

The Mormon Menace

Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South

By Patrick Q. Mason

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Patrick Mason's *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* begins with the murder of Elder Parley Pratt. This tragic event sets the tone for the rest of Mason's monograph, which at times feels reminiscent of a "spaghetti western" with blood-soaked vengeance as the solution for attacks on female purity. *Mormon Menace* provides a brutal catalog of the violence Mormons faced in the years after the Civil War: tar and feathering, whipping, harassment, gun battles, government oppression, threats, and more threats, as well as mob activity. These violent acts perpetrated by neighbors and often religious competitors appeared alongside licentious tales of the Mormon seduction of young white Southern women. The so-called Mormon threat materialized in the practice of polygamy and the missionary campaigns that actively sought converts in the American South. The Southern antagonism to Mormons was not singular as national campaigns against polygamy in particular demonstrated the widespread disdain for the Church of Latter Day Saints. In this careful and well-researched project, Mason showcases how anti-Mormonism emerged as one mode of reconciliation between white Protestants North and South in the years following the Civil War (14). While previous histories of the postbellum South have highlighted codes of Southern honor, the prevalence and predominance of African American lynching, and the place of religion (Protestantism) as the healing balm of national wounds, Mason adds a much-needed account of how Mormons became a target of Southern scorn because of their supposed threat to white womanhood, families, and the larger nation.

Unlike David Brion Davis's seminal essay (1960) on the commonalities between anti-Mason, anti-Mormon, and anti-Catholic literature in the nineteenth century,¹ Mason focuses tightly on the rampant anti-Mormon fervor's uniqueness and its unrelenting attachment to violence. This work

proves essential to scholars of not only Mormonism but also to anyone interested in the “complicated relationship of religion and violence” (19). Brutality becomes the main mode of protection in this vision of the postbellum South, and much of the analysis seeks to explain the appearances of anti-Mormonism and its root causes. He asserts that this prejudice emerges not only due to theological differences and religious competition but also due to concerns over the preservation of social order and sexual boundaries. His work is particularly strong in the rich descriptions of the white Southern crafting of the “Mormon monster” (Chapter 6), Mormon martyrs (Chapter 7), and the Southern rendering of polygamy (Chapter 4). These chapters best illustrate Mason’s goal to explore the white Southern male imaginings of the Mormon threat, and he makes good use of Mormon publications and correspondence to document how Mormons reacted to such intolerant acts.

While rich in the sources of the particular intolerance that Mormons faced, I yearned for more comparative work. The final chapter explores anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Mormonism side-by-side, but Mason does not push far enough in these comparisons, particularly because his commitment to the uniqueness of anti-Mormonism obscures the larger similarities to these common religious prejudices. The stereotypes of lustful Mormon missionaries are remarkably familiar to the prominent nineteenth century stereotypes of the Catholic priest as seducer and the deviant sexuality of male Jews. Enforcing the bounds of normative sexuality becomes a continual concern for white Protestants, so what kind of cultural work do these common stereotypes perform? Why does the rallying cry of white womanhood appear so frequently as a charge against religious outsiders? Mason gestures to the intimate relationship between intolerance, gender, and sexuality but does not fully explain these connections.

Despite my concerns over comparison, Mason’s focus on peoplehood as a part and parcel of intolerant responses is a crucial advance of R. Laurence Moore’s work on “religious outsiders.”²² This connection between peoplehood and prejudice needs more reflection. Why exactly do religious outsiders engender such vituperative responses among white Protestants both North and South? Mason’s *Mormon Menace* illuminates the significant import of anti-Mormonism to American national identity in the nineteenth century, which is a lesson that could easily transfer to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Moreover, he demonstrates that the tendency to racially class religious minorities as Other does not work as easily in the Mormon case. Their whiteness made them similar rather than different. Since their religion was not easily transferable to ethnicity, this made me wonder if much of the concern over Mormons was the inability to easily differentiate them from their white evangelical neighbors. This connection between race and religious intolerance should be explored further using Mason as a case study of this complicated relationship. Overall, this book serves as a detailed model of the prevalence of religious intolerance not only in the history of the American South but also the history of the larger nation. *Mormon Menace* stands as a needed intervention to explore exactly how many anti-religious movements become defining features of American nationalism.

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Notes

1 David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (September 1960): 205–24.

2 R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).