

EMBERS AND BONFIRES

The Richard L. Evans Professorship
and Interfaith Work at BYU

J. B. Hawes

The November 2012 presidential election was still over a year away, but the Republican primary race was already heating up when Dallas pastor Robert Jeffress introduced Texas governor Rick Perry to the Values Voter Summit in Washington, DC. And because of what happened during that brief introduction, CNN was waiting for Pastor Jeffress outside the main convention hall. Jeffress had just endorsed Governor Perry as “a genuine follower of Jesus Christ.” The subtext of those words was not lost on reporters who well understood the religious overtones of this particular Republican primary race. In everyone’s mind, of course, Mitt Romney—a Mormon—was the candidate with the questionable Christian credentials to which Pastor Jeffress had alluded. CNN wanted to press Pastor Jeffress on that point.¹

In the interview that followed, Jeffress said, “I think Mitt Romney’s a good moral man, but I think those of us who are born-again followers of Christ should always prefer a competent Christian to a competent non-Christian like Mitt Romney.” Then Pastor Jeffress went one step further. He called The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints a cult. Even though one observer noted that “Jeffress stole the Friday news cycle with his comments,” Jeffress defended his word choice in that CNN

interview. “This isn’t news,” Jeffress insisted. “This idea that Mormonism is a theological cult is not news either. That has been the historical position of Christianity for a long time.”²

Few would argue that “historical position” point with Pastor Jeffress. He was right to note that conservative Christians have long viewed Mormonism as heterodox and suspect. Looking back, then, what *did* seem to qualify as “news” was the reaction that the exchange generated over the ensuing weekend—and the number of voices that challenged the appropriateness of the cult label. High on that list was an essay CNN published on its website, two days after the summit, by Richard J. Mouw, president of Fuller Seminary, with this title, “My Take: This Evangelical Says Mormonism Isn’t a Cult.”

For those who had watched Mormon–evangelical interaction over the past half century (and longer), Mouw’s essay did seem to mark a milestone, especially considering Mouw’s reasoning: “For the past dozen years, I’ve been co-chairing, with Professor Robert Millet of Brigham Young University—the respected Mormon school—a behind-closed-doors dialogue between about a dozen evangelicals and an equal number of our Mormon counterparts. . . . I know cults. . . . Religious cults are very much us-versus-them. . . . They don’t like to engage in serious, respectful give-and-take dialogue with people with whom they disagree.” To Mouw, therefore, the cult classification simply did not fit his experience with Mormonism. “While I am not prepared to reclassify Mormonism as possessing undeniably Christian theology,” Mouw wrote, “I do accept many of my Mormon friends as genuine followers of the Jesus whom I worship as the divine Savior.”³

Significant for the story to be narrated here, the dozen-year dialogue that Mouw referenced flourished under the auspices of an endowed professorship at Brigham Young University—a professorship that is now more than forty years old. Robert Millet assumed that chair only a few months after he and Mouw launched that initial conversation that has had far-reaching influence on Mormonism’s place in the American religious landscape. This essay attempts to paint a picture of that professorship, the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding, in a pointillist style of sorts—individual dots of color combining to create an image that takes shape when viewed from a distance. In many ways, this “pointillism” characterizes the impact

of the Evans Chair on the public's perception of Mormonism. Individual moments and interactions have become parts of a larger whole, and in this case the whole is certainly greater than the sum of its parts.

What seems to be at work here is an "opinion leadership" approach to the shaping of public perception. One way to effect a shift in widespread opinion, of course, is an information blitz, a protracted publicity campaign, for example, to win the hearts and minds of wide swaths of viewers. But such a campaign requires enormous resources to have any kind of national or international reach. On the other hand, forging relationships with opinion leaders can mean that their influence—their social capital—can have a multiplying effect well beyond those initial relationships.⁴ In this way and in just over four-plus decades, the holders of the Evans Chair have leveraged the resources of the endowment not only to raise the profile of Mormonism but also to prompt second looks at Latter-day Saint belief and practice—all of which takes aim at the professorship's initial mandate: "promoting understanding among people of differing religious faiths . . . and promot[ing] an enlightening exchange among Latter-day Saints . . . and people of goodwill everywhere."⁵

TRUMAN G. MADSEN AND THE FIRST TWO DECADES OF THE EVANS CHAIR

To understand the story of the Richard L. Evans Chair, one must also understand something of the history of the institution where the chair is housed. And for much of that institution's first century, it almost goes without saying that not many academicians thought Mormonism was worthy of notice.

Brigham Young University started as a perennially underfunded academy in 1875. Teacher salaries were sometimes paid in farm produce in those early lean years. Even though it was an LDS Church-owned school, the institution's perpetuity was in doubt until almost the mid-twentieth century as Church authorities weighed the costs and benefits, and as administration attempts to upgrade the faculty met with stops and starts over financial and philosophical concerns.

Outsiders were even less enthusiastic about the prospects of intellectual engagement with Mormonism. In 1917, Yale-educated Walter Prince

wrote dismissively that “scholars have not thought it worth while to discuss the notion of [the Book of Mormon’s] ancient authorship” because “the odd contents of the volume lamentably or ludicrously fall before every canon of historical criticism.”⁶ Over the next two decades, Latter-day Saint authorities sought to bolster the historical-critical credentials of its religion faculty by sending several to study at the University of Chicago. What has come to be known in Church circles as the “Chicago Experiment” yielded mixed results—good academic training did not necessarily result in articulate exponents of a uniquely Mormon religious perspective, nor did it seem to promote a two-way exchange of ideas.⁷

While Mormon theology struggled to gain widespread acceptability as a system of thought, the Mormon people themselves made more headway in that direction in the 1930s and 1940s. An aggressive and well-publicized Church welfare plan in response to the Great Depression drew the press to Salt Lake City and a church that only a half century earlier had been castigated for polygamy was now being openly celebrated for provident living and patriotism. While this favorable turn in national media attention was certainly a welcome change for Mormons, there still was the sense that it was the Church’s espousal of all-American values—hard work, thrift, neighborliness—rather than the Church’s religious *raison d’être* underpinning those values that won this sometimes-grudging acceptance. Mormon historian Richard Bushman remembered that as a Harvard undergraduate in 1950, his “sophomore tutor in History and Science, the distinguished historian of science I. B. Cohen, casually mentioned during one of our meetings that many people at Harvard thought Mormon theology was garbage.”⁸ When sociologist Thomas O’Dea published *The Mormons* later in the decade, he recognized that there were those “who emphasize the obsolescence of Mormonism, those who see the end of the movement in a stereotyped lack of creativity and a routine running down, who believe that this Mormon world will end not with a bang but a whimper”—but O’Dea sensed those prognosticators “[were] wrong.” Though he may have been challenging much conventional wisdom, he felt that a tidal change was coming. “There is,” he wrote, “still too much vitality—the characteristic Mormon vitality—remaining for such a prognosis to be likely.”⁹

Visible evidence of that continued vitality was Church growth in the 1950s and 1960s. Church membership more than doubled in those decades. The accompanying building boom gave Mormons a physical presence in hundreds of new locales around the globe. Henry D. Moyle, a senior Church Apostle, summarized the boom this way in 1963: “In the past twelve years, we have built 56% of the meetinghouses we now have in the world, 1,941 in number—more than were built in the preceding 120 years of Church history.”¹⁰ Growth at BYU was even more dramatic. In the fifties and sixties, the BYU “student body increased six-fold to more than 25,000, the size of the faculty quadrupled, . . . and the number of permanent buildings jumped more than twenty-fold.”¹¹

Just as noticeable was growing esteem for the public faces of Mormonism. As recognizable as any such faces were those of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singers and their announcer, Apostle Richard L. Evans. By the 1960s the choir was already in its fourth decade of continuous nationwide Sunday broadcasts, and Elder Evans provided the inspirational sermon portion of the weekly *Music and the Spoken Word* programs. So broad was the appeal of the choir’s music and Evans’s nondenominational-sounding homilies that *Time* magazine reported in 1971 that “many of the show’s faithful listeners did not realize Evans was a Mormon; they considered themselves followers of ‘Richard Evans’s church.’”¹²

It was, fittingly, a Richard Evans broadcast that proved to be the point of genesis for the professorship that would eventually bear his name. California industrialist Lowell Berry (not a Latter-day Saint) had become a Richard Evans admirer after tuning in, by chance, to a 1954 “Church of the Air” sermon that Evans was giving entitled “We Are Not Alone in Life.” After meeting Evans and developing a friendship with him, Berry called the Mormon Apostle one of “the two greatest Christians he ever met” (the other was Billy Graham).¹³ Berry and Evans also shared an enthusiasm for the work of the Rotary Club—Evans was the president of Rotary International in 1966–67. Upon Elder Evans’s death in 1971, Lowell Berry proposed to BYU president Dallin H. Oaks that something be done to honor Richard L. Evans. The idea of an endowed professorship emerged. Lowell Berry became an initial underwriter of the chair, and, until his death, he

“continued his support over the protest of some of [the] fundamentalist directors” of his foundation.¹⁴

By November 1972, fifty donors had put forward \$600,000 to endow the professorship, and BYU announced that Dr. Truman G. Madsen would be the first occupant of the Richard L. Evans Chair of Christian Understanding.¹⁵ It proved to be a decidedly far-reaching appointment.

Truman Madsen came to the post with contacts and convictions. Before accepting an appointment at BYU in 1960, he had studied at the University of Utah, the University of Southern California, and Harvard; at Harvard he ultimately passed doctoral exams in both philosophy and the history and philosophy of religion. Madsen was no stranger to vigorous religious dialogue—after all, the man had written a Harvard doctoral dissertation that took on Paul Tillich’s theology when Tillich was still *at* Harvard—and he was certainly no stranger to the challenge of explaining Mormonism in a variety of settings and contexts. His first decade at BYU was interrupted by a call from Church authorities to serve for three years as president of the Church’s New England Mission. In that post, not only did he supervise scores of young volunteer missionaries, he also renewed many of the friendships he had made in Cambridge. Seven years later, when he was appointed to the Evans Chair, he drew on those friendships to take the academic engagement of Mormonism in unprecedented directions.¹⁶

It is worth noting here that the professorship’s potential for impact was not lost on leaders of the LDS Church. By definition, the Church President is also the chairman of Brigham Young University’s board of trustees. Harold B. Lee was that president and chairman when the Evans Chair was inaugurated, and he gave Madsen a charge in the form of an analogy. His message to Madsen was that a visit to another institution to deliver a lecture would be the equivalent of Madsen’s carrying an “ember” of Mormonism; inviting scholars to visit BYU would be like bringing them to the “blaze.”¹⁷ In terms of embers versus bonfires, 1978 stands out in the early history of the Evans Chair.

In March of that year, BYU and Truman Madsen hosted a symposium that one observer called “the watershed event of the decade.”¹⁸ A lineup of participants that read like a who’s who of American religious scholarship converged on Provo and for two days considered Judeo-Christian

parallels in Mormonism. Mormon polymath Hugh Nibley called the group “Number One, top-drawer in their fields”¹⁹; Madsen simply said, “We aimed high.” The modesty in his understatement aside, what should not be missed is the role that Madsen had played in building personal bridges. Krister Stendahl and John Dillenberger had been on the faculty at Harvard when Madsen had been there, and his friendship with them had given Madsen an important starting point to bring in other luminaries like David Noel Freedman, Jacob Milgrom, and Robert Bellah.²⁰

As remarkable as that 1978 conference proved to be, though, in hindsight it seems noteworthy more for what it represented than what actually transpired there, without taking anything away from the thoughtfulness of the presented papers. Duke University’s W. D. Davies described the conference as “[opening] up the world of Mormon thinking to direct and deliberate confrontation with that of non-Mormon religious scholarship.”²¹ What the symposium seemed to signal was that Madsen’s work was building momentum. This is characteristic of the “pointillist style” referenced above: the discrete, individual interactions that worked together to nudge a variety of thinkers to see things in Mormonism that they never expected to see—to consider, in Madsen’s words, “the thrust of Richard L. Evans’ life,” that “we have more in common than differences.”²²

In advance of the 1978 symposium, for example, Madsen invited Stendahl, the former dean of the Harvard Divinity School and expert on the Gospel of Matthew, to consider the Sermon on the Mount through the lens of the Book of Mormon, since in the Book of Mormon there is an account of the resurrected Jesus delivering a very similar sermon to a first-century New World audience. Stendahl later republished the presentation that he made on this topic at BYU in a Fortress Press collection of his essays entitled *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide*. In introducing the essay, Professor Stendahl gently chastised biblical scholars for being so “cavalier . . . in our attitude toward the biblical ‘after-history’” in “authentic writings” of a “revelatory character” like the Book of Mormon.²³ Stendahl compared his studying of Mormonism to “visiting the Christian Church ca. A.D. 150—a fascinating opportunity indeed for a New Testament scholar.”²⁴ John Dillenberger, too, advocated for more academic attention to Mormonism. Dillenberger led the Graduate Theological Union in the 1970s, and he pushed for a Mormon

Studies component in the curriculum there. Truman Madsen filled a three-year “commuter professorship” at the GTU. Dillenberger wrote to Madsen: “Mormonism is such a significant part of the life of the West that a theological university community which ignores it is not doing its task. We have assumed that our communities need an authentic exposure to Mormonism beyond the traditional stereotypes.”²⁵

This was the case Madsen was trying to make anywhere he could. After just more than a decade into his tenure (1983), Madsen reported that he had been to eighty different universities to offer lectures or meet with scholars. Besides his work at the GTU in Berkeley, he had also filled a visiting professorship at Haifa University in Israel.²⁶ After another ten years in the position, Madsen had taken “more than five hundred trips to colleges and universities and institutions worldwide,” including forty-five directed study tours to Israel and two years as director of BYU’s Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies.²⁷

Madsen saw his work as establishing relationships with colleagues who would “speak up for the Mormons, at least with understanding”—in academic circles, yes, but also in the public square.²⁸ One such public-square moment came in 1985. Krister Stendahl was by this time bishop of Stockholm in the Church of Sweden. He led a press conference at a Latter-day Saint meetinghouse in Stockholm to defuse local opposition to an announced Mormon temple there, and he articulated three rules of religious understanding that have since taken on a life of their own: one, when trying to understand another religion, one should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies; two, don’t compare one’s best to their worst; and three, leave room for “holy envy.” Stendahl then expressed “holy envy” for the doctrine of baptism for the dead and for the Mormon impulse to extend salvific rites to those who never had that opportunity on earth.²⁹ Stendahl even wrote an entry on baptism for the dead for Macmillan’s *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, published in 1992.

There is a danger of overreaching when attempting to measure the impact of conversations or impressions or encounters such as these. Still, what should not be discounted are repeated evidences of the Evans Chair’s hand in some of the most significant Mormon academic enterprises of the past generation. The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* project is a prime example

of that. In the mid-1980s, more Mormon-related stories—good and bad—hit newsstands across the country than perhaps ever before: the BYU football team won a national championship; Sharlene Wells, the daughter of a General Authority, was Miss America; Mark Hofmann, a Mormon documents dealer-turned-forgery murderer two people to hide his tracks; and a rash of violence in several fundamentalist polygamist communities brought new attention to Mormon breakoff groups. Jerry Kaplan, Macmillan’s chief executive officer, wanted to know more about the religion, but he was disappointed with the available resources at the New York City public library. He charged his company with changing that. A massive collaboration with Latter-day Saint scholars ensued. Truman Madsen was one of the editors, and he was instrumental in drawing in sixteen non-LDS scholars to contribute to the *Encyclopedia*—a small percentage of the full pool of contributors, but an important indication, and in a groundbreaking publication, of a growing mutual appreciation on the part of both Mormons and outside scholars.³⁰

BYU’s involvement with the Dead Sea Scrolls translation project is another of those landmark initiatives with an Evans Chair connection. When representatives of Hebrew University approached Madsen, then director of the BYU Jerusalem Center, and asked for his help in rallying Latter-day Saint donors for the Dead Sea Scrolls preservation project, Madsen expressed willingness to help. But he also offered something else: he explained that BYU was pioneering new computer digitization technology that could be used to catalog, display, and search through every scroll fragment. Thus began a partnership that has placed BYU at the forefront of Dead Sea Scrolls scholarship. Harvard’s Frank Moore Cross Jr., another friend of Madsen’s (and past participant in a BYU-hosted conference), recruited BYU professors to join Dead Sea Scrolls translation teams—and BYU led the way in electronic publishing of the scrolls. In Truman Madsen’s estimation, “this put us on the map.”³¹

TWO DECADES OF THE EVANS CHAIR AFTER TRUMAN MADSEN’S RETIREMENT

Changes in the Evans professorship after Truman Madsen’s retirement in 1994 meant that his tenure would always be unique in the chair’s

history—but what did not change was that the fingerprints of the chair’s occupants would continue to be found on formative, history-making Mormon intellectual enterprises. After Truman Madsen stepped down, the professorship was expanded (now two professors occupy the chair concurrently), and its tenure was limited to two- or three-year terms—all aimed at broadening the chair’s reach. And importantly, the professorship was renamed—the Richard L. Evans Chair of *Christian* Understanding became the Richard L. Evans Chair of *Religious* Understanding. The name change reflected the diversity of Truman Madsen’s contacts and friendships and interests. In this way—in every way, really—Madsen had set the tone for his successors, of which there have been nearly a dozen to date.

There is more to document in the recent history of this professorship than the constraints of this essay will allow. But two general trends—and the professors who launched those trends—have particular bearing on the question at hand.

First, David L. Paulsen and his engagement with Mormon metaphysics stand out in this regard. Paulsen was one of two Brigham Young University professors who assumed the Evans Chair in 1994. He was a professor of philosophy, and he followed his natural proclivities to make significant inroads in that discipline. Paulsen tapped into his long association with the Society of Christian Philosophers to initiate a two-year “series of mini-seminars on twentieth-century Christian theology—twentieth-century theological movements and theologians.”³² In many cases, the theological “movers” themselves came to BYU to represent their views before faculty and students. The fruit of that long series was a book published by Mercer University Press in 2007 that David Paulsen coedited with Stetson University’s Donald Musser: *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*. Each of the book’s chapters paired a Mormon thinker with a non-LDS thinker to explore a theological theme. Musser’s preface was telling. He recounted that on a flight to Utah to meet with David Paulsen, he read a feature in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on “Christianity at 2000.” Musser noticed that “there was not a word of reference to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” even though Mormons “easily outnumber[ed] many of the ‘major’ groups covered in the article.” Musser then admitted that “prior to my intersection with scholars at BYU . . . I would

not have noticed [this exclusion].” He even admitted that in the past, he “ducked any duo that [he] thought had a ‘Mormon missionary’ look.” What changed for Musser was that he became “engaged in the conversations contained in this volume”—conversations, importantly, that “pursued neither an apologetic nor a polemical tack,” but were “conversations . . . that lead to understanding.” Both Paulsen and Musser agreed in the book’s introduction that “the similarities surprised both sides. Agreements were far more frequent than many discussants expected at the outset.”³³

Over his career, as David Paulsen wrote about the theological innovations and implications inherent in Mormon cosmology, he detected important changes along the lines of Musser’s biographical journey. When Paulsen first published essays on theodicy or divine corporeality, he “[presented] and [defended] Mormon points of view” but “didn’t explicitly identify them as such.” He had seen the resistance such explicit identification could generate: for example, *Faith and Philosophy*, the journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers, turned down Paulsen’s article on “Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil” because “it dealt explicitly with Joseph Smith.” It said something, therefore, when less than twenty years later, this same journal—the mainline Christian academic journal in the field—published in 2008 a David Paulsen and Brett McDonald essay entitled “Joseph Smith and the Trinity: An Analysis and a Defense of a Social Model of the Godhead.” Paulsen has seen his work in print in journals like the *Harvard Theological Review* and *Analysis*, and in his view, the days of “setting out a Mormon perspective without identifying it as Mormon” are passing; “we don’t have to do that anymore,” he said in 2007, and for him, that new reality was a “breakthrough.”³⁴

“Breakthrough” might also well characterize one more Evans Chair holder to be profiled here: Robert Millet. Significantly, this very volume and several of its contributors stand as evidence of the impact of Millet’s Evans Chair outreach. Perhaps more than anything else, what set Millet’s activities apart was his turn toward evangelical Christianity. Millet assumed the Evans professorship in 2000, just as he was forging a friendship with Utah pastor Greg Johnson, a friendship that had grown initially out of mutual interest and engagement with *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*. That 1997 book had been coauthored by Stephen Robinson, Millet’s BYU religion faculty colleague, and Craig Blomberg of

the Denver Seminary, where Greg Johnson had gone to school. Millet and Johnson's early meetings led to an impulse to formalize and expand their conversations. Millet put his Evans Chair resources to good use. Not only did he and Johnson conduct dozens of "An Evangelical and a Latter-day Saint in Conversation" public forums at universities and churches across the United States, but—coming back to the point where this essay began—he also launched the semiannual Mormon-evangelical dialogue group that continued for more than a decade, with Richard Mouw as coleader.

As was the case in that opening CNN vignette, Millet and Mouw's collaborations have led to a number of memorable moments that have challenged preconceptions about Mormon-evangelical interaction.³⁵ In 2004, when Millet worked with Latter-day Saint authorities to make available the historic Mormon Tabernacle on Temple Square for an evening of preaching with evangelist Ravi Zacharias, Mouw made perhaps the biggest news of the night. In his introductory comments before Zacharias's preaching, Mouw apologized to Latter-day Saints for what he saw as the false witness that evangelicals often bore against Mormons when they caricatured Latter-day Saint faith. Then, when Robert Millet published a 2005 book, *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints*, with evangelical powerhouse Eerdmans Publishing, Mouw wrote the foreword and afterword. These statements resonated widely, not just for what they said, but also for what they signaled—something that was not lost on Mormon or evangelical readers.

REALITIES—AND POSSIBILITIES

Not everyone was happy, to say the least, with Eerdmans' decision to publish Millet's book or with Mouw's apology at the Tabernacle. Fiery blogs decried Eerdmans' treachery in giving airtime to Latter-day Saint theology through Millet's book or Mouw's shortsightedness in weakening countercult evangelizing.³⁶ And it is certainly not a one-sided problem. Millet has noted that some Latter-day Saints have questioned his interfaith approach and the approach of several of his BYU colleagues. A few such voices see these professors' presentations of Latter-day Saint doctrine to Protestant groups, especially evangelical Christians, as either "minimalist" or "neo-orthodox"

variants of true Mormonism—as “giving away the store.”³⁷ The passion generated by these questions about Mormonism’s “Christian status” and the appropriateness of religious dialogue brings an important dose of reality to this discussion about the impact of interfaith initiatives.

So, too, does the frankness of Douglas Davies, a scholar at Durham University in the UK who forged close ties with Evans Chair professors beginning with David Paulsen, and whose own work on Mormonism (and his advising of graduate students in that vein) has made important contributions to the field. Davies noted in 2007 that in terms of outside scholars—like him—who at the time were working on Mormon topics in a serious and committed way, “you can count them on the fingers of one hand, by and large.”³⁸

Likewise, in the early days of the 2012 presidential campaign’s “Mormon moment,” Richard Bushman and Terryl Givens had prime vantage points from which to observe America’s public perception of Mormonism, not only because they were Mormon historians with a keen eye for cultural clues, but also because they became go-to resources for scores of journalists who wanted to know about the faith. Thinking about the state of things in 2011, Bushman described the middle of the twentieth century as a time when “Americans became convinced that Mormons were good people. . . . That battle,” he said, “I think we’ve won. The second battle, making our theology respectable, we haven’t won.” Givens similarly observed at the time that “Mormons are perfectly welcomed to dance with the stars, to feed continual streams of great quarterbackbacks into the NFL, . . . [and] the Mormon Tabernacle Choir continues to sing at the presidential inaugurations, but the theology continues to be marginalized as a system of thought.”³⁹

These are important contemporary commentaries about the state of both academic and public engagement with Mormonism, and the realities noted therein call for appropriate restraint. But there are enough signs of a sea change—signs, for example, that Douglas Davies’s estimate no longer feels accurate just a few years later,—that for those with an interest in interfaith discussion, optimism does seem to be the order of the day. Discerning evidence of that sea change, though, might be more like noting a rising tide rather than measuring the size of the waves.

On one level, the venues and the voices involved cannot go long unnoticed. Evans Chair–sponsored conferences and lectures have ranged from Harvard to Yale to Notre Dame to Wheaton to Fuller, just to name a few. Sponsored conferences with wide denominational participation over the last decade at BYU have led to important volumes on salvation and authority.⁴⁰ A conversation Robert Millet had with Roanoke College’s Gerry McDermott sparked what might be the brightest star to date in this constellation of conferences. McDermott and Millet had joined forces in 2003 for a public Mormon–evangelical presentation—and McDermott mentioned in passing that he was participating in a Library of Congress celebration of the tricentennial of Jonathan Edwards’s birth. Millet had already been tapped by the LDS Church to represent BYU on a Church committee that was making plans to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of Joseph Smith’s birth, so the Library of Congress idea was serendipitous. The result was the “Worlds of Joseph Smith” conference at the Library of Congress in December 2005, a conference that considered, from various angles, the impact and import of Joseph Smith’s life and teachings. Eight of the seventeen presenters were not Latter-day Saints.⁴¹

There is something to be said, too, of the ripple effect of Evans Chair initiatives. Almost as if in answer to Bushman’s or Givens’s call for serious attention to Mormon thought, Roman Catholic philosopher Stephen Webb published a bold book with Oxford University Press in 2013, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints*. Webb first turned heads in Mormon studies when he published a *First Things* essay entitled “Mormons Are Obsessed with Christ,” a personal response to the “Are Mormons Christian?” question that became so charged (again) during Mitt Romney’s campaign seasons.⁴² The publicity that came to all of Mormonism in connection with those campaigns, of course, seemed to catalyze an academic and interfaith interest in Mormonism that had already been growing, and the sheer volume of media attention meant that the opportunity for exposure to Mormon ideas was greater than ever. Terryl and Fiona Givens felt some hopefulness in that vein in the month after the 2012 elections. “Only by the end of the Romney campaign,” they wrote, “did we seem finally to be moving beyond discussion of magic underwear, Missouri Edens, and Kolob. . . . Perhaps Americans can

at last begin a conversation about the substance, rather than the esoterica, of Mormon belief.”⁴³

New forces seem to be in motion that will only contribute to the “substantive” inertia of that interest. The University of Virginia, for example, inaugurated the Richard Lyman Bushman Chair of Mormon Studies in the fall of 2013—another entry to add to Jerry Bradford’s 2007 survey, “The Study of Mormonism: A Growing Interest in Academia.”⁴⁴ And Brigham Young University launched in August 2014 a new Office of Religious Outreach and advisory board, with Robert Millet as its head.

Apart from these visible institutional movements, though, something that Stephen Webb wrote in his book’s acknowledgments seems to bring this essay perhaps full circle: “Of all the people I met at BYU, I am most in debt to David Paulsen, a fearless metaphysical pioneer who amiably opened the door for me to the richness of Mormon thought. He is truly a lover of wisdom, my mentor in Mormon studies, and an elder to me in the Christian faith.”⁴⁵ This direct link between personal interaction and new perspectives on Mormonism speaks to the ideals on which the Richard L. Evans Chair at Brigham Young University was founded. And while *causation* may be difficult to ascertain statistically, public opinion polls do suggest at least a chronological *correlation* between interfaith outreach and growing public familiarity with, and diminishing misconceptions about, Mormonism.⁴⁶ From a distance, then, this is a picture that is taking shape—and it is a picture that has room yet to be fully filled out.

NOTES

1. Richard A. Oppel Jr. and Erik Eckholm, “Prominent Pastor Calls Romney’s Church a Cult,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/08/us/politics/prominent-pastor-calls-romneys-church-a-cult.html>. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meetings of the Mormon History Association, and I acknowledge the MHA, with gratitude, for that opportunity.
2. “Perry Supporter Says Romney’s Religion ‘a Cult,’” *CNN*, October 8, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/10/08/politics/perry-response-mormonism/>; Frances Martel, “Anti-Mormon Pastor to Anderson Cooper: Romney May Belong to a ‘Cult,’ But

- He Is Better than Obama,” *Mediaite*, October 8, 2011, <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/anti-mormon-pastor-to-anderson-cooper-romney-may-belong-to-a-cult-but-he-is-better-than-obama/>; Oppel and Eckholm, “Prominent Pastor Calls Romney’s Church a Cult.”
3. Richard J. Mouw, “My Take: This Evangelical Says Mormonism Isn’t a Cult,” *CNN*, October 9, 2011, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/10/09/my-take-this-evangelical-says-mormonism-isnt-a-cult/>.
 4. I am indebted to Mark Tuttle, a director in the Public Affairs Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for identifying this philosophical approach in his department’s work. See Mark Tuttle, interview by author, August 20, 2008, transcript in possession of the author, 8–9. The approach, which has roots in the “two-step flow” theory of communication, seems to apply here as well. See, for example, Ronald S. Burt, “The Social Capital of Opinion Leaders,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 566, no. 1 (November 1999): 37–54. See also David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson, *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 184–91, for analysis of survey data that points to the importance of both social contact and factual knowledge in softening “negative attitudes towards Mormons” (187). The implications of their research are significant here, since the work of interfaith outreach fostered by the Evans Chair seems targeted at facilitating both social contact and factual knowledge.
 5. Quoted in the pamphlet announcing the chair’s establishment, “The Richard L. Evans Chair of Christian Understanding: A Special Heritage in Religion,” Dean’s Office, Religious Education, Brigham Young University; copy in possession of the author. Stephen David Grover has also written an important history of the Richard L. Evans Chair, drawing on interviews with several past holders of the chair to give insight into their feelings about the purpose and purview of the professorship. See Stephen David Grover, “Building Bridges: The Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding,” *Religious Educator* 9, no. 2 (2008): 45–56; see especially pages 51–53 for perspectives and experiences shared by past Evans professors Fred Woods, Roger Keller, and Darwin Thomas.
 6. Walter Prince, quoted in Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 144.
 7. See Casey P. Griffiths, “The Chicago Experiment: Finding the Voice and Charting the Course of Religious Education in the Church,” *BYU Studies* 49, no. 4 (2010): 91–130.

8. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), vii.
9. Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 262.
10. Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 208–9.
11. Gary Bergera and Ronald Priddis, *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985), 26.
12. “Died: Richard L. Evans,” *Time*, November 15, 1971, 53.
13. From a two-page, unpublished typescript of personal reminiscences by Truman G. Madsen, “The Richard L. Evans Chair,” 1; copy in possession of the author. The background to the establishment of the chair is also explained, with additional details, in the pamphlet announcing the Chair’s establishment. See “The Richard L. Evans Chair of Christian Understanding: A Special Heritage in Religion.”
14. Madsen, “The Richard L. Evans Chair,” 1.
15. From a one-page historical report, “Richard L. Evans Chair of Christian Understanding,” file 56-A, Dean’s Office, Religious Education, Brigham Young University; copy in possession of the author.
16. This background information is summarized from two helpful biographical essays: Truman G. Madsen, “Truman Madsen, On His Education,” and Dillon K. Inouye, “Truman Madsen, Valued Teacher,” in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002).
17. Truman G. Madsen, interview by author, March 22, 2007. See also David Paulsen, interview by author, March 8, 2007; and Robert L. Millet, interview by author, March 16, 2007.
18. From the dust jacket of *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1978).
19. Inouye, “Truman Madsen, Valued Teacher,” xxx.
20. Madsen, interview, March 22, 2007.
21. From the dust jacket of *Reflections on Mormonism*.
22. Madsen, interview, March 22, 2007.
23. Krister Stendahl, “The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi in the Book of Mormon,” in *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 99.
24. Stendahl, “The Sermon on the Mount,” 100.

25. "The Richard L. Evans Chair of Christian Understanding: A Special Heritage in Religion" announcement pamphlet, 8.
26. Madsen, "The Richard L. Evans Chair," 1.
27. Madsen, "Truman Madsen, On His Education," xx.
28. Madsen, interview, March 22, 2007.
29. Madsen, interview, March 22, 2007.
30. Madsen, interview, March 22, 2007. See Mark Hofmann prison interview, quoted in Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 317. See also Richard D. Poll, "Review of the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*," *Journal of Mormon History* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 205–6, for the story of Jerry Kaplan's interest. I am also indebted to John Welch for his retelling of this story.
31. Madsen, interview, March 22, 2007. See also the introduction to Donald Parry and Dana M. Pike, eds., *LDS Perspectives on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), for a timeline of Latter-Saint involvement with Dead Sea Scrolls scholarship.
32. David L. Paulsen, interview by author, March 8, 2007.
33. David L. Paulsen and Donald W. Musser, *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), vii, 1.
34. David L. Paulsen, interview, March 8, 2007; see also David L. Paulsen and Brett McDonald, "Joseph Smith and the Trinity: An Analysis and Defense of the Social Model of the Godhead," *Faith and Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (2008): 47–74. All of this seems especially significant given the troubled reaction from some members of the Society of Christian Philosophers when David Paulsen organized regional meetings of the Society at BYU in the early 1990s. The Society later changed its policy about selecting host institutions because of complaints from some members about the BYU events, but other members pushed for the continued inclusion of Mormons as members of the Society. For a concise summary, see "Mormon-Christian Dialogue?," Beliefnet, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/Latter-Day-Saints/2001/06/Mormon-Christian-Dialogue.aspx>.
35. Also worthy of mention, especially for its bearing on the question of opinion leaders, is Robert Millet and Richard Mouw's participation as panelists at Michael Cromartie's Faith Angle Forum with national journalists in May 2012. See "Evangelicals and Mormons: A Conversation and Dialogue," Ethics and Public Policy Center, May 7, 2012, <http://eppc.org/publications/mouw-and-millet/>.

36. See, for example, Dr. James White's May 8, 2005, blog entry, "08 May: Paul Owen Finally Lays His Cards on the Table (#1)," at the Alpha and Omega Ministries website, www.aomin.org; also Keith Walker (Evidence Ministries), "A 'Mouwtainous' Mistake: An Open Letter to Richard Mouw and Other Academics Involved in Apologetics to Mormons," *Apologetics Index*, <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/cpoint13-1.html>.
37. See Millet's comments on various LDS reactions to interfaith dialogue in his "Outreach: Opening the Door or Giving Away the Store?," *Religious Educator* 4, no. 1 (2003), 55–73. An important side story to the impact of the Richard L. Evans work is the impact on Latter-day Saints. For example, a number of chair holders have presented fireside-type meetings for LDS congregations—Church members or full-time missionaries—with the meetings focused on improving religious understanding and tolerance and mutual respect. Significantly, conversations with evangelical Christians led Robert Millet to publish "What Is Our Doctrine?," *Religious Educator* 4, no. 3 (2003): 15–33, an important essay about evaluating sources of authority in Latter-day Saint doctrinal matters. The Church published something similar, officially, in 2007: "Approaching Mormon Doctrine," *Mormon Newsroom*, May 4, 2007, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/approaching-mormon-doctrine>. Millet's services as the Evans Chair holder were repeatedly tapped by the Church's Public Affairs Department. See, for example, Robert L. Millet, "Richard L. Evans Professorship: Report of Activities for the Year 2003," 1; copy in author's possession.
38. Douglas Davies, interview by author, March 22, 2007.
39. Richard L. Bushman and Terryl Givens, quoted in J. B. Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 263.
40. See Roger R. Keller and Robert L. Millet, eds., *Salvation in Christ: Comparative Christian Views* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2005); Robert L. Millet, ed., *By What Authority? The Vital Question of Religious Authority in Christianity* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010).
41. Robert Millet, interview by author, March 16, 2007; Millet, "Richard L. Evans Professorship: Report of Activities for the Year 2003," 7–8. See also the introduction to "The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress," *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): vii–x.
42. Stephen H. Webb, "Mormonism Obsessed with Christ," *First Things*, February 2012, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/02/mormonism-obsessed-with-christ>.

43. Terryl and Fiona Givens, "Moving Past the Esoterica," *Patheos*, December 2, 2012, <http://www.patheos.com/Mormon/Moving-Past-Esoterica-Terryl-and-Fiona-Givens-12-03-2012.html>.
44. M. Gerald Bradford, "The Study of Mormonism: A Growing Interest in Academia," *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 119–74.
45. Stephen Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
46. See two examples of this: "Americans Learned Little About the Mormon Faith, But Some Attitudes Have Softened," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, December 14, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Mormon/attitudes-to-ward-mormon-faith.aspx>; also "How Americans Feel About Religious Groups," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, July 16, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/07/16/how-americans-feel-about-religious-groups/>. It is on this point of the impact of interfaith relationships, too, that the research of David Campbell, John Green, and Quin Monson again becomes so important. In *Seeking the Promised Land*, they argue that "the role of interfaith relationships in fostering goodwill across religious lines presents Mormons with a problem. . . . The comparison between Jews and Mormons is instructive. There are about as many Mormons as Jews in America, but while Jews are viewed very positively, Mormons rank near the bottom of public perception. It is no coincidence that Jews are the religious group most likely to bridge to people of other faiths, while Mormons are among the least likely to do so" (185); I am indebted to Spencer Fluhman for raising this point. In Campbell, Green, and Monson's words, "More knowledge about Mormonism softens, or even reverses, such negative impressions, as do close personal relationships with Mormons themselves (but not passing acquaintances)" (190).