

May 7, 2014

Religious Studies Associate Professor Nathaniel Levton answers questions from Ian Withrow, Media and Information Coordinator for the College of Humanities and Sciences at the University of Montana, regarding the Berlin Prize and NEH Fellowship:

1. What appealed to you most about these fellowships in particular?

The Berlin Prize offers a unique opportunity to spend a semester in residence at the American Academy in Berlin, where I'll work full-time on my book. While there, I'll be interacting every day with other scholars, writers, policymakers, and artists in residence working on fascinating projects very different from my own. This will greatly enrich and expand my research horizons. In addition, the Academy hosts a number of distinguished visitors every semester and I will have opportunities to engage in dialogue with American and German academic, corporate, cultural, and political leaders. I'm told the American Academy hasn't hosted a fellow from Montana before, and it will be an honor to represent UM there. Also, I've dreamed of spending a semester in Germany – Berlin especially – since I was an undergraduate student of religion. Now I'll finally have the chance to see and work in the great German universities and cultural institutions that gave birth to my field of modern biblical and religious studies. In this respect, the American Academy places great emphasis on introducing its American fellows to their German colleagues and to cultural institutions throughout Berlin and Germany. And of course this all means I'll have plenty of opportunities to refresh my college German, which I'm afraid is very rusty!

The National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship represents an equally unique opportunity of an entirely different kind. Unlike the Berlin fellowship, the NEH fellowship is not linked to a particular university, academy, or city. Instead, it gives scholars the chance to follow their research anywhere it may take them. For example, it will enable me to continue working on my project right here in Missoula (and kayak on the rivers after work!) and at the same time it will also enable me to pursue my research in the great libraries and antiquities museums of America, Europe, and the Middle East. The NEH award is meant to give scholars what is required to do difficult, important Humanities scholarship, and to communicate the necessity and value of Humanities research in America today. I view this as a great responsibility that I must work hard to fulfill.

2. What research project(s) will you be conducting as a result?

I'll be writing a book and articles about religion, politics, and writing. Specifically, I'll write a book about the politically charged phenomenon of text destruction in the ancient world, from the beginnings of writing to the formation of the Bible. I'll examine literary and archaeological evidence for purposeful, religiously and politically motivated acts of text destruction in ancient times. My goals are 1) to produce the first catalog of evidence for this important but overlooked ancient phenomenon, and 2) to identify and explain its significance. I also have a more specific focus: to identify examples of ancient text-destruction traditions in the Bible. I'll show how this evidence reveals the deep connections between religion, politics, and writing at the dawn of literacy, in the Bible, and through to today.

3. Why is the study of text destruction in the ancient world important to contemporary religious perspectives?

The public, physical violation of sacred texts remains a powerful kind of attack against national and religious identity throughout the world today. I'm really writing about the power of words, or more generally, the power of communication: of the power of communication to change people's lives, their communities, their countries, even the world as whole. I'm also writing about the beginnings of book burning, explaining why it happened, why it still happens, and what it means. In ancient times, the destruction of sacred texts symbolized the destruction of cities, gods, people, and the world itself. Today, there is a monument in Berlin where, in 1933, thousands of Jewish and so-called "un-German" books were publically burned. About a hundred years before that event, the German poet Heinrich Heine wrote: "There, where they burn books, they will in the end burn people."

The ancient world I'm writing about witnessed the invention of writing technologies. Today, the digital revolution has shown us once again the incredible power of words and communication technologies to alter the history of nations, the lives and freedoms of individuals, and the world itself. The power of words continues unbroken from Moses to the digital age - or as a book I assigned for a religious studies class last year at UM nicely put it, "from tablet to scroll." And remember, Moses is said to have destroyed those first tablets!

4. Why are fellowships important to UM faculty members and how does that research translate to current UM students?

Fellowships and sabbaticals offer faculty members temporary leaves from teaching and administrative duties to periodically focus full-time on their research, to access resources and collaborate with colleagues at other institutions, and to return to the UM classroom intellectually refreshed and updated on advances in their professional fields.

It is important for me to note that I would not have received these fellowships without public support for the Humanities. I developed my project and grant proposals in my office in the Liberal Arts building over a number of years, and my project's early stages were recognized and supported by UM's Faculty Development programs for Humanities research. In other words, the University of Montana's commitment to Faculty Development in Humanities research enabled me to pursue my project during and between teaching semesters to a point where I could successfully compete for outside funding on a national and international level. The greatest responsibility I have is to use these fellowships to further Humanities research and teaching at the University of Montana - to represent Humanities scholarship at the University to the best of my abilities and to inform and inspire my students.

It's essential that our students earn their degrees, as so many proudly will next week, well-prepared for graduate work and the job market in a rapidly changing world. I believe that a broad and deep Humanities education provides Montana's students with the most powerful, flexible, and enduring preparation for the unknown challenges and opportunities of the future. College students today must be given opportunities to develop creative and critical thinking skills, so that they may make informed decisions about personal, public, and professional matters throughout their lives without relying solely on the judgments of others. They must also develop good writing and public speaking skills so that they may effectively and productively

communicate their ideas to others. The Humanities and Liberal Arts must therefore be supported and promoted here at UM - this has been the University's grounding and core mission since its founding, and support for the Humanities must continue, now more than ever, even in tough economic times. This requires well-trained faculty and robust programs in the study of history, religions, literature, politics, foreign languages, and related academic disciplines that together set the true foundations for global leadership in the 21st century.

When I'm granted the opportunity to travel to other places and, through my research, to other times in the past, I return home to Montana to share what I've discovered with my students. My goal in doing so is to empower them to discover these things for themselves, for them to better understand the world as well as the value and meaning of home. Value in a public university cannot be defined as it is on Wall Street. Long-term investment in the Humanities – of which these fellowships and the University of Montana stand as examples - will enable faculty to teach students durable, flexible life and professional skills and their responsible use. This will empower UM graduates to develop and express informed views clearly and effectively, to understand the past that led to the present so they can create a better future. Strong, enduring support for Humanities teaching and research at UM will enable our students to achieve and understand the power, privilege, and responsibility that a world-class public higher education can give.

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