

“A Place in This Church”:

An Interview with Richard Lyman Bushman

Larry Alan Brown, a writer living in Alpine, Utah, conducted this interview with Richard Bushman on August 1, 2012, at his summer home in Provo, Utah. Dr. Bushman is the Gouverneur Morris Professor of History emeritus at Columbia University, a renowned scholar of American and Mormon history and author of the critically acclaimed Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling, for which he received the Evans Biography Award. A practicing member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he and his wife Claudia live in New York City.

Larry Brown: In January of this year, the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life published the results of a groundbreaking survey entitled “Mormons in America.” The survey reported that 74% of LDS Church members in the U.S. are conservative and identify with or lean toward the Republican Party. Do you think Jesus Christ designed his gospel and, by extension, the Mormon Church, to be more appealing to conservatives than to liberals?

Richard Bushman: Well, if you believe that, you’d have to repudiate the first hundred years of Latter-day Saint history, because they were not conservatives in that time. My parents voted Democratic. Utah went Democratic in the 1930s. They were all supporters of FDR and during the Progressive period there was a lot of Mormon support for government intervention in society and the economy. The church modeled many of its programs after progressive reforms in the teens and twenties. So I don’t think there’s anything fundamentally antipathetic between Mormonism and more liberal politics. I

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think you can make a case from either point of view, starting with scriptural beliefs and certain Mormon principles.

Larry Brown: Why is there such an imbalance in the church along political lines, not only amongst the membership, but amongst the leadership, where there are very few Democrats?

Richard Bushman: The history seems to show that the shift occurred in the 1950s and 60s. The best analysis of the reasons is that Mormons were anti-Communist. Church leaders were anti-Communist. And it wasn't just the Birch variety of anti-Communism, but sort of a deep-seated feeling that communism represented a totalitarian society and government that we really didn't like. That brought about the main switch. Up until the 1960s, you could picture the Utah voters and Mormons, in general, going either way. The other thing that's at work is Intermountain politics. It isn't just Utah and the Mormon population that are conservative; Colorado, Montana, Wyoming are also.

Larry Brown: Before that, it was much more balanced between Republicans and Democrats in the Utah State Legislature as well as the state's Congressional delegation.

Richard Bushman: Right, and the governorships.

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Larry Brown: What is the impact of this trend toward overwhelming conservatism in the church in terms of the church’s image, the dynamics amongst its members and its missionary program?

Richard Bushman: Well, it’s unfortunate because, while maybe 70% of the church is conservative, 30% is not. They’re either independent or they’re Democratic. And, as soon as you get an overwhelming point of view on something like politics, which is not central to the church’s mission, but peripheral to it, then you’re going to begin to divide your congregations. And there’s a real problem, if you don’t go along with this point of view, you feel ill at ease when the comments in the high priest quorum are all conservative, all the chuckles and laughs in that direction. Many assume that the President of the United States is not to be trusted, that he’s leading us in exactly the wrong direction, and you might not feel that way. So are you a member of the Mormon Church or not?

Larry Brown: Have you personally felt this tension between your political affiliation, your personal views, and the Mormon culture.

Richard Bushman: (laughs) I haven’t because I live in New York City. It’s a different world out there. I also think that in many Mormon congregations, there’s awareness that politics should not be discussed. There’s a kind of sensitivity to this, that it’s a little bit explosive and divisive.

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Larry Brown: Does the predominant conservatism of church members skew the church’s image, not only in the U.S., but abroad?

Richard Bushman: It’s a problem both in the U.S. and abroad. It’s now evident that there are more liberals than evangelicals who feel uneasy about voting for a Mormon candidate. I think if the church had taken its political ideology in a different direction, the liberals would not be so suspicious. So we’re alienating a large part of the United States population.

Larry Brown: Europe, of course, has a lot of people who tend toward left-of-center politics.

Richard Bushman: Latter-day Saints in Europe and England are partly offended, partly amused, by the America right wing. It looks silly in Europe. It seems so extreme, so unable to cope with real life, caught up in ideological illusion of how society works. My own granddaughter, an English girl, was alienated from the church by the Iraq war. It seemed untenable to her that Americans could go in that direction. When Mormons tended to follow the Republican line, it hurt her.

Larry Brown: Do you know of other cases of church members or prospective investigators who were alienated and either left the church, became less active, or just refused to join because of the enormous sway of conservatism over Mormon culture?

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Richard Bushman: Proposition 8 (California’s 2008 initiative banning same sex marriage) was very hard on our young people, because as we know, youth in general tend to be more open. It wasn’t that they objected to the church taking a moral stand in favor of heterosexual marriage. They were very uneasy about the church entering the political arena. That was very hard.

We had a discussion in our ward in Pasadena when I was living there during Proposition 8. A very strong case was made from the pulpit about why we must take this stand with a lot of doctrinal backing for it. And one girl rose and said “Well I can understand the church taking a stand but why did they have to enter politics?” The person in charge gave a sort of abrupt answer as if it were obvious. After the meeting, she ran out to her car and was just sitting there sobbing. Fortunately, a very sensitive patriarch in our ward walked out to the car and simply said, “I want you to know there’s a place in this church for people like you.” That saved her.

Larry Brown: Do you feel that church leadership was wrong to politicize Proposition 8?

Richard Bushman: I would never say church leaders make mistakes because it’s impossible to see the long run effects of any decision. There may be a higher wisdom I don’t see. But there was a lot of collateral damage in Proposition 8. The first and most obvious was that it put Mormon families with gay children in the position of having to choose between the church and their children. If you’ve got a family living in a ward where they’re being told they should get involved in this campaign and one of their kids

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is gay, and married to a gay, if the family got involved they were, in effect, repudiating their own children. That’s not right.

The second problem is that as soon as you enter into the political campaign, you suddenly become news apart from anything that you intend. So when the Mormons got involved in Prop 8, they were, in effect, running a hundred million dollar ad campaign with the slogan, “Mormons hate gays.” Now, the church can say “we don’t hate gays.” They can do whatever they want, but that is still the message that gets across. And it’s an erroneous message. The message should be that Mormons love traditional families, and that’s what we should be supporting. But, in getting involved, we inadvertently took a position that really isn’t what we’re about.

Larry Brown: Do you see the potential for a schism in the Mormon Church because of this 70%-30% split between conservatives and liberals?

Richard Bushman: I don’t think there will be a schism. The very heart of Mormonism is this commitment to our group life. In the wards, you get people all along the doctrinal liberal and conservative spectrum. And yet, they love each other and they take care of each other. When you read accounts by liberal Mormons about why they stay in the church, it’s often the ward community. We have a very heavy commitment to that. There are stresses and strains, but I am doubtful that we will ever split up. Some people thought we might go in the direction of the Jews with various segments. I think not.

Larry Brown: Split into reform, conservative, orthodox.

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Richard Bushman: Yes. There are some people trying to define a category for Mormon religious liberals. They call it the middle way, or something like that. I think that’s misbegotten. What they’re trying to do is say there is a place for you and we’re giving a new definition. But categories are dangerous, because none of us really fits in those categories.

Larry Brown: That promotes division, doesn’t it?

Richard Bushman: That promotes division, so I think we have to admit complexity and diversity and be very tolerant of people all along the spectrum but not emphasize divisions by naming them.

Larry Brown: Is that an observation of what is, or a hope for what should be?

Richard Bushman: It’s a description of what is, in my experience, which is limited. There’s a very strong pastoral urge in Mormonism. They really want to take care of people as individuals. Look at the huge change in church attitudes toward gays in the last five years! I see that pastoral urge trumping abstract principle.

Larry Brown: Do you think the Mormon Church and its policies have shaped the political ideology of its people? Or is it the reverse, where the conservatives in the church and their political ideology shape the church and its policies?

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Richard Bushman: I don't think that there's anything intrinsic in Mormonism that leads to right wing American conservatism. You can make a case in either direction. What happens is, once you find yourself favoring a certain political party, then you search around in your doctrinal principles and you find things to support it. So, you have the sense that you are harmonious with the church and the political side. But I think that's after the fact. The word agency suddenly becomes the principle of freedom, and then it becomes no big government, so that seems doctrine pushes you in that direction. But you can find other equally basic principles that lead in the other direction.

Larry Brown: Does the conservatism of the membership influence the church leadership? Do you envision the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve sitting around saying, “Okay, do we take this position, in part, because we don't want to alienate 70% of our membership?” Or is it strictly a matter of “we feel this is revelation, we need to do what's right according to our faith?”

Richard Bushman: That's a hard question. A similar question could be asked of the U.S. Supreme Court. When they make a decision, are they just following abstract principles of law and precedent, or do they take into account the political ramifications? All historical analysis shows that they have to take into account the political ramifications because if the Supreme Court is too far separated from the basic opinion of the American people, they jeopardize their own position in American government. The Supreme Court is a very frail body. It all rests on the opinion that this group of justices should be trusted. I think

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that’s why (*Chief Justice John*) Roberts reversed his opinion (*on the Affordable Care Act decision of June 2012*).

Larry Brown: Do you think he was interjecting some balance and attempting to blunt any perception that they’re doing the bidding of Republican Party that nominated them?

Richard Bushman: Right. And there are many reasons why it should do that. It’s a big thing for the unelected Supreme Court to deny the action of the elected legislature, try to repudiate it. But a wise chief justice will always keep it in mind just how far public opinion can be stretched. In that sense, any leader of any organization has to take into account where his people are. But I don’t think it’s a calculated political matter. I think (church leaders) genuinely do things because, in their hearts, they believe it’s right.

Larry Brown: You’ve characterized the church as having shifted from 19th century radicalism to 21st century conservatism. When, in the church’s history, was there a rough stasis between its radical beginnings and when it started to tip toward conservatism? You mentioned the 1950s and 60s and the Cold War. What do you see as other influences?

Richard Bushman: This change is taking place over a period of time. Up until 1890, there’s just one church political party.

Larry Brown: The People’s Party.

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Richard Bushman: It wasn't Democrat or Republican. And then there comes a time when they needed Republican support to get Reed Smoot seated. That was a political calculation. To achieve a goal we needed to throw in our lot with Republicans and most of the church leaders went in that direction. But there's also, in first decade of the 20th century, a lot of liberal, or even socialist, Mormons who saw the solution to the problems of the world in what we would now call progressive terms. That is, the dangerous force in American society was not government, it was huge corporate bodies.

Larry Brown: The rising class of industrialists.

Richard Bushman: Plutocrats and these huge organizations, U.S. Steel, and so on. The real problem was to find a way of checking those people. The fallout and the suffering that went with the conditions of labor at that time, was so severe--little children being brought into the work place, taken out of school, and so on. So the efforts to moderate the effects of business domination in American society seemed like the cause of good. As a result government grew more powerful over the twentieth-century as a kind of counter-balance to business. Corporations get more and more powerful but government balloons. And so now there is a suspicion of both elements, probably more of government than of big corporations. Some people believe in collusion between the two. There's one conglomerate of power working together for the advantage of a select few.

Larry Brown: In 2007, you were the featured speaker at the Pew Forum's biannual Faith Angle Conference on religion, politics and public life. During the Q&A, you said that

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you felt that Utah could go Democratic again. You said “it’s not forever and a day locked into that Republican platform.” You also said that “there may come a time when Mormons will need to become radical again, for some reason, to change the social order, in some respect, and back towards equality.” What did you mean by equality?

Richard Bushman: (laughs) Did I say that?

Larry Brown: (laughs) That’s what the transcript says. Is economic equality what you were referring to?

Richard Bushman: We’re talking about a distant future when the events can only be hazily glimpsed. I used to be a Republican and the reason I changed, was the fall of Communism. So long as there were these two powerful world views with organizational support, I thought Communism was the more malicious of the two. But the fall of the Soviet Union, and with it the deflation of the socialist-communist ideology, left capitalism as the dominant form of social organization.

Larry Brown: It became unchecked.

Richard Bushman: And so it becomes unchecked, and I felt like I had to get on the side of the underdog and try to resist these powerful capitalist forces.

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Larry Brown: Do Mormons support the notion of economic equality, some redistribution of wealth, or do you see such support decreasing as church members move further to the right?

Richard Bushman: I think you'd have to go a long way to find Mormons who believe in the redistribution of wealth. There are a few.

Larry Brown: That is, essentially, the spirit of the United Order is, isn't it?

Richard Bushman: Well, the problem with the United Order is it didn't work. Joseph instituted it. He was deeply devoted to it. He gave his all to it, and it really didn't work. When he finally had a city that he controlled, Nauvoo, he didn't try to institute it again. It just had too many internal contradictions. Later Brigham Young made an attempt at it. ZCMI was a reasonable organization. There were all sorts of co-ops that worked. So, I don't think that that kind of top-down reorganization of society is deeply ingrained into Mormonism. What *is* deeply ingrained into Mormonism is pastoral care. If there's someone in trouble, we try to take care of them. That's our welfare program.

Larry Brown: What's your response to conservatives who say that the government should get out of the safety net business, perhaps with the exception of the most helpless in society, and that contributions to the poor should be voluntary?

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Richard Bushman: Well, I’m willing to go with any scheme that actually works. You can’t have schemes just based on some abstract principle, that everyone should do it on our own. We have to find ways to take care of the people who are not insured medically and who are down and out. Maybe the government’s doing it the wrong way, but you can’t turn your backs on those people. Someone has to step in. You can’t just say let them fend for themselves and everything will work out in the end.

Larry Brown: So there is a place for tax dollars, in addition to voluntary contributions?

Richard Bushman: The trouble is, it has to be done with some degree of agreement. It doesn’t really work if you force people. In a democracy, there is force: the majority rules and that means the minority has to give way. But we strive for a higher degree of unity. Through the political process we try to find ways of working together. We often fail, but the answer is not to stop working together,—that is, to end government. It’s to keep laboring away until we find ways to work together. The aim is not to reduce or increase government, but to solve the problems in the lives our people.

Larry Brown: We’re a long way from agreement.

Richard Bushman: And that, I think, is the thing that’s going to scuttle the Republican Party. If the tea party group takes over with their uncompromising stand, their unwillingness to work together, they alienate Mormons. The bulk of the Mormon population does not like that unwillingness to compromise in any way. And it’s actually

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unconstitutional. The Constitution was set up to require compromise, not that one party would stiffly stand by its position without any regard for what anybody else is concerned about.

Larry Brown: As you mentioned at the Pew Forum, if the social order were to radically change, who knows? Maybe in the future the balance might be restored in terms of political ideology in the church. That would take a pretty massive shift, though, wouldn't it?

Richard Bushman: It would. This might be a point for me to talk about my notion of conservatism. The reason I don't like the tea party in the right wing is they're too radical. They are not conservative. I am a Burkean conservative. Burkean conservatism is that you don't make huge changes on the basis of some rational scheme. You don't create an ideology by analyzing the nature of society the way Marx did or any of the early socialists and then saying we have to wrench society back into this, according to our rational calculations. That is very dangerous because no human mind can comprehend accurately the true nature of society.

Larry Brown: You can't predict the ripple effects in real life.

Richard Bushman: You don't know what will happen. In general, when this is attempted, it results in violence. People have to be killed or imprisoned in order to force society into this framework. The idea of just dismantling what has developed over 80 years since the

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New Deal is radical. You're trying to destroy something that has been integrated into American society and the consequences could be disastrous. If there are changes to be made in a more conservative direction, they should be made gradually, and step by step, rather than according to some Utopian scheme of how society ought to work.

We're going to have to have some kind of fiscal reform, tax reform, and all of our major social programs. But there is this feeling that if the government would just leave us alone, life would be grand. People think that if we would do things on our own, the free enterprise system would produce prosperity for everyone and life would get better. We want to get the government off our backs. But that's a Utopian scheme. It's never worked, I doubt if it ever will work. So, these extreme conservatives are driven by illusion.

Larry Brown: How much of this ideological conflict is being driven at the political level? Or is it the American people who have changed and become intolerant of compromise across the aisle? People like to blame Congress but how much of the problem really is Congress, which is a representative government?

Richard Bushman: There's a deep process that's going on here which, in a way, is very democratic. But, at this point, it's disastrous. We've become expert at finding groups in society that have certain needs and desires and tapping into that.

Larry Brown: Special interest groups.

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Richard Bushman: All sorts of special interest groups. Karl Rove was expert at it. He tailored the Republican political message to every little group. Now all politicians do it. And that means that the anxieties and fears of the populace as a whole are entering into the higher levels of the political process. As a result some people are beginning to say, I don't want to leave it to the educated, powerful higher ups to run society. They want the elites off their backs and that has come to mean Washington bureaucrats. These are the ones who now think government must go.

Larry Brown: You hear that a lot in conservative talk.

Richard Bushman: You do. People get a sense that there are some smart people there in Washington who think they can run my life better than I can run it myself. That is social class conflict. I think it really is class resentments that are being expressed here. And in a way, I'm very sympathetic, because those wishes cannot be disregarded. They run very deep and there's a lot of unhappiness and the feeling like the well-educated people get all the big jobs, they're the ones who control the government, they run corporations. That is a genuine feeling, but, unfortunately, it's not a well-informed feeling. It hasn't gone through a process of political education where you have to learn what you actually have to do to govern a society.

Larry Brown: Just tear it down and we'll worry about how to govern later. The Spartacus effect.

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Richard Bushman: Yes, exactly.

Larry Brown: Do you think that the advent of technology has allowed these special interest groups to amplify their message, or perhaps even manipulate public opinion more than they could have done in the past?

Richard Bushman: Absolutely. Technology is critical to this whole operation. It's technology that permits us to identify with these interest groups. It's technology that magnifies their interests because, if you have a group that's sort of restive but has no political consciousness, and then you have a Rush Limbaugh who voices their fears. Suddenly they realize they're part of a powerful group. There are all sorts of silent majorities. They're not really majorities, but they think that they speak for the true American people. You would think that maybe technology would broaden us, we'd get to see more perspectives and we'd realize we're a whole people and we would have to honor diversity. It's just the reverse. People find people who think exactly the way they do, listen to those people and they get the idea that they have the right to control things.

Larry Brown: It's an echo chamber.

Richard Bushman: Yes.

Larry Brown: If you look at the number of political talk shows, there are far more conservative commentators compared to liberal ones. One report I read says that there are

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ten times more conservative talk hours on the air than liberals. What is it about conservatives that they seem to be doing so much better at communicating their side, but the left doesn't seem to have as much of a presence?

Richard Bushman: Well, that's probably more true today than in earlier times, through the 50s, 60s, and maybe into the 70s. The majority then was silent. They felt on the defensive and all they could do was try to imitate some watered down version of the New Deal. But today it's reversed. There's a lot of money that goes into conservative think tanks that generate all this stuff. And, of course, some of these commentators found that they had a huge audience so off they went. I do think that, right now, the progressive element is on the defensive. It feels like the momentum is with the right. My own belief is this is going to fizzle. I think it will be like the Anti-Masonic Party of the 1830s or the anti-immigrant party of the 1850s. The tea party is an expression of popular anxieties but not a party than can govern.

Larry Brown: They'll get to their extreme, people will reject it.

Richard Bushman: They'll go too far.

Larry Brown: There is evidence that church leaders are trying to reestablish some political moderation among church members. They've taken a more compassionate stand regarding illegal immigrants, including support for the Utah Compact and HB116, Utah's guest worker law. They've also sent a representative to express church support for Salt

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Lake City’s anti-discrimination ordinances protecting gays. So it seems that they’re trying to send moderate signals.

Richard Bushman: The trouble is they can’t say it. They’re so pledged to neutrality. I think there will be a lot of coded messages about moderation in politics.

Larry Brown: They tend to make more of a whisper than a shout.

Richard Bushman: It will be a whisper. But even whispers by the Brethren get listened to. Whether or not the right wing will hear it is a question. I remember years ago when President Kimball came out against more atomic testing in Utah at a time when the right wing was saying we’ve got to get more bombs, we’ve got to scare the living daylights out of the Soviets. He took a fairly strong stand against testing in Utah. I remember a very good Latter-day Saint, who we love and adore, say President Kimball really didn’t know what he was saying.

Larry Brown: They’ll let their personal political views trump the Brethren.

Richard Bushman: Yes. It was extremely disappointing to me to see a very good man not listen to a church president when he crossed certain political beliefs. What I think is more directly relevant to contemporary politics is the Mormon principle of working together. That’s what we stand for as much as anything. If there’s a problem, you can recruit Mormons to go out to do their darnedest to solve that problem. We’ll sacrifice time,

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money, anything. The reason we work so well together is we respect authority.

Whoever's bishop, doesn't matter what their background, if a ward's called upon to do something, they'll respect him and will work together. That makes us very effective.

Furthermore, it's not advantageous to have every individual out doing things all on their own. That's not the Mormon way. Of course, we work hard. We have our own gardens, we get our own jobs. But when there are large problems, we work together. The government is the institution, in our larger society, where people should try to work together. It seems to me that this is the Mormon principle that should gradually be brought to bear.