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Interviews with Philip Barlow and Patrick Q. Mason

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Editor's Interview with Philip Barlow

Philip Barlow, retired Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture at Utah State University and current Associate Director and Research Fellow of the Neal A. Maxwell for Religious Scholarship, discusses his career and his thoughts on the field of Mormon Studies.

Why did you decide to specialize in Mormon Studies? When did you first become interested in LDS culture and history?

I was raised contentedly in a Latter-day Saint family and have retained a participant's natural interest in the movement. Because I was under the impression that I understood this religion when I left home to study religion academically, however, I intended to study everything *except* my own tradition. I was two years into my studies when I realized that my own tradition presented an extraordinary case study, with extraordinarily rich sources, for understanding how religion works—how it forms and adapts and thrives or fails. I also concluded that the church and the wider Restoration movement offered important clues for understanding American culture and diasporic religious movements. So I decided to write a dissertation on a Mormon topic.

What was it like being hired as the first Mormon Studies Chair? What was the most rewarding aspect of the position? What challenges did you face in establishing the program?

USU's appointment of the first such professorship was also intrinsic to the University launching the first degree-awarding religious studies program in this part of the country, so it was exciting to help conceive and shape that.

Religious studies as an academic discipline was born in the 1960s. A major reason that this field did not take hold in Utah until the 21st century was because many people, including portions of the legislature which appoints the state board of regents, were leery that such studies would mean the subtle fostering or denigrating of religion and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in particular. One of the challenges and one of the pleasures came in eroding such fears. The ultimate point of a liberal arts education is not mere job training but the exploration of what it means to be human beings in our universe—and nothing exceeds religion as an object of study for how humans form worldviews, value systems, and meaning. Yet the fears of such study came from several angles and were real. I remember receiving a long diatribe by surface mail from someone, once news went out about my appointment, before I had even moved to Utah. This person, who took a dim view of the church, went on for several pages about how unfortunate it was that I was uprooting my career in Indiana to come teach about a church

that was soon to collapse. Another time, the nation's Senate Majority Leader called me up to forcefully express his displeasure at something I had been quoted as saying in the *Washington Post*.

How do you think Mormon Studies has changed since you were first hired? And how would you like to see Mormon Studies expand its focus in the coming years?

One important development is the sheer fact that the field is maturing as a respected sub-field with a diversifying range of participants, an increasing number of whom are not themselves church members. Another is that historical approaches, while still predominant, are more and more being complemented by other fields—theology, philosophy, anthropology, political science, and others, including sociology, which has long run second to history in scope and impact. There will come a time in the not distant future, I suspect, that a professorship will be established designed for a field outside of history. A third major development is the rising attention to Mormonism internationally. It has been nearly a quarter-century since more church members resided outside than inside the United States—and this fact is affecting the character of the American church as well. Scholarly minds and organizations are turning their attention to global realms. This, and more attention to the 20th and 21st centuries, is inevitable and to the good.

What challenges do you think Dr. Patrick Mason will face in his transition to Utah State University?

Dr. Mason is gifted, experienced, and judicious. He will of course have to navigate the advantages and challenges of teaching and writing about a topic that is very personal to a majority of citizens in the state: church members and their sometimes critical observers. But I have not the slightest reservation about his abilities, his marvelous colleagues, and the foundation laid by the Religious Studies Program, the History Department, and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, all of them exceptionally well led these days.

Will you talk a little bit about your retirement from Utah State University's Leonard Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture and how life has changed since you've joined the faculty at Brigham Young University's Neal A. Maxwell Institute of Religious Scholarship?

It was not easy to leave beautiful Cache Valley and Utah State and the position there. I will remain life-long friends with a number of colleagues and many others who studied with me and also taught me things. I take delight in how the Program at USU is thriving. I left for the Maxwell Institute at BYU because I was ready for a season of my life to focus on writing and certain theological, rather than strictly religious studies, projects. At BYU I research and write as a religious believer rather than strictly as an observer. I

compare the distinction to the difference between writing biography versus autobiography. I find both angles of vision important.

I know we are eager to know more about what you are working on. What can we expect from Philip Barlow in the next few years?

Just now I am, along with Spencer Fluhman, serving as general series editor for a unique 12-volume set called *The Book of Mormon: Brief Theological Introductions*, which will begin to appear in January. Its an exciting series written by remarkable authors, designed to make the Book of Mormon more alive and accessible to thoughtful non-specialists.

After that I will return to a project I've contemplated for many years—a prose prequel to Milton's *Paradise Lost* dealing with the primordial notion of war in heaven. Conjuring Milton can seem pretentious, but my more modest venture attempts to put aspects of Joseph Smith's thought into conversation with Milton, Dostoevski, and other thinkers preoccupied by suffering, notions of good and evil, freedom, and what comprises sanity. This project will yield a series of scholarly essays as well as an experimental, mythical novel.

What advice would you give to young academics who are interested in Mormon Studies?

It is moving and exciting to sense the talent, ambition, thoughtfulness, and hopes of students with interest in this field. They are capable of giving me good advice too. But in response to the question, here are three observations.

Remember that “she who knows only one language knows none.” One has no way to understand English deeply, much less to understand language as such, if one doesn't know at least one other language. Similarly, in order to know the field of Mormon Studies well, we need to understand other things—other worlds, other disciplines—and bring that training and experience to bear when studying the Mormon world, including the formal Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its history. Take *all* of your classes seriously; you never know what angles of vision it may give you in your future work.

If you have a passion for this field, and if professional feedback suggests you have exceptional aptitude for it, then you may want to plunge in. But remember that the study of religion, and of this religion in particular, is worthwhile for its own sake. It can help us better understand the maps of reality that people carry about in their heads, maps that frame their perceived options for behavior. So this study can offer you a kind of superpower: to understand human beings better than you would without the experience. Such study may or may not lead to professional work in the future—that is a highly competitive world and is not for everyone. There are not enough professional positions even for some highly gifted and accomplished scholars. But the study itself can

AN EDITOR'S INTERVIEW

change your life, no matter what profession you end up in. When I went off to seek a master's degree in the study of religion, I did so with eyes mostly open. I decided to do it even if no professional doors opened and I ended up returning home two years later to go into business with my brothers. There are *lots* of ways to thrive intellectually and through which to make the world a better place apart from the professoriate.

If you proceed to graduate study, appreciate but do not be overawed by brilliance in your colleagues and teachers. The form of intelligence that lends itself to genuine scholarly accomplishment is rare and wondrous in the general population. It is not so rare in the academy. Great learning is a treasure if pursued with humility and the intent to lift others rather than to strut about as an intellectual peacock. A love of knowledge is wrongly disdained by those who sneer at the epithet "intellectuals." But intellectual accomplishment is not adequate compensation for lack of wisdom and character and (in my view) loss of God. Moreover, the correlation between brilliance and goodness, or between brilliance and mental and spiritual health, is not obvious to me. Remember that intelligence comes in many forms. Some may dazzle in one or two arenas—take delight in this and learn from them. But you too will be able to develop your own way of contributing.

Editor's Interview with Patrick Q. Mason

Patrick Q. Mason, former Howard W. Hunter Chair in Mormon Studies and current Leonard J. Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture at Utah State University, discusses his career and his thoughts on the field of Mormon Studies.

How did you become involved in Mormon Studies? When did you first become interested in Latter Day Saint history and culture?

In some ways it was quite natural, and in other ways totally accidental. I grew up (and remain) Mormon, so that of course is a factor. I knew from the moment I enrolled at Brigham Young University that I wanted to be a history professor. Along the way I took a course called "Mormonism and the American Experience" from David Whittaker, the long-time curator of Mormon Americana in BYU Special Collections. (I later went on study abroad with David and worked for him, so he was an important early mentor for me.) That was the first time I had ever studied Mormon history in an academic vein, and it was there that I learned about things like Joseph Smith and seerstones, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, and the race-based priesthood ban.

Over time I basically figured out that I wanted to study American religious history, so that took me to the University of Notre Dame for graduate school. My focus early on was on African American religious history, and by the time I took my qualifying exams I was interested in race, religion, and violence in 19th- and 20th-c. America. For my dissertation, I wanted to understand how the Ku Klux Klan went from being basically just anti-black in the 1860s to being anti-black, anti-Jewish, and anti-Catholic in the 1920s. So I decided to research violence against religious minorities in the postbellum South. I threw Mormons into my proposal almost as an afterthought, thinking there wasn't much of a story there. I had written a seminar paper here and there on Mormonism, but my interests were always much broader than that, and I had heard the same caution that so many others have, that specializing in Mormonism was going to be a bad idea for my career prospects.

Well, funny things can happen when you go into the archives. In the course of my research I discovered that there were more episodes of violence against Latter-day Saints in the late 19th-c. South than against Jews and Catholics combined. (Obviously, the violence against African Americans was of an entirely different magnitude.) So anti-Mormonism became a prominent part of my dissertation, and when it came time to publish my dissertation, I decided to focus on what I considered to be my best and most

original research. That became my first book, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South*, published in 2011 by Oxford University Press.

It just so happened that right when my book was being published, the Howard W. Hunter Chair in Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate University opened up. (Richard Bushman was the inaugural Hunter Chair in 2008, but he always intended to stay for only three years.) So I threw my hat in the ring. I had held a tenure-track position before then, and was currently working back at Notre Dame helping to launch a major research initiative, but I figured I was too junior to be seriously considered. But I benefited from a series of unlikely developments and good luck, and got the offer. It was really at that moment that I became a full-time Mormon Studies scholar – before that, my career could have gone in any number of other directions.

You have spent the last eight years at Claremont University as the Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies. What was that like? What was the most rewarding element of the position? Can you talk about any challenges you faced during your tenure?

It was an incredible eight years, and I'll always be grateful for my colleagues, students, and community supporters at CGU.

All of a sudden, as a still relatively junior scholar, I was the holder of one of two endowed professorships in this still-emergent field of Mormon Studies. (The University of Virginia soon thereafter added a third chair, the Richard Bushman Chair.) Then in 2012, some guy named Romney ran for president, and became the Republican nominee. There had been talk about the "Mormon moment" since the Salt Lake Olympics, and *The Book of Mormon* musical had just taken Broadway by storm. But Romney changed everything—for the LDS Church, for Mormon studies (at least temporarily), and for me. For the simple fact that I had "Mormon" in my job title without being an LDS Church employee, I had reporters calling me literally from around the world looking for more information about Romney's religion. Mormon Studies was immediately and powerfully relevant.

I've been fortunate to continue to work with the media ever since, any time there is a story about Mormons or Mormonism that hits the news. It's something that I absolutely did not anticipate when I went to graduate school, but which has been an extremely gratifying part of my career. I believe strongly that we shouldn't keep our knowledge locked up in the ivory tower, but find ways to connect with broader publics. We have to learn to translate our work for general audiences, and in 3-5 minutes. (I'm still pretty bad at giving soundbites, but I've learned to give good summaries!) I've developed a habit of never saying no when a reporter calls. I'll often tell them that I don't have any particular expertise on a particular subject and point them to a colleague who knows more about it, but I'll never brush them off.

Of course, I really enjoyed working with my graduate students at CGU. It's so intellectually stimulating to teach a graduate seminar and have a lively discussion for three hours, and still have more to talk about when time is up. Advising doctoral students is a lot of work – I don't think anyone quite realizes that until they've done it – but the upside is that you learn a lot along the way from these incredibly bright people who are doing truly original, innovative work.

One of my tasks as the Hunter Chair was fundraising. Although the chair itself was fully endowed, we were always raising money to support student fellowships and programming. I learned that I enjoyed fundraising more than I expected to. Not the asking-people-for-their-money part, which has never been comfortable for me, but getting to know so many smart and interesting people. Academics can be a little cloistered, and talk mostly to themselves, but some of my best conversations—and friendships—have been with people in all kinds of professions (frankly, a lot of them were lawyers) who happened to be interested in the kinds of things I'm interested in. Again, there is a translational quality to this work—nobody outside the academy is interested in historiography. (Literally, nobody.) So I had to think about what it was about my work, and the developments in my field, that would be relevant and compelling to the broader educated public. I can nerd out with other PhDs as well as the next scholar, but I'm also just as happy having a really smart conversation with people who look at Mormon history and theology through a non-academic lens.

The biggest challenge I faced at CGU was the always-daunting question of funding for students. (That's why I spent so much time and energy on fundraising.) CGU is an expensive tuition-driven private school, and while I really believe in the quality of educational experience and training we delivered to our students, it was a real financial burden for most of them to enroll there. Combine that with a perpetually lackluster academic job market, and I had more than a little anxiety about just what exactly it means to train graduate students in Mormon studies. I was comforted somewhat by what the great scholar (and close friend) Armand Mauss told me, that nobody has to go to graduate school, and these students are adults who choose to be there. That's true, and it helps, and I understand what it's like to feel compelled to go into academia despite having other options. But it's not easy to welcome students into an apprenticeship when you can't guarantee what their future will look like. That's one reason we started talking a lot about career diversity in my last few years at CGU.

I know that Utah State University is thrilled to welcome you as the Leonard J. Arrington Chair of Mormon Culture and History. How do you think that your experience at Claremont will shape your tenure at Utah State University? How are the programs similar/different?

I'm thrilled to be here too. Although Claremont was very good to me, during my last three years there I was serving as Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities. I learned a

lot in that position, had a lot of good experiences (and some not so good ones), and came to appreciate the hard work and difficult decisions that make up university administration. But when it came right down to it, at this stage in my career—I'm only 43—I'm still more interested in being a teacher and scholar than an administrator. Coming to Utah State has given me that opportunity to fully reclaim my academic aspirations.

The great thing about having already had a similar position for several years is that I was able to slide right into my job here at USU and immediately feel comfortable. The Arrington Chair is housed in the Religious Studies program, which is itself situated within the History Department. Given my intellectual training and the kind of work I do, that setup is ideal for me. The transition has been quite smooth, facilitated by welcoming colleagues and highly capable administrators. I've been doing a lot of writing, am back in the undergraduate classroom (which I really did miss), have some exciting new initiatives to pursue, and of course have been working on fundraising and donor relations.

The biggest difference here at USU, besides being back in a History Department, is that I'm teaching undergraduates and don't have doctoral students. I still have MA students, and I've really enjoyed starting to work with them. But in addition to teaching in my main areas of Mormon studies and American religion, I'm also teaching courses in History of Christianity and Religion, Violence, and Peace, both of which are new for me (especially at the undergraduate level). I tend to get bored doing the same thing over and over again, so it's enjoyable to have some new experiences and explore new areas.

Do you have plans for how you would like to develop the program?

I have two great full-time colleagues in Religious Studies – Ravi Gupta, who is a scholar of Hinduism, and Dominic Sur, a scholar of Buddhism. We're hiring right now in Jewish Studies, and have a number of terrific colleagues who teach courses in other areas within the curriculum. We're committed to building one of the leading Religious Studies programs in the intermountain West. Part of that will come through our teaching, which we are all committed to excellence in, as well as our scholarship. But one of the reasons I came to Utah State is because I believe in its mission as a land grant university. My colleagues had already started to build an outward-facing program before I arrived, for instance by hosting a major conference on religion and climate change called "God and Smog." We want to follow up on those kinds of initiatives, especially because we have responsibility not just for our students in Logan but for our entire statewide campus system.

In terms of Mormon studies, I'm in the early stages of reaching out to donors who can support projects including both research and public history components that we can involve students in. My colleague Rebecca Andersen and I are committed to teaching "Mormonism and the American Religious Experience" every semester in order to fulfill the substantial student demand for the course (USU's student population is majority

LDS). The Book of Mormon Studies Association has been holding their annual conference at USU for the past few years, and we hope to host them indefinitely, since it's a great fit for both of us. I'll also continue to host public lectures and conferences on a periodic basis.

Finally, I'm working with some colleagues on trying to build a peace studies initiative here at USU. I earned an MA in International Peace Studies while at Notre Dame, and have been writing about peace and violence for many years now. I'm hopeful something will come to fruition there.

I imagine Claremont, California stays relatively warm. Any plans for how you'll survive a winter in Logan?

Let's just say we had to invest in a whole new wardrobe for the family when we moved. But my wife and I survived several winters in South Bend, Indiana, and I'm pretty sure (fingers crossed) Logan can't be as nasty as the upper Midwest. And Cache Valley is gorgeous, so that helps.

Can you talk a little bit about any upcoming projects or publications?

I'm currently finishing a co-authored book called *Proclaim Peace*, which articulates a Latter-day Saint theology of peace and nonviolence. This has been a longstanding project with my friend and co-author David Pulsipher, professor of history at Brigham Young University-Idaho. We're excited to be (hopefully) nearing the end, partly just to be done with it, but also because it's a really meaningful project to both of us and we hope it has some impact especially within the LDS community.

After that, my next major book project will focus on Ezra Taft Benson as a lens on twentieth-century Mormon and American culture. Benson, who served as Secretary of Agriculture in the Eisenhower administration and eventually became president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is a fascinating figure. He lived almost the entire century (1899-1994), and was a major figure in both American conservatism and Mormonism. The book won't be a traditional biography, but will follow his life more or less chronologically in order to examine major themes where Mormonism and American life intersect throughout the twentieth century, from politics to gender, economics to hermeneutics. I've already done a fair bit of research, and will turn my full attention to the project beginning in early 2020.

How would you like to see the field of Mormon Studies develop over the next several years?

It's an exciting time for the field. I see a number of trends, all of which are positive. First, the field is becoming truly interdisciplinary. The historians have dominated until

now, and we're not going away. But the Mormon Social Studies Association is becoming more active (featuring the work of sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and others), the Book of Mormon Studies Association is already thriving, the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology is being revived, the Latter-day Saint Theology Seminar is doing pathbreaking work, and so forth. I think the areas to watch in the next few years will be scripture studies and theology. Whereas Mormon historians dominated the past half century, and changed our understanding of the tradition, I'm putting my bet on the theologians and scripture scholars to be at the forefront of intellectual exploration in the next few decades.

Second, the field is engaging more with theoretical literatures in religious studies, gender studies, critical race studies, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies. We can't abandon the incredible archival richness that has always been one of the field's strengths, but if we can add close attention to the sources with innovative theoretical framings, we'll continue to see a lot of really interesting scholarship.

The third development, which is absolutely crucial, is that Mormon studies is finally wrapping its head around global Mormonism. It's not easy, because of languages, resources, access to sources, and so forth. But everyone in the field recognizes that it's outside America where most of the growth and dynamism in Mormonism has been in recent decades, but it's also what we know the least about. I started a global Mormon studies initiative at CGU that my successor Matt Bowman is continuing, and there is an active and growing global Mormon studies group that keeps in touch via e-mail, social media, and now conferences. The Mormon History Association is paying more attention to global Mormonism than ever before. What has been slower to develop is the community of scholars who live outside the United States and Europe. What everyone is mindful of is not replicating colonial structures in which white people from the North Atlantic just go and pilfer black and brown people's stories. The disparity of academic and financial resources won't go away anytime soon, so we just need to be proactive about creating opportunities for scholars from the global South to make their distinctive contributions to the field.

What advice would you give to young academics who are interested in Mormon Studies?

There's never been a better time to be in Mormon studies. It is a growth field, and is steadily gaining in respect and reputation. That said, we have to be realistic. There are still only three jobs in the world with "Mormon studies" in the job description. Graduate students absolutely cannot *just* focus on Mormonism, at least not if they want a job in the secular academy. They have to develop expertise in other areas that are recognizable to their academic peers who don't give a fig about Mormonism for its own sake. We're past the point where it's career suicide to write a dissertation primarily dealing with Mormonism. But as my colleague Kathleen Flake always says, the key is to show how Mormon studies can help answer other people's questions. It can't just be inside

baseball. Mormonism works extremely well as a laboratory to study all kinds of things that are of broad interest and relevance, but students (and senior scholars) have to dedicate themselves to the serious and rigorous study of those other fields so that they know what those themes, questions, theories, and debates are.

I certainly want to encourage students who feel a passion for this area and want to follow that passion. But they need to go in with both eyes open, and become just as interested in their courses and readings that have nothing to do with Mormonism as they are about Mormon studies. I'm a big believer in intellectual serendipity – oftentimes the thing that will make the biggest difference in the quality of your research will come from something that has nothing to do with your research. So graduate students need to read widely, attend lectures in other fields and disciplines, and not always ask the question “what does this have to do with Mormonism?” It's a big world out there, and while Mormonism is every bit as worthy of study as any other topic, the best interpreters of the tradition have been people who have paid their dues learning about that big world.