The Religious Studies Program Welcomes Patrick Q. Mason

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October was a busy month for Dr. Patrick Mason, the new Leonard J. Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture. On October 7, he appeared on Utah Public Radio’s Access Utah with Tom Williams to talk about Mormonism past and present. On October 11, he discussed religion and the Salt Lake City mayoral race with Doug Fabrizio on Radio West. The next day he headed the plenary session at the Third Annual Book of Mormon Studies Conference, where he interviewed Elizabeth Fenton (University of Vermont) and Jared Hickman (Johns Hopkins University) on “Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon.” On October 16, Mason presented his inaugural lecture, “The Politics of Mormon History,” to a packed Russell/Wanless Performance Hall. Later that week, he gave the keynote address, “Belief and Brackets: Representing Religious Experience in Biography,” at a day-long writers’ workshop in Salt Lake City. All this on top of the daily tasks of teaching, grading, research, and writing. There was also the matter of his kids’ Halloween costumes.

Despite a busy first semester and all the hassles that accompany settling into a new university and community, Mason is thrilled to be at USU and sees it as the ideal place to research and teach religious studies. “As a state institution, rather than a church institution,” he says, “the university is a little removed; and while it’s important [for the university] to maintain a good relationship with the community, the critical distance is equally important.”

As for people who influenced him as a scholar and thinker, Mason is just as likely to cite the author Toni Morrison, the activist Malcolm X, or the philosopher Thomas Scanlon as he is a religious scholar or historian. Many of these writers and thinkers he encountered in the gap year he took from his PhD program at the University of Notre Dame. Against his advisor’s advice, Mason finished the final semester of coursework, passed his comprehensive exams, and then took a year leave from the PhD program. He didn’t travel or take a break from academia. Rather, he enrolled in the one-year Peace Studies program at Notre Dame.

“That year was transformative in many ways,” he says. “It was a crash course in political theory, sociology, [the] psychology of conflict; and it exposed me to a lot of literature and ideas that were mind-expanding. It also made me a better historian.”

It’s probably unfair to ask someone who has been here for just two months what his plans are for growing the program, but Mason had no problem supplying answers. First, he’d like to see the USU Religious Studies program take a leadership role in the American Academy of Religion’s regional meetings. Second, with the help from his colleagues Ravi Gupta and Dominic Sur, he aims to
build a standout religious studies program in the region by increasing the number of undergraduate majors, sending more graduate students to conferences, and capitalizing on the innate curiosity in the student body to show them religion is something they can study, not just something they do on Sundays. Finally, he wants to see the program continue its commitment to excellence in teaching.

As for his research, Mason’s latest book, *Mormonism and Violence: The Battles of Zion*, was published in July 2019 by Cambridge University Press, and he has several other projects in the works. It is clearly an exciting time to be a scholar of Mormon history and culture, as the scope of the subject is expanding. “The future of Mormon history is global,” he says. “There are more church members outside the US than inside. Membership is expanding in the global south. The 21st century church will look browner. And although scholars will continue to study 19th century Mormon history—there are plenty of stories about the era that still haven’t been told—the energy and vitality of Mormon history is global.”