



Brent R. Nordgren

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Mormon Studies and Religious Studies: A Conversation with Spencer Fluhman

INTERVIEW BY DANA M. PIKE

Spencer Fluhman (*spencer_fluhman@byu.edu*) is an assistant professor of history at BYU who was appointed to serve as editor of *Mormon Studies Review*, a publication of BYU's Neal A. Maxwell Institute of Religious Scholarship.

Dana M. Pike (*dana_pike@byu.edu*) is associate dean of Religious Education.

Pike: Tell us a little about your background.

Fluhman: I was a Near Eastern studies major at BYU and then received history degrees at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, studying American religious history. So I come at Mormon studies from that historical angle, much to the chagrin of all of my biblical studies colleagues!

Pike: How long have you been at BYU?

Fluhman: I started teaching part time in 1998, was hired in 2004, and became an assistant professor in 2006. I've been around BYU for a long time! I've taught Doctrine and Covenants courses, LDS Church history courses, American religious history courses, and general American history courses.

Pike: Why do you think you were interested in history and religion? Any formative experiences that steered you in this direction?

Fluhman: I think it's the way I came into this world! Growing up, I had comments from teachers that I was unusually curious. I was always the most intellectual of my friends; I was always the one who was engaging the world inquisitively, so it was natural for me to move in these directions. I was sure I was going to be a teacher by the time I was eighteen. Religion is what I

was most passionate about, so I decided that's what I was going to teach, and I found my way to these various topics. I knew I wanted to be a historian; that's where my heart was. At the same time I was having a crisis over Hebrew, a language that I loved but that was beating me up. I took a Doctrine and Covenants class that lit a fire in me with regards to Church history. On a whim, I asked my professor if he needed a teaching assistant. And with that my search was over because he had me in the archives and in the secondary literature of LDS history. It was the perfect fit for me.

***Pike:** It seems like we have seen in the past ten years or so an increased interest in the academic study of Mormonism. If this is true, how has this been demonstrated, and how do you account for this development?*

Fruhman: Non-Mormon scholars have become very interested in Mormonism as an appropriate object of study. In one sense, this field mirrors a broader interest in the academy in religion itself, not just in Mormonism. The American Historical Association tracks subfield expertise among historians in the United States, and as of maybe 2008, religion became the number one subfield of historians in the United States. So in one sense, the interest in Mormon studies is parallel to the development within the academy generally; religion has been reinserted as an important lens to study the past. I think the assumption of people in the 1960s and early 70s was that religion was going away. Religion did *not* go away!

Religion defines some of the great political tensions of the modern world. Based on the fact that religion didn't go away and the fact that it's an obviously powerful presence in geopolitics and in American politics, American culture, and world culture, more and more scholars simply had to face the fact that one can't comprehend the human experience without comprehending religion. Even where there is no religious perspective, more and more there is an acknowledgment of religion and its influences.

A parallel development is evident in Supreme Court decisions in the United States relating to religion in public education in the 1960s. For some religious people, it seemed like a travesty of American culture that religious instruction was removed from schools. Seen from another perspective, what those Supreme Court decisions did was give a green light to teaching *about* religion in public education in a nonsectarian way. They gave a kind of encouragement for religious studies at secular universities and public universities. Religious studies is vibrant; it's chaotic, it's exciting and confounding at the same time, but I think that's a part of the puzzle as well. Religious studies is a

vibrant part of the American academy. The conflict of religion and academia makes for a kind of ripe, opportune, and very friendly setting in which interest in Mormonism from non-Mormons can wax. And that's what's happened! And that development has forced Latter-day Saints to rethink how they write about their tradition in some ways.

Pike: Where are Mormon studies programs developing in the USA?

Fluhman: We can answer this question in two ways. One way is to mention those programs that have defined Mormon studies in terms of an endowed professorship or a specific faculty position that would have responsibility for the teaching of undergraduate or graduate students. So Claremont University and Utah State have both taken a step, University of Virginia took that step, and University of Utah is not far behind in raising funds and organizing fellowships, possibly expanding from there. Those are places where Mormon studies is a faculty priority. The other sense we ought to mention, though, involves schools in which scholars have been especially supportive of or solicitous of dissertations on Mormonism. So, for example, we can point to Laurie Maffly-Kipp at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has been very supportive of dissertations on Mormonism and has been a magnet for both Latter-day Saint graduate students and non-Latter-day Saint graduate students interested in Mormonism. George Marsden at Notre Dame also carried on a very supportive cohort of graduate students who studied Mormonism. So there are pockets like that. Grant Wacker at Duke has been supportive as well. In my own experience, Wisconsin was very supportive of Mormonism as a topic of study. Charles Cohen has led out there; he's been on other students' dissertation committees that involve Mormonism as well. There are pockets like these that are parallel to [the] endowed professorships.

Pike: What do you think the implications of this are? For the academy and for the Latter-day Saint Church?

Fluhman: For Latter-day Saints, I think one of the questions is: how does one write about Mormonism academically? One model is to simply write for Latter-day Saints, and that has been the case for many. There's nothing wrong with doing that, but this new setting does open up academic space for those who want to write for a mixed audience—or who *can* write for a mixed audience. But that demands that LDS authors translate the Mormon experience into language that is accessible to non-Latter-day Saints. They are often forced to make their work more comparative, more rigorously contextualized. Those who are interested in that are finding an academic audience for that

kind of analysis of the LDS past, scripture, or doctrine. Often it requires a religiously neutral tone; although, the postmodern academy is often chaotic enough that it doesn't have to be a brazenly secular analysis either. As long as one signals to the audience what assumptions are in play, what authority is at play, what questions of audience and text are being addressed—as long as one makes those kinds of things as transparent as one can—there are still many non-Mormons that will give those kinds of analyses a hearing. That is one of the happy accidents of the academy as it has developed. There are certainly also downsides to this approach, but one of the upsides is that one doesn't have to necessarily hide one's religious commitment to write in the academy. That's a development that's surprising to some.

Pike: How extensive do you think this willingness is?

Fluhman: It depends on the field. In my field of American religious history, it's actually believing historians who have contributed to the field in fairly dramatic ways. Evangelical Christians, in a large measure, have been aggressive in their attempt to write for audiences that aren't just evangelical Protestants, but they make their work compelling and meaningful to nonbelieving audiences. In some ways they have made possible the kinds of writing that I do—someone who does not hide his belief in Mormonism but writes in a way that is accessible to a broader audience. Religious studies is big enough and it is not monolithic; there are all kinds of voices within the field, including those who are practitioners of various faiths writing about that faith and bringing to bear on analyses all sorts of epistemological and historiographical and ethical questions that reflect a religious worldview. There is space for all sorts of perspectives.

Pike: What are some of the major conceptions, approaches, and methodological considerations that are part of religious studies as an academic emphasis?

Fluhman: One side of the field looks to categorize and compare religious traditions cross-culturally; to describe religious traditions reasonably and respectfully, but to offer students and readers a grounding in what makes religious traditions tick, how are they alike, how are they different over time, across space, and so on. That project is big and unwieldy because of how many religions there are, and the kinds of descriptions and taxonomies that exist, and trying to comprehend those traditions through sociology and anthropology and history. Another side of the field is more theoretical, more philosophical, including such questions as: What is religion? What is belief? What is ritual? Where do the materials from the various religions,

their writings, their rituals, their practices, become the evidence or the data for these larger questions? How might one conceptualize religion itself? And these discussions get incredibly complicated. They're frankly very divisive conversations. These are the great wars of the field. Some argue that religious studies simply replicates a kind of Western imperialism: it's so enmeshed in a Western project of colonialism that religious studies itself shouldn't even exist. It's kind of a wild field to be a part of! One can go to the American Academy of Religion meetings and find almost any kind of presentation one could imagine related to religion. So religious studies is that big of a tent; it's all over the place, methodologically, ideologically, with every conceivable perspective in terms of race, class, gender, all across the political spectrum, it's all there—it's a big, raucous crowd!

Pike: So do you think religious studies is a valid enterprise?

Fluhman: One of the great arguments for religious studies, at least in the public university, is that religious ignorance is a problem for a democratic society. The kinds of reasoned, rigorous descriptions and analyses religious studies practitioners can offer, at least insofar as they are translated to a broader public, gives a better sense of people's lives, practices, and worldviews. I think that's compelling; I think that makes better national citizens and world citizens, to know something about what other people believe and practice. For religious people, ignorance is a problem. I think knowledge of other faiths helps religious people be better religious people. It has helped me be a better Latter-day Saint, a better neighbor, to know something about what other people believe and what they practice. It makes me more charitable, more patient. It humanizes people. I'm less likely to stereotype and dismiss them when I have a clearer sense of who they are and what they do, what values they have, and what matters to them. And, as an intellectual or an academic, I think that a view of the past that doesn't incorporate religion is incomplete. An analysis that doesn't take religious people seriously, doesn't take religious institutions seriously, doesn't take religious thought seriously—there's a poverty in that narrative of the past.

Pike: What are some of the main assumptions or considerations in religious studies? How does one go about doing religious studies?

Fluhman: It depends on who's teaching—that's part of the joy and part of the problem. Often an introductory course in religious studies becomes a way of introducing students to the wildly disparate ways of seeing religion. They might be offered readings from Sigmund Freud about religion as

an illusion—very negative conceptions of what religion is. Maybe religious voices would be introduced as well, or maybe Mircea Eliade, who saw religion phenomenologically, as a part of the human experience—these approaches are really compelling to many religious people, whether or not they share those religious commitments.

Pike: What if you were teaching an intro course on religious studies?

Fruhman: I would show students prominent theories about religion over time. I would both give them all of these perspectives and offer students ways of criticizing each, asking questions such as: What does this particular view get us? What are its blind spots? How would this view help one understand one's own religious tradition versus another's religious tradition? Would it help? Would it hurt? Then I would try to contextualize those. What about religious and intellectual history makes these theories comprehensible? What's at stake with these various theories? I would help students hone their critical skills and begin thinking about religion thoughtfully, reflectively, and let their minds bounce off these great minds of the past as they think about religion. I think students are both surprised and excited to see that many of the great minds in history took on questions such as: Why do people believe? How do we account for the varying ways people believe and practice faith over time? What does that mean about being a human being? These are exciting questions to students who have religious commitments. It's exciting to students who don't have religious commitments. I would help them try to comprehend people of faith and religious institutions.

Pike: People sometimes ask, how can scholars study the Bible and be involved in religious studies if they're not religious themselves? How do you respond to that?

Fruhman: I've had lots of conversations with nonreligious scholars of religion. And I can't speak for them, but I can certainly comprehend their interest. Many recognize religious texts as incredibly influential in human communities. So they're interested at the level of the influence. Like a Shakespearean scholar knows Shakespeare mattered to the Western literary canon—whether they like Shakespeare or not! Many that I've talked with, their self-explanations usually run something like these answers: I understand the power of religious texts or of religious institutions, and I'm interested in an understanding of power in human societies. Or, I'm interested in aesthetics, and I don't buy into this religion, but there's something beautiful or horrifying about it to me. They are on a quest of understanding—most of

them—that at least parallels the quest of understanding for religious people. It runs in different rhythms, but they're out to comprehend themselves and their place in the world. There's something intriguing about it. And there are scholars of religion who are viscerally resistant to religion. They're there and they're loud, and I think they need to be taken seriously at the level of argumentation. I don't fully comprehend them personally, but I'm open to trying to see what they see. But a lot of the scholars in my field are religious people with issues about religion, or post-religious people, or people with complicated relationships with their faith, or folks whose experience with faith has a lot to do with thinking rigorously about everything.

Pike: What do you consider to be some of the main drawbacks to this type of approach to religion? Can religious studies take a toll on a person's faith or spirituality?

Fluhman: I suppose there are drawbacks for some, but academic inquiry can as easily deepen faith as weaken it. That has certainly been case for me. Some can go through religious studies training and come to see everything in naturalistic terms, but that is not unavoidable by any stretch. I'm a better Latter-day Saint because of my academic training. I simply would not trade the experiences and perspectives I've gained. They have deepened and broadened my faith. We have too many encouragements in the revelations to seek learning—broadly conceived—to simply ignore the life of the mind, especially with regards to religion. Early on in my own graduate training, it struck me that there was no thought so important that I could excuse myself in failing to serve those who God had called me love. My advice to graduate students, in other words, is to do your home and visiting teaching. Don't stop "becoming," in the Mormon sense of the term, while you become an academic. If the ivory tower pulls us away from the communities we're supposed to love, then there would be a problem indeed. But, as it stands, I pursue my academic work *and* live the faith, every day, and the rigorous thinking and the communal practice of a Latter-day Saint life exist in a kind of electric, dynamic relationship for me.

Pike: Tell us about your new assignment with the Mormon Studies Review that will be published by BYU's Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship.

Fluhman: I serve as general editor of the *Review*. I work with two talented associate editors, Morgan Davis and Ben Park. Blair Hodges contributes as chief editorial assistant. Our editorial advisory board is made up

of the many of the most prominent scholars in Mormon studies from some of the best institutions in the world. It includes historians, literature scholars, philosophers, theologians—we've tried to cover a wide academic spectrum. The board really reads as a "who's who" of Mormon studies over the past generation. We have an editorial team that is poised to make a great contribution to the academic study of Mormonism.

Pike: *What is your vision for the Mormon Studies Review?*

Fruhman: We've expanded the *Review's* scope. We aim to make it a one-stop shop for the best scholarship on Mormonism. We won't present original scholarship per se, though. Rather, as a true review, the *MSR* will track and assess the field as it develops with review essays, book reviews, and roundtable discussions relating to the field. We'll gather voices across the academy, both LDS and non-LDS. Each issue will offer extended reviews of the most important books on Mormonism. In addition, we'll have scholars craft review essays that will take on multiple titles or broader topics too. Our roundtable discussions will gather prominent scholars to think together about important questions facing the field. If we do it right, each volume will serve as a handy and informative review of each year's best work.

Pike: *What do you hope to contribute? How are you attempting to achieve or fulfill this vision?*

Fruhman: Mormon studies is unquestionably coming into its own, at least in the United States, and we hope that the *Review* will be a key venue for tracking how the field is developing across multiple academic disciplines. There are journals aimed primarily at Latter-day Saints and there are journals aimed at practitioners within specific academic disciplines like history, for instance, but as yet we have no academic journal that offers an interdisciplinary review of academic Mormon studies for a broad audience. We want to fill that void. We think the *Review* will provide a valuable service for scholars. Mormonism is taught at institutions within Mormonism and outside it, across the world. Scholars of every conceivable religious and nonreligious stripe write about Mormonism. We hope that the *Review* will serve that broad, diverse audience with the best scholarship and the highest academic standards.

Pike: *Who is your audience?*

Fruhman: Anyone interested in the academic study of Mormonism will want to read *Mormon Studies Review*. Scholars interested in religion, American religious history, and Mormonism will want to subscribe for sure.

Nonacademic readers with interest in Mormon studies will surely benefit, too. We'll throw a wide net, and we hope that the *Review* will inform and enrich the study and teaching of Mormonism across the country and world. By aiming at interested scholars, we realize that we're indirectly shaping the way thousands of students in institutions far and wide are introduced to Mormonism. Add to that the way the *Review* can help inform the writing of Mormon studies and, again indirectly, all those respective readers, and we sense the potential for a broad impact!

Pike: Thank you for your time. I enjoy and appreciate the passion and energy you bring to your studies. Would you like to make one closing statement about the study of religion, or Mormon studies in particular, for our readers?

Fluhman: Subscribe to *Mormon Studies Review*! **RE**