lincoln signed Morrill's Anti-Bigamy Act one day before signing the Land-Grant College Act. Representative Morrill's feelings about public education and the Mormons, respectively, were on the opposite ends of the spectrum. "I am a firm believer in universal education," he affirmed, largely because it instilled in the masses the skills and knowledge needed to be good citizens of the republic.[2] As for the Mormons, however, Morrill asserted that they "are quite as hostile to the republican form of government as they are to the usual forms of Christianity."[3] Only five years after the Latter-day Saints publicly announced their practice of plural marriage, Congressman Morrill declared, "When the works of such a religion, in its overt acts, exhibit the grossest immorality

1. Morrill Act of 1862, 7 U.S.C. § 304, https://www.loc.gov/item/uscode1925-002007013/.

2. Quoted in Coy F. Cross II, *Justin Smith Morrill: Father of the Land-Grant Colleges* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999), 77.

3. Justin Smith Morrill, *Speech of Hon. Justin S. Morrill, of Vermont: On Utah Territory and its Laws—Polygamy and its License, Delivered in the House of Representatives, Feb. 23, 1857* (Washington, DC: Congressional Globe, 1857), 4.

and debauchery, it is questionable whether legislators should remain neutral."[4]

History is full of ironies, large and small. Among those ironies is that one of the universities Justin Morrill made possible is now home to an endowed professor studying the religion he so despised. So, to Justin Morrill, wherever you are: thank you . . . and I'm sorry.

I begin with this reference to Representative Morrill as a reminder that Mormon history is and always has been political. By "political," I mean only in part what we typically think of when we refer to "politics"—federal legislation, constitutional law, ideological battles, voter behavior, and so forth. In these remarks I'm more interested in the original sense of the Greek term *polis*, connoting the ways that humans live together in community. With that in mind, I want to reflect on how Mormon history, and the broader field of Mormon studies, can serve as an arena in which differing communities of interest can discern, negotiate, and fulfill their mutual obligations to one another. To me, history is a deeply ethical endeavor. It's not just names and dates. That is why in my office I have a poster of Malcolm X with the quote from his great 1963 speech "Message to the Grassroots" that says, "Of all our studies, history is best qualified to reward our research."[5]

"Can we all get along?" Rodney King famously pled in the midst of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Historians have always been interested in the question of why and how we *don't* get along, and I'm no exception. In graduate school I began studying religion, conflict, and peace in earnest.

4. Morrill, *Speech of Hon. Justin S. Morrill*, 12.

5. Malcolm X, "Message to the Grass Roots" (speech, Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference, King Solomon Baptist Church, Detroit, Mich., Nov. 10, 1963), available at https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/message-to-grassroots/.

That eventually led to my first book, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South*, which examines hundreds of episodes of violence against Latter-day Saint missionaries and converts in the late nineteenth-century southern United States.[6] But more than the violence itself, I wanted to better understand the practice of religious tolerance in American history—often seen through its failure—and the limits of the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom.

Some late nineteenth-century southerners blithely discarded the principles of religious freedom, such as the North Carolina mob who whipped a Latter-day Saint missionary while bragging that they "did not care for the law or constitutional liberty."[7] But more thoughtful observers genuinely wrestled with where protected Mormon belief ended and illicit Mormon practice began. Since polygamy was a federal crime, then should the mere preaching of the principle of plural marriage be outlawed—as it became in Tennessee in 1885—or did Mormon proselytization fall under constitutionally protected free speech? Was it only Mormonism's peculiar marital institution in the crosshairs, or the religion in general? One South Carolina newspaper called for the annihilation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in its entirety on the grounds that it had forfeited any claim to religious liberty: "All religions are guaranteed by the Constitution, but whenever a system goes beyond common morality, it ceases to be a religion, and should be unceremoniously stopped."[8] One didn't need to grapple with the complicated question of how far religious freedom should extend if, in fact, you determined that there was no religion to grant freedom to at all.[9]

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6. Patrick Q. Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

7. Quoted in Mason, *Mormon Menace*, 96.

8. Quoted in Mason, *Mormon Menace*, 99.

9. This is a significant theme in J. Spencer Fluhman, *"A Peculiar People": Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

It's easy to narrate nineteenth-century Mormon history with Latter-day Saints as the perpetual underdogs and victims. We should never forget that in all of American history there is no other example of a state-sponsored pogrom against an entire religious minority group quite like what happened in Missouri in late 1838. And yet a narrative of the Mormon past with Latter-day Saints *only* playing the part of victims is not really history at all. I suppose it's possible within Mormon *hagiography*—the stories of the saints—to promote a narrative in which God's people are always persecuted by the wicked outside world as a sign of their chosenness. But Mormon *history* cannot do this. When you pick up a stick, you pick up both ends. As I show in my most recent book, *Mormonism and Violence: The Battles of Zion*, a *history* of the horrific anti-Mormon violence in Missouri must also analyze the Mormon sources of and contributions to that violence.[10] A *history* of Mormon pioneer settlement in Utah must also document the sometimes brutally violent dispossession of the Native peoples who already lived here. A *history* of Mormonism's remarkable global expansion must also assess the structural and cultural violence of racism against black- and brown-skinned people embedded in certain Mormon scriptures, narratives, theologies, and policies. These are not easy stories to tell or hear, especially not for many people in the pews who want to be inspired by heroic and faith-promoting stories of their religious forebears. Furthermore, certain powerful Latter-day Saint leaders have at times determined that the whole historical truth is too much truth, that some things that are true are not always useful for the Church and its believers.[11] The even-handed truth-telling commitment of Leonard Arrington and his professional colleagues in the Church Historical Department in the 1970s was seen as sufficiently threatening to some

10. Patrick Q. Mason, *Mormonism and Violence: The Battles of Zion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

11. See Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (1981): 1–18.

that the operation was shut down. It got so bad that Arrington and his associates were eventually exiled to the nether regions of Utah Valley and punished with the truly horrible fate of working at Brigham Young University.[12]

Decades later, as times changed and the disposition of Church leaders also evolved, a new generation realized that maybe Arrington & Co. had it basically right in the first place. The truth-telling commitment of the Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in this century is, in my estimation, nothing short of astounding. I don't know of another religious organization that dedicates so many resources, relative to size, toward first-rate historical scholarship. The Joseph Smith Papers project is jaw-dropping in scope and audacity—to track down, publish, and professionally annotate literally every extant Joseph Smith document, and to put it all up on the web for anyone to scrutinize. The Gospel Topics essays were pathbreaking in their forthright, if admittedly incomplete, treatment of some of the most difficult issues in the Latter-day Saint past. And I was personally shocked at how transparent the first volume of the new *Saints* narrative history was about the polygamy practiced by Joseph Smith and the early Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo. This is all extremely encouraging. If we want to actually understand how people in the past lived—how they muddled their way through conflict of various kinds—then we have to tell the whole story. We have to pick up both ends of the stick.

Many of us—maybe most of us—care about history not just because of its antiquarian value but because it also helps us think about the

12. I say this as a proud alum of Brigham Young University. For more information about the events mentioned here, see Gregory A. Prince, *Leonard Arrington and the Writing of Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press and Tanner Trust Fund, 2016), esp. chaps. 22–23.

present. Mark Twain is reported to have said (which means he probably didn't actually say it), "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." It's precisely because of that rhyming quality that the study of the past can become useful for us today. Useful, but not determinative. Just as there is no one way of understanding or interpreting history, there is no one way to apply it. We have to be careful how we apply history because it can be a dangerous thing. Let me give an example.

Recently I was a guest on KUER public radio discussing the role of religion in the 2019 Salt Lake City mayoral election.[13] Former Salt Lake City mayor Rocky Anderson made religion an issue in the campaign when he posted on Facebook, then followed up with an op-ed in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, that voters should not elect candidate Luz Escamilla precisely because she is a Latter-day Saint. Responding to the howls of religious bigotry, Anderson said he was simply applying the lessons of history. In his recounting, which is at least in the ballpark when speaking of the 1850s, "Brigham Young, with the support of the Territorial Legislature, assumed autocratic control of Utah Territory under the guise of speaking on behalf of God. At that time, the Legislature was all-Mormon, juries were all-Mormon, the courts assigned by the Legislature to hear all civil and criminal matters were all-Mormon." Anderson admitted that times have changed since the mid-nineteenth century, but not all that much. And so he insisted that voters should reject Escamilla's candidacy on the grounds that she "seems willing to do the bidding of the church."[14]

I'm not a resident of Salt Lake City, so I have no opinion about which candidate should win the race. There are no doubt a number of

13. Doug Fabrizio, "Salt Lake City's Mayoral Race and the Question of Religion," *RadioWest*, Oct. 11, 2019, https://radiowest.kuer.org/post/salt-lake-citys-mayoral-race-and-question-religion.

14. Rocky Anderson, "To Challenge LDS Church Power in Utah is Not 'Bigotry,'" *Salt Lake Tribune*, Sept. 6, 2019, https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2019/09/06/rocky-anderson-concerns/.

perfectly good reasons for a voter to prefer Erin Mendenhall over Luz Escamilla. And it's important to discuss and critically assess the ongoing influence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Utah politics. But were Rocky Anderson to make that same argument in a paper for one of my history classes, he'd earn a C at best. To summarily dismiss a candidate in 2019 on religious grounds, based largely on the way things went down in 1852, with only a facile recognition of the enormous changes that have occurred in Utah and Mormon history in the intervening sixteen decades, is a subpar and even irresponsible application of Mormon history. What's more, Anderson's argument is an extension of a longstanding trope, traceable to the mid-nineteenth century, that Mormons are clones and drones, that the religion is a monolithic theocracy, and that Latter-day Saint women in particular are so unaware of and complicit in their own oppression that they are duped into simply doing the bidding of male patriarchs.[15] That's not good history, and it doesn't take into account the complex agency of Latter-day Saint women.[16] One compelling reason for the role of the humanities in a public university, and history and religious studies in particular, is that through them we learn to make and insist on better arguments in the public sphere.

Let me offer a counterexample of what I think is a better instance of applying Mormon history to contemporary issues. Cast your mind back to 2017 and 2018, when the Trump administration issued a proclamation banning immigration from several Muslim-majority countries, a measure that was immediately challenged in the courts and subsequently revised. In response to the administration's action, a group of scholars of Mormon history and law submitted an amici curiae brief that went first to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals then

15. See Fluhman, *"A Peculiar People."*

16. See Catherine A. Brekus, "Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 59–87.

to the Supreme Court.[17] I was a minor contributor and signatory to the document; major credit goes to Nathan Oman, professor of law at William and Mary Law School. After tracing the depth and extent of popular and political anti-Mormonism in the late nineteenth century, we showed how the executive branch, in particular during the administration of President Rutherford B. Hayes, made a concerted effort to ban Mormon immigration in the late 1870s. For instance, in 1879 Secretary of State William Everts, frustrated that Congress was not taking more proactive measures against Mormon immigration, issued a circular to all American diplomats stationed in Europe directing them to pressure European governments to halt Mormon emigration from their countries to the United States. Most of the European nations failed to reply, and none complied—it seems they were as eager to get rid of Mormon immigrants as the Hayes administration was resistant to welcoming them. Since they couldn't control the outflow from Europe, US immigration officials tried to stop Mormon migrants at the ports by detaining them and returning them to their country of origin—a strategy that was only sporadically applied and not particularly effective. Finally, Congress acted in the late 1880s by disincorporating the Church's Perpetual Emigration Fund and seizing its assets.

Our brief was neither partisan nor polemical. The signatories did not take a position on whether President Trump's September 2017 proclamation violated the Establishment Clause or was otherwise unlawful. Rather, we wanted to inform the court with "an example of religious discrimination in immigration from America's past, and to show the harms caused by treating particular religious minorities as dangerous and foreign." We argued, "This case presents the Court with an opportunity to give the [President's] Proclamation the sort of genuine scrutiny that did not exist in the nineteenth century. This Court should

17. Anna-Rose Mathieson, Ben Feuer, and Nathan B. Oman, "Brief of Scholars of Mormon History & Law as Amici Curiae in Support of Neither Party" (2018), *Appellate Briefs* 13, https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/briefs/13.

ensure that history does not repeat itself by taking a hard look at the government's purported justifications for the Proclamation."[18] In other words, we didn't claim that nineteenth-century Mormon history forced us, or the courts, to believe or act in a certain way lo these many years later. But the historical record does offer a cautionary tale to at least be mindful of when we encounter new political developments that, if not quite repeating history, certainly rhyme.

I've discussed the politics of Mormon history itself, past and present. But what about the politics of *doing* Mormon history, both now and in the future? And thinking even more ambitiously, is there a way that Mormon history can inform our broader cultural politics, providing a model of how to live together despite competing interests? For this, I want to borrow from an eminently scholarly source: the NBC sitcom *The Good Place*. One of the major characters in *The Good Place* is Chidi Anagonye, a professor specializing in moral philosophy and ethics. Chidi's life is a mess because he obsesses over the ethics of even the most inconsequential actions like choosing what flavor of muffin to buy. I don't want to endorse Chidi's neurotic moral paralysis, but I do want to borrow the central question from a lecture he delivers, which forms the philosophical backbone of the entire show (and is based on a book by the real-life Harvard philosopher T. M. Scanlon): "What do we owe one another?"[19]

I must confess that, as a scholar of Mormonism, I am sometimes jealous of other academic colleagues who conduct their research and publish articles and books without the specter of a living

18. Mathieson, Feuer, and Oman, "Amici Curiae," 7–8.

19. See T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

community—especially one of which they are a part—peering over their shoulder.[20] At times I have bristled at feeling that I need to be careful about the way I say something, or even whether I should say it at all, for fear that someone, somewhere, will be offended, that their faith will somehow be challenged, that I will give the wrong impression or I will say something that a missionary or a bishop or an LDS Public Affairs representative or a General Authority simply won't like. In short, there is a *politics* to the writing and teaching of Mormon history, in terms of how scholars and the community live alongside one another.

And now there is even a politics to the very term *Mormon* history or *Mormon* studies, with the M-word becoming a new kind of shibboleth that marks you in certain ways to certain people. Every Mormon studies scholar and institution has wrestled with the question of nomenclature since the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints changed its style guide, and especially when President Russell M. Nelson made clear that the emphasis on the full name of the Church was a serious institutional priority.[21] No scholar or journalist I know wants to casually disregard the Church's request. But in the academic field of Mormon studies, we don't just study the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Indeed, if we did, technically Joseph Smith's early visions, the translation of the Book of Mormon, and the establishment of the Church of Christ would all fall outside our purview, since each foundational event occurred years before the 1838 revelation giving the

20. This section draws from and adapts Patrick Q. Mason, "Scholars, Saints, and Stakeholders: A Forgotten Alternatives Approach to Mormon History," *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 1 (Jan. 2015): 217–28.

21. See "Style Guide—The Name of the Church," *Newsroom*, https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/style-guide; and Russell M. Nelson, "The Correct Name of the Church," Oct. 2018, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/10/the-correct-name-of-the-church?lang=eng.

Church its present name.[22] In fact, Joseph Smith and the other believers in the Restoration were known as "Mormons" years before they became Latter-day Saints. What's more, the Restoration tradition is wonderfully diverse; by one scholar's count, there have been over four hundred organized groups over the past two centuries who have traced their spiritual lineage back to Joseph Smith, with approximately eighty still operating as of about a decade ago.[23] In short, when discussing the history and culture of Restoration traditions, the capacious words "Mormon" and "Mormonism" are simply unavoidable, and remain useful, in many contexts.[24]

This raises a broader point. As a scholar, shouldn't I have the right just to say what I want to say, teach what I want to teach, and write what I want to write? Why should I care about what leaders and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints think, except as an object of my study? I work in American higher education, after all, with its time-honored standards and methods of rigor and objectivity and critical analysis and academic freedom. Don't I have the right to pursue an unfettered path toward historical truth, regardless of how people in the community *feel* about it? Of course, these questions are not unique to scholars of Mormonism. They apply to anyone studying any human community that has a stake in the stories being told about it. They apply even more to those of us who are scholar-practitioners, a fancy name for the obviously misguided lot who have made the self-evidently poor life decision to academically study the religious community they still

22. An analogy is that the settlement of Jamestown, which long predated the creation of the United States of America, fits in an American history course but somewhat more awkwardly in a history of the United States.

23. See Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer, eds., *Scattering of the Saints: Schism within Mormonism* (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2007), 9.

24. For thoughtful perspectives on this issue, see the roundtable on the name of the Church in the Fall 2019 issue of *Dialogue*, available at https://www.dialoguejournal.com/issues/fall-2019/.

actively participate in. Those of us who walk that line, which includes my Hindu and Buddhist colleagues in Religious Studies here at Utah State, are accustomed to upsetting people—or at least knowing we have the real potential to upset people—on both sides of the chasm between the academy and the temple.

I have found the tightrope walk to be easier when I pay less attention to the perilous fall on either side and more attention to the question of *relationships*. What is the relationship between scholars and their subjects? What rights and responsibilities do scholars and their subjects have in relationship to one another? What does a scholar owe the community, and what does the community owe the scholar? In terms of the politics of Mormon history, how might we talk about Mormon historians' relationship with the ecclesiastical and cultural communities that have a special stake in their writing and teaching of that history? In short, what do we owe one another?

Let me address those complicated questions with an imperfect analogy. Although we don't often recognize it, fundamentally historians are in an extractive industry. Our job is to retrieve and process the raw materials of history that were usually deposited long before we were born. There are two things to understand about those resources, two things that exist in some tension. First, those resources do not belong to anyone in particular because no living person created them. People or institutions might have legal ownership of certain documents, but nobody "owns" history. History is community property. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that some people have actually settled on certain resource-rich lands. That's where they live. That's where they've made home. That's where they raise their kids. Those of us who are in the extractive industry don't have the right to dispossess them of their ancestral lands nor to pillage the land or pollute it so as to make it inhabitable for its current inhabitants or future generations. Furthermore, whatever wealth is created from the resources we extract and refine should be shared with the community. It's true that some

community members will probably wish that we never came with our extractive machinery, preferring that the land would now and always remain pristine. They may insist that their particular ecosystem is especially fragile, that we should leave the resources alone and take our operation elsewhere. That's a legitimate and understandable sentiment. But the fact is that the community needs and can benefit from the historical resources we extract and refine as much as anyone else.

What do we do with these competing interests? It seems to me that the best plan is to steer a middle course of responsible, ethical development that lies somewhere between reckless plundering and naïve primitivism. But not everyone will agree about what is responsible or ethical, making it all the more important for those engaged in extraction to be sensitive about community concerns and maintain the highest professional standards in doing their work.

What would a responsible, ethical relationship between the religious studies scholar and the religious community look like? In my view, Mormon studies, as a subset of religious studies, will make its greatest and most unique contributions in the often-uncomfortable space between the critic and the caretaker.[25] Scholars will be most effective in the space in which we can rigorously analyze and discuss the tradition—its institutions, scriptures, histories, cultures, politics, gender norms, race relations, and so forth—without being obsessed with or trapped by competing truth claims. This is precisely the path that Leonard Arrington and his generation put us on and that we have been trying to discern and follow ever since.

If scholars of Mormonism cultivate a studious commitment to something approaching objectivity and neutrality, and our research is

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25. I am referring to, but also departing from, Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); and Atalia Omer, "Can a Critic Be a Caretaker Too? Religion, Conflict, and Conflict Transformation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 2 (June 2011): 459–96.

conducted with evidentiary fidelity and analytical rigor, then we will be in a unique position to see Mormon history and culture in fresh ways. This is broadly true of the entire humanistic endeavor. An article published last year in *Forbes*, of all places, extolled the special virtue of the arts and humanities precisely because they "show us how things could be different than they are."[26] The particular ways this plays out will take distinctive forms in various fields. But in the subfield of Mormon history, and the discipline of history more generally, I think one of our greatest and most useful strategies is to uncover and lift up history's "forgotten alternatives."

The notion of forgotten alternatives comes from the great Southern historian C. Vann Woodward's classic book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*.[27] I use it to mean not only paths that were once available and were either not chosen or foreclosed for various reasons but also options that may become available as our cultural, intellectual, political, and religious landscapes change and necessitate answering new questions with the resources at hand. It is not the role of scholars to act as supposedly enlightened sages telling the benighted masses, or leaders, what should be done. But in a forgotten alternatives mode of history, one key function of the scholarly community is to keep alive a multiplicity of ideas and options, gleaned from the rich bequest of our diverse histories. As scholars writing in another context have stated, "Critical moments of genuine receptivity and openness to change come unpredictably, but when they do, policymakers will look seriously at whatever is on offer which comes from a credible source and provides answers to their predicament." Along these lines, the Nobel Prize–winning economist Milton Friedman wrote, "Only a crisis—actual or

26. Matthew Gabriele, "The Medievalist Who Fought Nazis with History," *Forbes*, Oct. 23, 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/matthewgabriele/2018/10/23/medievalist-who-fought-nazis/.

27. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1955]), chap. 2.

perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That," Friedman said, "is our basic function [as scholars]: to develop alternatives to existing policies, and to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable."[28]

What forgotten alternatives can Mormon history present to us—all of us, not just those who go to an LDS ward on Sundays? What can Mormonism's past tell us about the relationship between church and state, the nature and limits of religious freedom, marriage and family structures, gender norms and relations, majority-minority relations, the pursuit of economic justice in a market-based economy, the challenges of pluralism and particularism, racial and national identities, the rights of individuals in balance with the needs of communities, how to weigh competing authority claims, violence and peace, colonial relationships of center and periphery, and so on?

Let me give a couple concrete examples of how this has already worked. Perhaps the most famous instance of a Mormon historian working in a forgotten alternatives mode, which in turn had a significant impact on the development of the institutional Church, is Lester Bush's classic 1973 *Dialogue* article, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview."[29] When Bush wrote his essay, a kind of historical amnesia had settled upon Church members and leaders in which they had come to believe that Joseph Smith had initiated the Church's ban on ordaining Black men to the priesthood and that no Black men had

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28. Both quotations appear in Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina, "Just Wasting our Time? Provocative Thoughts for Peacebuilders," in *Peacebuilding at Crossroads? Dilemmas and Paths for Another Generation*, edited by Beatrix Schmelzle and Martina Fischer (Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2009), 11–35. See also Milton Friedman, "Preface," *Capitalism and Freedom*, rev. ed. (1962; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xiv.

29. Lester E. Bush Jr., "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11–68.

ever been ordained—or if they had, it had been a mistake. Bush's essay disproved both of these cultural myths—not by way of advocacy or polemics but through careful, evidence-based historical scholarship. It seems President Spencer W. Kimball read Bush's essay during his personal wrestle with the issue and that the forgotten history that Bush uncovered was one factor giving Kimball the confidence that an alternative future was possible.[30]

Or consider the role of a small group of Boston housewives, as they called themselves, who stumbled upon a strange set of periodicals housed in some dusty corner of the Harvard library in the 1970s. Their rediscovery of the *Woman's Exponent*, a publication by, for, and of Latter-day Saint women published from 1872 to 1914, kindled their confidence that feminism was not a foreign concept to their religion but rather part of their pioneer heritage.[31] This group of women in Boston—which included Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and Claudia Bushman—along with a handful of women employed by Leonard Arrington in the LDS Church's Historical Department, essentially created the now robust field of Mormon women's history. Their rediscovery of the forgotten alternatives of Latter-day Saint women's past inspired new paths of inquiry, exemplified in Maxine Hanks's 1992 collection, *Women and Authority*.[32] Hanks's book, and her confrontational attitude at the time toward Church leaders, was more than the institution could bear, leading to her excommunication. In our current decade, however, much of

30. See Edward L. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 54.

31. See Claudia L. Bushman, et al., "My Short Happy Life with *Exponent II*," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 179–92. One important book to come out of this group was Claudia L. Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah* (Cambridge, Mass.: Emmeline Press, 1976; Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997).

32. Maxine Hanks, ed., *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

what women's historians and theologians were writing about for some four decades, often under a cloud of suspicion, has become a new orthodoxy. Hanks was rebaptized in the Church, and the restoration of moderate Mormon feminism has become mainstream with publications like Neylan McBaine's book *Women at Church*.[33] Gradually, incrementally, painstakingly, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is leaning into the forgotten alternatives of women's activism, leadership, and ritual participation.

The role of Mormon studies scholars is not to dictate policy to institutions or individuals, even in moments of crisis. But Mormon studies is and must always be political, meaning it is oriented toward questions of the common good. Mormon studies must preserve among its practitioners (and readers) a lively sense that what we say and write and teach really matters—if not in obviously direct ways today, then perhaps someday, somehow, for someone. This is not, however, a call for advocacy-based scholarship. Indeed, scholarship is usually poor scholarship when it is only footnoted versions of contemporary cultural politics. The trick for each Mormon studies scholar is not to be caught up in scheming how she will be the next Lester Bush, while still retaining a sense of purpose that her scholarship may indeed somehow matter in an unimagined present or unanticipated future.

A forgotten alternatives approach requires a kind of unspoken compact between the Mormon studies scholar and the Latter-day Saint community. Goodwill, trust, forbearance, and occasionally forgiveness must be extended to the scholar, particularly when she offers forgotten alternatives that do not square with present institutional or cultural norms. In exchange, the scholar must recognize that there are external stakeholders whose claims are valid, even compelling. The scholar must be content to a life—at least a professional life—somewhat apart, somewhat divorced from the corridors of ecclesiastical power. This is

33. Neylan McBaine, *Women at Church: Magnifying LDS Women's Local Impact* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014).

because the scholar will be held in at least benign suspicion by those who can't always tell what "team" she is on because she calls it like she sees it, and not necessarily the way the institution would prefer it to be seen.[34]

So what, in the end, do the Mormon studies scholar and the Latter-day Saint community owe one another? Spencer Fluhman had it right when he suggested that what we can offer one another is our friendship.[35] It seems to me that the scholar owes the community her best efforts in pursuing rigor, candor, accuracy, neutrality, and creative insight, all conditioned by humane generosity and the benefit of the doubt. In turn, the community owes the scholar space, sources, patience, and curiosity, all conditioned by humane generosity and the benefit of the doubt. Of course, when I speak of these mutual obligations born of friendship, I recognize that there is nothing binding on either side. Scholars can be biased and petty, and communities can be parochial and unforgiving. But where does that get us? How does that advance knowledge? Polemicists on both sides may score a few short-term wins by appealing to their respective bases of power—academic or ecclesiastical—but their impact is temporary, and they are typically not remembered kindly in the long run.

In perhaps his most trenchant insight into the human condition, canonized in the LDS scripture as Doctrine and Covenants section 121, Joseph Smith perceived that coercion born of ambition and self-importance can secure grudging acquiescence for a time, but true power and lasting influence can only be maintained long-term through persuasion, forbearance, humility, kindness, and indeed love.

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34. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich talks about the "double-bind of identity politics" that practicing Mormon women scholars often find themselves in. See Ulrich, "Mormon Women in the History of Second-Wave Feminism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 48.

35. See J. Spencer Fluhman, "Friendship: An Editor's Introduction," *Mormon Studies Review* 1, no. 1 (2014): 1–7.

He intuited that knowledge was truly capable of enlarging our souls only when pursued without hypocrisy or guile.[36] Honesty, generosity, and liberality of spirit are not exactly the coin of the realm in our current culture, but those are the virtues I find among my colleagues in the field of Mormon history. Can Mormon history, as a shared endeavor involving both scholars and the community, offer an alternative ethos of truth-telling, accountability, and reconciliation as a counterweight to our broader environment of fear, deception, and mutual recrimination? In other words, can Mormon history be the site of a different kind of politics? That may seem an audacious and idealistic claim for a tiny academic subfield. But I hear it as a distant sounding of the vision of the Restoration that Joseph Smith offered a month before the end of his life. Perhaps in some small way, Mormon history, like the movement Smith began nearly two centuries ago, can help "lay a foundation that will revolutionize the whole world"—not by force but rather by "the power of truth."[37]

36. Doctrine and Covenants 121:37, 41–42.

37. "History, 1838–1856, volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844]," 18, The Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-f-1-1-may-1844-8-august-1844/24.

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