New Arrington Chair is a scholar of American religious history first

The College of Humanities and Social Science has been very pleased to welcome historian Patrick Mason as the new Leonard J. Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture. Dr. Mason joined the Religious Studies Program as an associate professor in mid-2019, and he’s been busy teaching courses — “History of Christianity” last fall, “Mormonism and the American Religious Experience” and “Religion, Violence, and Peace” this spring — answering fans’ history questions, and taking calls from national media seeking perspective on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

However, we’ve never had the opportunity to talk with Mason about the leading-edge scholarship that led to his appointment as the Arrington Chair. This article remedies that and also offers a window into Mason’s research on the extraordinary, sometimes eccentric, and always evolving landscape of Mormon history.

Who is author, professor and scholar Patrick Mason?

Mason was born in the Salt Lake County suburb of Sandy and grew up in a fairly traditional and religious neighborhood. That could have set his life path, except for an unscripted trip to the local cinema. He left the theater with a heightened curiosity about the world at large — and a new consciousness of the nation’s pervasive and largely targeted injustice.

That eye-opener for Mason was “Malcolm X,” the 1992 Spike Lee film about the legendary black activist. Mason may not have known it at the time, but this new recognition of oppression and unjustness, whether on a personal or systemic level, was to inform a large part of his education, research, and, most importantly, his continuing worldview.

Malcolm X, said Mason, “was the prophet in the wilderness … exposing the kind of ugly brutality that is as much a part of the American experience as the heroic stories we prefer to tell.”

Mason earned a degree in history at Brigham Young University and served a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to Seattle. For graduate school, his choice came down to the University of Notre Dame because of its acclaimed scholarship on American religious history. More specifically, the private Catholic university’s History featured nationally renowned Catholic and Evangelical scholars.

“So here I was,” Mason remembers, “a Mormon kid from BYU at Notre Dame, deeply immersed in its Catholic subculture but with a lot of my fellow students and professors who were Evangelical. For me, it was a great mix.”

The concept of peace has long fascinated Mason. He can’t exactly explain its allure; after all, he says, “I haven’t experienced any violent trauma in my life or lived in a conflict zone.” But he does recall the first time he actively thought about this ideal — a World Civilization class at BYU that explored humans’ long striving for peace, and the inevitable retreat into war. “I was totally taken by the theme,” he says. “I was inspired by it, challenged by it.”

At the University of Notre Dame, he was introduced to the prestigious Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, which examines the roots of violent conflict and strategies for peace. He put history on hold, and he instead pursued, and earned, a master’s in Peace Studies. He went on to receive his doctoral degree in American History in 2005.

After several teaching positions at Notre Dame (during his graduate work and as a Ph.D.) Mason in 2007 accepted his first tenure-track professorial position — seemingly on the far side of the world, at least from his position in...
northern Indiana. Mason moved his family to Egypt, and he began teaching at the American University in Cairo.

There he became the unofficial “American” specialist and was compelled to confront the question, “What should a bunch of Arab kids learn about American history?” Their interests ranged, in just two examples, from colonialism to America’s rise to international dominance.

“I realized that the most important parts of American history aren’t just for Americans,” he said. “There are themes from American history that have resonance beyond the American story.

“This is a human story, right?”

In 2011, he was named the Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate University near Los Angeles. Continually expanding his scholarship of the church’s political history, he’s become known as an authority within the circle of LDS academics, serving as president of the Mormon History Association. He also moves in a wider circle as a popular speaker and an expert source for media worldwide.

He and his wife, Melissa, along with their four children, have made their home in Logan.

Mason’s early research


With his Peace Studies master’s degree from Notre Dame, Mason considered possible topics for his Ph.D. dissertation. He was looking for something that bridged his research interests — religion and race in American history, as well as the violence that oftentimes occurs.

The resulting scholarship was so groundbreaking with original research that in 2011 Oxford University Press published Mason’s dissertation as his first academic book, The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South.

Mason began his investigation of race, religion, and violence with the confederation that to this day embodies all three: the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan began its nightmarish advance in the years following the Civil War, targeting its antipathy at former slaves.

But as the decades advanced into the new century, Mason noticed “a curious thing.” The post-Civil War KKK seemed to fade, but the 1920s saw a revival of brutality and bloodshed, this time fixated on newly arrived and unfamiliar immigrants.

“That was the question that got me thinking,” Mason said. “What happens in the roughly half century in between? How does the Klan go from being primarily anti-black”

to targeting newcomers who were largely Catholics and Jews?

Mason began his research in the era’s crumbly and disorganized city and court records, mostly in the American South. Almost as an afterthought — and since he was already dusty — Mason decided to investigate another religious minority that was increasingly seen on Southern country roads: Mormon missionaries.

“I didn’t think there was much of a story there, that it would probably be the weakest material,” he said. But what he found astounded even this intrepid researcher. “I went to the archives and, lo and behold, discovered there were more episodes of violence against Latter-day Saints in the late 19th-century South than against Catholics and Jews combined,” he said.

Missionary pairs who traveled exposed and unarmed along isolated roads were early and easy targets for angry gangs with grudges. Records show there were more than 300 assaults and other incidents of violence, as well as the murders of three missionaries in Georgia and Tennessee.

The local Protestants’ strong feeling against these curious preaching pairs was inflamed by news of the church’s practice of polygamy and its other oddities. Mason explains in The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South that the proliferation of missionaries and small Mormon communities led Southerners to believe they were part of “an epic contest between competing civilizations, one monogamous and the other polygamous, one Christian and the other idolatrous, one dedicated to defending the purity and virtue of southern womanhood and the other intent on debasing it.”

Disturbingly, Mason found, the assaults increasingly involved neighbors against their long-time neighbors. Pockets of newly converted Saints began to appear. These congregations were generally small, between 10 and 30 people, made up of a few multi-generational families and friends, said Mason.

Although longtime southern residents themselves, the new members were driven out of their homes “at the point of the gun” and sometimes with a nailed notice that gave them 30 days to get out of town, said Mason.
This slice of history from the late 1800s may seem analogous to the earlier persecution endured by church members that culminated in the 1844 murder of church founder and prophet Joseph Smith. There are, indeed, some similarities, Mason said. In both eras, vigilantes were suspicious of newcomers and attacked their neighbors. They sought to “cleanse or purify their community from these unwanted elements,” he said.

In the late 19th-century South, vigilantes also took aim at Jews and Catholics. Attacks on Jews, often lonely peddlers who visited isolated homesteads, were largely based on economic factors. Catholics, however, were more significant targets because of their religion and their ethnicity. Earlier waves of Irish and German immigrants had increasingly settled into the landscape of American life. Fresh immigrants from areas such as Southern Italy, however, were considered to be “unsavory characters,” he said.

Mason’s research stands out as an original addition to scholars’ view of the era. That analysis was confirmed by Oxford University Press’s decision to publish Mason’s first academic book. “I’ve discovered things that nobody else had really looked at. This gives us a different way of not only understanding Mormon history, but also Southern history and the history of violence in America,” he said.

A peace-seeking church founded in violence

Mormonism and Violence: The Battles of Zion (Cambridge University Press, 2019)

Mormon history is marked by persecution and violence. Even today, this fraught history reflects many Latter-day Saints’ self-identity. Vigilantes, midnight flights to safety, their prophet’s martyrdom — are all “important parts of the stories we tell ourselves,” said Mason. Mormons remember their history because “the story is so powerful, so poignant,” he said.

Not so comforting is “the other side of the story,” he said.

In the earliest years of the church’s existence, members were largely pacifist. “They didn’t respond with violence even when they were persecuted,” Mason said. By late 1833, however, early Mormons began to take up arms in what Mason describes as justifiable self-defense.

Self-defense became increasingly aggressive, though, particularly with the 1838 establishment of the Danites, infamous paramilitary members who looted, burned and pillaged non-Mormon communities in Missouri. Soon, the Latter-day Saint city of Nauvoo, Illinois, demonstrated its military strength with the visible presence of the Nauvoo Legion. This 3,000-man army, said Mason, “was huge even in an era when militias on the frontier were common.”

The legion was never engaged, but this “standing army” unnerved its neighbors. “It was more bark than bite,” he adds, “but that bark was pretty loud.”

The idea that early Saints had a large military “under the command of a religious prophet who was also a mayor looks a lot like theocracy,” said Mason. “And that flies in the face of the American tradition of republicanism and separation of church and state.”

Eventually, church members escalated their use of violence, primarily “to punish dissenters or dissidents within the community,” he said. That attitude continued after the faithfuls’ arrival in Utah. This time, one of the chief targets was the Native population, whose land was coveted by Mormon newcomers.

This all escalated in the autumn of 1857. The September 11 Mountain Meadows Massacre, said Mason, is “the single worst day in Mormon history.” A brigade of Mormon settlers ambushed the passing Baker-Fancher wagon train, resulting in the murder of some 120 men, women and children in cold blood. It still remains among the largest civilian massacres in U.S. history.

In addition to the massacre, the decade that began in 1850 saw the beginning of widespread polygamy, a priesthood ban against African-Americans, and the conflicts with the federal government that culminated in the 1857 Utah War. “It’s a decade to remember,” he said, “just not fondly.”

Not long after their arrival in the West, the persecuted become the persecutors, said Mason. The Mountain Meadows Massacre speaks to the “classic human story of what happens when good people do bad things because they had been victimized themselves.”

It’s also a cautionary tale of what can happen when trauma is “left to fester and remains unaddressed,” he said. Violence became a tool against dissenters and so-called “gentiles.”

This darker history remains unknown to many Latter-day Saints because of its troubling aspects. “I think most members are just completely unaware of that history,” he said. “Not that that’s the only story we should tell about Mormon history. But it has to be part of the story.”
By the 1880s, Latter-day Saints moved away from violence, and church leadership explicitly disavowed any kind of violence.

Mason argues in his academic history that “Mormons haven’t stopped being violent,” but any violent tendencies have been redirected from church to state. “This was part of the deal of getting statehood and for not being persecuted anymore,” he said. “Being an American citizen means that you’re willing to send your sons and now daughters to fight and be killed for the state.”

Even in this new millennium, “we see large numbers of Latter-day Saints joining the military or national security apparatuses such as the CIA,” He said. These are “good and honorable careers,” he said. “But we have to recognize that state violence is often at the heart of those careers.”

Following the 2019 publication of Mormonism and Violence: The Battles of Zion and the resulting stellar reviews, Mason and a co-author have finalized for publication another book manuscript centering on the LDS Church’s tradition of nonviolence. He describes this latter manuscript as the bookend to his previous work on Mormon violence.

“This will be the other side of the story: How does the tradition reclaim and lift up its nonviolent heart?” he said. “Whereas Mormonism and Violence was primarily historical, this is a more theological project.”

The 1960s and a sharp turn to the right

Future research on Ezra Taft Benson and the politics of the LDS Church

For much of the 20th century, Ezra Taft Benson was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ most recognized — and polarizing — leader. Indeed, said Mason, Benson became “the face of Mormonism.” The Idaho farm boy led the church as its president from 1985 until his death in 1994. But his formidable conservative influence began much earlier, dating back to 1943 when he was named an apostle.

His prominence spread far beyond Utah when he served for eight years in Pres. Dwight D. Eisenhower’s cabinet as the Secretary of Agriculture. Ironically, said Mason, during his time in Washington as a cabinet member, Benson was “closer in line to the U.S. presidency than he was to becoming president of the church.”

Benson, with his “huge personality” and influence, brought the church along with him as he moved to the extreme right in the early 1960s, mixing politics and church policies, said Mason. He notoriously partnered with the John Birch Society, a group that reflected his arch-conservative, anti-communist beliefs. He also popularized a notion that still haunts the church’s more liberal adherents. Paraphrased, it contends that one cannot be a good Mormon and a good Democrat.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, Mormons were mixed politically. Utahns voted for FDR’s New Deal four times. But, Mason said, in the post-World War II years, Mormonism “changed drastically,” a shift that Benson helped manufacture.

“The church’s conservatism changes over the second half of the 20th century, as it becomes concerned with more than just communism,” said Mason. “It becomes about family issues, gender issues.”

Until George Romney entered the national scene in 1968 when he launched a presidential campaign, Benson “was probably the only Mormon that most journalists could name,” said Mason. “He became the face of Mormonism.”

Story by Janelle Hyatt

"There are themes from American history that have resonance beyond the American story... This is a human story."

— Patrick Mason
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Published Works

A list of publications created by or worked on by Patrick Mason

*Mormonism and Violence: The Battles of Zion* (Cambridge University Press, 2019)
An examination of the relationship between the LDS Church and violence, accessing church history as well as its scriptures.

*What is Mormonism? A Student’s Introduction* (Routledge, 2017)
While a religious studies professor at Claremont University, Mason was unable to find a textbook that he felt comprehensively covered the LDS Church’s history, the beliefs, culture, practices, and yes, its engagement with politics. So he wrote his own textbook designed for use by non-specialist professors and students.


Edited books:

*Out of Obscurity: Mormonism since 1945*
Essay collection co-edited with John G. Turner. (Oxford University Press, 2016)
A look at recent history of the church that has been marked by rapid growth, increasing public prominence, and involvement in politics.

*Directions for Mormon Studies in the Twenty-First Century* (University of Utah Press, 2016)

Essays on how best to move forward with sophisticated new scholarship and advancing methods of research that have changed the landscape of Mormon Studies.

*War and Peace in Our Time: Mormon Perspectives*
Co-edited with Richard L. Bushman and J. David Pulsipher (Greg Kofford Books, 2012)
Essays by scholars on LDS scriptures, prophetic teachings, history, culture, rituals, and traditions of Mormonism affecting attitudes and actions regarding issues of war and peace.

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