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## Book Review: The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South

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***The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South.*** By **Patrick Q. Mason.** New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xi + 252 pp. \$29.95 cloth.

“Whereas anti-Mormon violence had been characteristic of virtually every northern locale of Mormon settlement during the antebellum period,” Patrick Mason writes in his history of the subject, “violent assaults on Mormon missionaries became an increasingly southern practice in the years after the Civil War” (93). What distinguishes Mason’s book from other chapters in the sad saga of religious persecution is his excellent analysis of the complexities that result when political agendas, regional norms and interests, and theories on the proper role and limits of government all collide in the face of religious heterodoxy. Virtually all late nineteenth-century citizens and politicians were united in their desire to extirpate polygamy—which became synonymous in their minds with Mormonism—but they differed greatly in their strategies. The familiar, broad issue framing Mason’s study is the conflict between religious liberty and social norms, between an idealized pluralism and a rigorously delimited orthopraxy. But he breaks new ground in his lucid exposition of how messy the management of religious difference could become in the complicated politics of the mid-nineteenth century.

In the southern culture of honor, fears about the contamination of female virtue were already exacerbated by racist hysteria and representations—which emancipation only heightened. But if few were concerned about the niceties of religious toleration, localism was a more pressing matter. In the aftermath of Reconstruction, no southerner wanted to grant the federal government even more power to regulate social practice at the cost of state or individual sovereignty. On the other hand, making the Mormon problem

into a national issue had the virtue of uniting erstwhile enemies in the face of a new, unifying threat all could agree upon. Out of the morass of competing agendas and interests, as Mason recounts, three strategies emerged for addressing this “twin relic of barbarism”: vigilantism, Christian missions, and legislation. The first of these earns place in Mason’s subtitle, and Mason brings to light a chronicle of harassment against a religion that has been far less noted than the story of the Missouri extermination order, the Haun’s Mill Massacre, and the great Mormon exodus. In part, this is because the numbers of those brutalized were far less alarming—a few hundred cases of violence with fewer than ten deaths. Mason largely passes over the second approach, only noting that a typical view of religious conservatives was that Mormon polygamy was “too deeply entrenched for the churches alone to address” (94).

It was in the realm of legal sanctions that the southern politicians excelled; John Randolph Tucker of Virginia at first objected on constitutional grounds to the unrestrained legal oppression of Mormons proposed by his colleague George Edmunds, then went on to outdo all his colleagues with the draconian act that bore both their names and successfully pushed Mormonism to the brink of dissolution, forcing its abandonment of polygamy in 1890. Implicit but not singled out by Mason as a separate strategy, was the deliberate shaping of the Mormon image by the popular press of the day. Mason skips over an abundant corpus of nineteenth-century fiction, but does review an extensive journalistic culture that played upon fears and prejudice. On one level, the Mormon problem played out at the national level, as federal armies and federal legislation forced institutional change. But evangelizing plays out at the personal level, as do, ultimately, all acts of violence. And as Mason intimates, individual opinions—of those at the head of mobs and legislative committees alike—were largely shaped by what they read in the papers of their day. Even a practice like polygamy, while never innocuous in a Protestant culture, was rendered more diabolical and menacing by calculated association with Eastern harems, white slavery, and lascivious missionaries.

Mason makes the point that for Mormons to interpret the violence against them as bigotry is an insufficient explanation of its extent and nature. That may be true, insofar as violence of every sort can always be contextualized, historicized, and psychologized. What remains unclear, is whether Mason considers religious intolerance to be a more damnable rationale for violence than other motivating factors. In his conclusion, he is at pains to argue that “it is important to consider the religious dimensions of violent episodes that are commonly categorized solely as political or racial” (172). The great question is, why might that be so?

The anti-Mormon journalist J. H. Beadle insisted in 1877 that “something peculiar to Mormonism takes it out of the sphere of religion” (“The Mormon

Theocracy,” *Scribner’s Monthly* [July 1877]: 392). A few years earlier, the prominent anti-Catholic agitator S. F. B. Morse invoked the same defense. In his vicious attack on Catholicism, he nonetheless insisted that with their “religious tenets, properly so called, I have not meddled” (“An American,” *Imminent Dangers to the Free Institutions of the United States Through Foreign Immigration, and the Present State of the Naturalization Laws* [New York: E. B. Clayton, 1835], 15–16.) The fact that violence against Mormons, like violence against Catholics before them, so often felt itself compelled to masquerade as violence against something else, tell us a great deal about our implicit recognition of the even greater threat religious prejudice itself poses to our conceptions of self and nation.

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