

## The Campfire

### Transcript of Episode 1: A Historian's Take on Mormonism with Patrick Mason

**Max Benavidez:** Welcome to Claremont Graduate University's podcast, the Campfire. Today we're doing Episode 1 with Professor Patrick Mason, who is a professor of Religious Studies and the Howard W. Hunter Chair in Mormon Studies, and he's also the dean of the School of Arts & Humanities here at Claremont Graduate University. He earned his degrees from the University of Notre Dame, and prior to joining CGU, Patrick held positions at the University of Notre Dame and the American University in Cairo. He is an internationally recognized authority on Mormonism. He's had regular appearances in various media outlets including the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN, ABC News. And he's the author of *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Post-Bellum South*, published by Oxford University Press. And he has a new book out called *What Is Mormonism: A Student's Introduction*, published by Routledge.

**Benavidez:** Patrick, welcome to The Campfire.

**Patrick Mason:** Great to be here, Max, thanks.

**Benavidez:** I want to start by asking you "What is Mormon Studies?"

**Mason:** That's a great question. Really it's nothing more complicated than the academic study of Mormonism, but it gets a little trickier, because a lot of people especially who are religious themselves—this becomes complicated for people to understand what is religious studies in general. Mormon Studies is a subset of religious studies, just like you could study Catholicism or Islam or Buddhism or any other tradition within the kind of broader family of world religions. So Mormon Studies focuses just on the Mormon tradition, but what it does is it brings the academic tools that we've developed over time, whether it be historical study or sociological tools or anthropological tools or looking at it through the lens of politics or gender, any number of these kinds of academic lenses to try to understand the religion and its adherents better. So it could be looking at history or theology or culture or ritual any aspect of the tradition in the context of the broader culture.

**Benavidez:** Isn't Mormonism a relatively new religion?

**Mason:** It's a really new religion. I mean it's less than 200 years old. And so the religion began with the founding prophet Joseph Smith having a series of visions in the 1820s. So we're less

than two centuries... and that was here in the continental United States. I mean, and this is one of the fascinating things about Mormonism, you know a lot of people have called it “the American religion.” I mean there are other American religions, of course, but in terms of born and raised here in the United States, unlike, you know, many of the other older religions, of course, Judaism and Islam and Christianity—all originating in the Middle East—Buddhism and Hinduism—in South and Eastern Asia. And so Mormonism is a distinctly American creation which has now gone global. I mean the thing that a lot of people don't understand or recognize is that there are now more Mormons outside the United States than inside the United States, so it's an increasingly global religion—but it started here in the United States. And that happened because of the missionary work that a lot of Mormons do.

**Benavidez:** Isn't that part of the... I think when you are a certain age you go off for a year or two and do missionary work. Is that how it works?

**Mason:** Yeah, that's right. Missionary work was built in from the very, very beginning, and it's now become very common. And it's not mandatory, but it's highly recommended. And so a lot of young people, most of the active young people in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (which is the formal name of the main institutional church that we talk about with Mormonism) .... but most young people go on these missions, as you said, either [for] 18 months or two years, and they can be sent anywhere around the world. And so the real growth in Mormonism we've seen around the world has been since World War II. As a result of both population growth—Mormons tend to have large families—but also mostly through this missionary work.

**Benavidez:** So you yourself were born into a Mormon family. So you're a Mormon and here you are now, you're a scholar and you're studying your own religion. What's that like? Because you know you're bringing a critical view, so to speak, to the religion you grew up with.

**Mason:** Yeah, it can be awkward sometimes, I'll be honest. And I think this would be true of a lot of other religious scholars who would say the same thing if they are also a scholar of the tradition that they inhabit or were raised in. So you're right. I mean I was born into a Mormon family and raised as a Mormon. I served a Mormon mission.

**Benavidez:** Where'd you go?

**Mason:** I went to Seattle. Not very exotic. I had a brother that went to the Philippines and had all kinds of great stories. I went to Seattle. But you don't get to choose where you go. They just send you. I mean you open an envelope and you could be going anywhere in the world, speaking any language you know. So you don't choose, all you do is sign up and say you're willing to do and then the church sends you.

So yeah I grew up and went to Brigham Young University, which is the church's university, for my undergraduate education. But I was always interested in history, so I went and got my PhD in history at the University of Notre Dame and was particularly interested in religious history. I've always been fascinated in the way that religion operates. It moves people in lots of

different ways, whether it be in terms of politics or the way that they organize their families, the way that they organize their societies. So I've always been interested in that, especially in the American context.

So I never had a plan to make Mormon studies the kind of forefront of my career, the main focus of my research. It happened almost accidentally. I ended up... I did a lot of work in graduate school on religion and violence and peace building; I got a master's degree in International Peace Studies. And I wrote a dissertation on violence against religious minorities in the late 19th century American South, and Mormons were just one of the cases that I included. I looked at Catholics and Jews and black Christians, but it turned out that there was just this enormous amount of violence against Mormons in the late 19th century South that hadn't been documented.

And that became my first book, so I just sort of got pulled into it by virtue of the research itself. I mean the sources surprised me. Historical occurrences that I didn't know that were going to be there. And so that's the fun thing about research: Sometimes it surprises us and brings surprising news. And it certainly surprised me; it wasn't what I expected going in. I didn't go to grad school thinking I was going to do Mormon studies. I thought I was going to do some other things.

But you're right. What it means is that I approach my religion both with the eyes of a scholar and applying all the kind of critical analysis and critical thinking that we bring as a scholar, but I also continue to inhabit the tradition as a person who goes to church on Sunday. And those are two different languages, those are two different sensibilities. I'm able to do both things, and you sort of have to navigate that. I think it's hard for people to understand sometimes. I mean even some of my fellow church members, they don't understand that I sometimes am speaking as a scholar, right? Not as a church member, because that is a different kind of language.

**Benavidez:** Let me ask you this. Can you define Mormonism for people who don't know? Some of our listeners, they've heard about it and they go, What is it exactly and why is it Mormonism? And some people have asked me, is Mormonism a form of Christianity, is it Christianity? So if you could talk about that a little bit, because I think a lot of people wonder: What exactly is it?

**Mason:** Exactly, I think that's a great question. I mean it really goes back to the origins of the religion in the 1820s. So it begins with Joseph Smith, this founding prophet, who was actually 14 years old at the time.

**Benavidez:** When he has these visions...

**Mason:** He has these visions, exactly. And he's going around to different Christian churches, to Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians, going to various revivals that they would have. And he was confused about which of the churches he should join. This is the kind of standard story that the Mormons tell. And so he found a verse in the Bible that says you should pray about this if you're confused and so he went into the woods near his farmhouse and he prayed and he

says that that God and Jesus came and told him not to join any of the churches. And later on he had a series of other visions in which he ultimately received what were called golden plates. I mean actually plates made out of gold that were buried in the ground that an angel pointed him to. And he said through the power of God he was able to translate that into what is now the Book of Mormon, which is the main additional book of scripture that Mormons have in addition to the Bible, the Old and New Testament that other Christians read. And so he started this new church, this new religion. And a lot of people have asked, Well, what is it? Does it fit within Christianity, or is it another Protestant religion? Is it a whole religion altogether?

And actually scholars have debated over this and some have said no, it's a whole different religion altogether, or, it is a form of Christianity. I think there's a kind of growing consensus, and what I would say is that Mormonism is a kind of separate branch of Christianity. That you have Roman Catholicism, you have of course Protestantism that broke off from that after the Reformation 500 years ago, you have orthodoxy—Greek Orthodoxy, Russian Orthodoxy—all of those churches that split off from the Catholic Church about a thousand years ago. And then I think Mormonism belongs as a separate and unique branch of Christianity that shares a lot of aspects of other Christian belief and practice. So again the church is called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Mormons would say you know they worship Jesus Christ and read the New Testament and all those things. But it's different enough. It's not just kind of another Protestant church because it makes claims about being the one true church that God has restored back on Earth in modern times.

**Benavidez:** So it's not like a Baptist or a Methodist or a Presbyterian kind of form of Christianity. You're saying it's separate from that. Those are more similar. This is separate.

**Mason:** Yeah, exactly. I mean in terms of its theology you make certain theological claims which depart from such.

**Benavidez:** Such as.

**Mason:** So one of the things if we want to get really kind of theological: So the traditional Christian belief in God is in the Trinity, right? That the God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are all three in one room. And in the vast majority of Christian churches, whether Protestant Catholic or Orthodox, agree on some form of the Trinity. Mormons also believe in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, but they believe there are actually three different totally separate beings, so it's not three in one, like St. Patrick used to teach the Irish about the Shamrock, right? You know. Or at least the legend has it. But the Mormons don't believe that it's three in one but there are actually three separate beings. And so there's different ideas about the nature of God.

**Benavidez:** Is Jesus still the Son of God?

**Mason:** Jesus is still the Son of God but not God. But he's not one with him and he is one. And Mormons would say he's one in purpose with God. But he's not the same being. And so some of those are sort of arcane theological debates, right? But it also plays out in the way that

Mormons believe that when Jesus was on Earth in the New Testament that he set up a church and called Apostles and disciples and he gave them authority.

But Mormons would say that that authority was lost after Jesus died, after the Apostles died, that the church went into a period of apostasy, where the church lost not only truth but also authority. So Mormons say that Mormonism was required [because] God had to restore a new church to bring that authority back. So Mormons don't recognize other Christians' baptisms, right? So if you were baptized Roman Catholic and wanted to become a Mormon. you'd have to get re-baptized again. So there are some of those kinds of differences as well.

**Benavidez:** And who is Mormon, is Mormon an angel?

**Mason:** Great question, what does the name even come from? It comes from the Book of Mormon. This additional book of scripture, which the Book of Mormon is—at least what it purports to be by its own account—is a record of ancient American scripture. So just like the Holy Bible was written by prophets in the Near East, in Jerusalem Palestine and environs, the Book of Mormon purports to be a record of ancient prophets here in the Americas, people who got on a boat from Jerusalem, I mean that they went down to the Arabian Peninsula then built boats and sailed over to the New World. And then for a thousand years had a civilization here with Christian prophets here in the Americas.

**Benavidez:** Where were they located?

**Mason:** The exact geography isn't....

**Benavidez:** So it's like the Bible in the sense it's sometimes, you don't know where exactly Paradise is located. But there was a paradise, right?

**Mason:** Right, exactly. And where did Noah's Ark land and all that kind of stuff... Although Mormons have speculated about this and sent archaeologists down to Central American ruins you know to try and find these things. But it's not definitive. It's one of the critiques of the Book of Mormon right that the archaeology isn't as strong as Biblical archaeology, right? Where is the archaeological proof of these massive civilizations that it talks about? But the idea is that these ancient American civilizations had prophets who taught about Jesus Christ. So the Book of Mormon is a deeply Christian text. But the idea is that it was here in the Americas, and a separate record from the Bible, but another witness of Jesus Christ as Mormons believe it.

**Benavidez:** One thing I was struck by was when you said earlier that you know you are a scholar but you also are part of the church—you're a church member. And so how do you deal with that kind of conflict, because you are highly recognized for your scholarly work, and at the same time you're there in the church on a Sunday and praying to God, praying to, and following. How do you balance that? Because at some point you've got to also have faith, which is different than what a scholar is always questioning. Right?

**Mason:** Yeah. You don't get tenure based on having faith. No, exactly right. I mean there are, there's different tools and you have to be in a somewhat different mindset and a different approach. And for a lot of people this is... there's a real tension here, there's a conflict, you know, between faith and scholarship, or faith and reason.

**Benavidez:** How do you handle that?

**Mason:** For me, I see it not so much as a conflict but rather complementary parts of a whole human self. There are lots of parts of me as a human that are quite different than the kinds of things that I do as a scholar—my relationship with my wife and my family, for instance, are not based on critical thinking and the rigorous examination of evidence. Exactly. This is part of the human condition. Right. And so for me personally—and I know it's different for everybody—but for me personally, the kind of religious encounter is part of the human experience, right, in terms of my encounter with something I recognize or identify as God, or the divine, and I find Mormonism as the vehicle through which I'm able to express and practice that. And so I think this is all just part of being a whole human. But I also completely value the life of the mind and the kinds of things that we do as scholars, the very rigorous careful examination of evidence, and that's forced me to go back and rethink some of the religious beliefs that I had growing up. So the kind of stories that I had—when I go back and look at the documents, I say, well, maybe it didn't happen that way. And in fact Mormonism is going through a period right now of transition, of having to revisit some of its historical narratives because it turns out the sources are a little different than the kinds of stories that we told in Sunday school growing up, right? And so there's a kind of maturation that Mormonism is undergoing right now in large part because of its historians, and in some ways, I'm a part of that process.

**Benavidez:** Is this a revision?

**Mason:** It is a revision. I mean it's a revision of the stories that we told for a long time.

**Benavidez:** That's kind of a big deal ... Here's this whole religion and now like you were saying earlier it's growing all over the world. We'll talk about that in a second. But here you are being part of the revision of the religion itself.

**Mason:** Yeah. And it's exciting but it's also scary for a lot of people in the pews, right? Of course. So for me it's invigorating to see this, and again I see this as all kind of complementary, you know, faith and reason. But for a lot of people it's like, you know ... Imagine if you're raised 40, 50, 60 years on a certain story about church history, right? Then some academic historian like me comes along—even if I'm a church member—that comes along and says, well, actually we've gone back to the documents and that thing that you believed for so long and that was taught by church authorities over the pulpit... right? It is actually you know that we got to change the story. That's really unsettling.

**Benavidez:** It is unsettling and you're also calling into question the authority of these figures who came before and were held in high regard. Now you're saying, well we've got to change

the story. Do you undercut the authority? I mean you are, I can see why people in the pews might be a little scared.

**Mason:** That's exactly it. You put your finger on it exactly and this is precisely where Mormonism finds itself right now and in fact there are a lot of people who are renegotiating their relationship with the church. Many of them are leaving the church because they feel like some of these new findings, historical findings or other things like this, have undercut the traditional narrative that they grew up with and they're not sure that they trust in the church's authority or reliability.

**Benavidez:** Do some people consider this revision radical, because you have people leaving and questioning the old sources and authority figures. Isn't that kind of a radical thing?

**Mason:** Yeah, I mean, in a way. I think most of us who are historians, we don't think of ourselves as radicals. I mean we think of ourselves as kind of just going about our business and doing a lot of careful work, right? But for a lot of people this is a kind of, you know, on some of these issues there's been a kind of 180 or close to it.

I'll give you an example. Mormons are known, that it's well-known that historically Mormons practiced polygamy in the 19th century. And for a long time this was really kind of pinned on Brigham Young, who was the second prophet and president of the church after Joseph Smith was killed. And Joseph Smith's participation in polygamy was a little bit shadowy and people don't really talk about it very much because you know polygamy isn't particularly popular nowadays. There was this sense of wanting to protect Joseph Smith's reputation.

Well, the historical sources show that Joseph Smith was the one who introduced polygamy and he often practiced it in secret. He married some underage women, you know, some teenage women. He in fact had polygamous marriages, even to other men's wives. I mean there were a lot of aspects of polygamy as practiced by Joseph Smith.

Again this was not part of the Sunday school narrative, right? And so now for historians to come along and present this information about the church's founder, the religion's founder, right? That he was actually a polygamist, yeah, and a polygamist in a way that seems unsettling, again marrying you know a 14-year-old girl or marrying other men's wives, right? Now this is richly documented historically, so this is well-attested in the sources, but this is hard for people to swallow. And you can see that of course. And so you know the founder of our religion, that the prophet who we think revealed all these things from heaven and had these visions of God and Jesus and angels, you know, that that he was doing this and how do you wrap your mind around ... how do you make sense of that.

**Benavidez:** Are you helping people do that, you and other scholars? Because then what is Mormonism if the founder, the visionary, so to speak, had these other things going on that we weren't all aware of?

**Mason:** Right, I mean my job as a scholar is to lay out the evidence, and to say here's what we know based on the documents. There's a lot of things we don't know. I mean for any historian there's always frustration that there's always gaps in the historical record. We never know as much as we want to know. And this is a great example of that, that there are a lot of gaps in terms of the historical record. But in terms of what we have, this is what we know, right? And we're not going to argue with the facts. And also the job of the historian is to put things in a broader context—this is what we know about marriage at the time, this is what we know about kind of theological or cultural ideas about marriage or sexuality ... That's the job of the historian, right? Sort of kind of let the chips fall where they are. And then there's the other part of it, there's the pastoral side—that's the job of church leaders or church members or theologians within the church to make sense of that historical data and try to come up with answers that make sense of that within the framework of faith. So you know there are a lot of other scholars who are doing this kind of work as well, both historians but also theologians and others within the church.

**Benavidez:** So would it be fair to say, Patrick, that Mormonism is in a period of transition then of some sort?

**Mason:** I think so, absolutely. And there have been, you know, a couple of other periods of transition for Mormonism and for every religion. I mean, no religion ... First and foremost, I'm a historian. And so what is history? It's the study of change over time. And so nothing ever stays the same, especially in the modern period, where change is so rapid, so fast. Just think about technology. And so religions change too. And we are... But sometimes the change is faster than other times.. And I think we are in a period of real transition for Mormonism. A lot of it is in response to an era of social media, to the Internet.

**Benavidez:** Really? How is that?

**Mason:** Well because, for most of its history, and most of human history, access to information was very difficult. How many people were going to go to the library at Oxford, trying to get all the information, or in Salt Lake City, or the Vatican, or wherever it might be, right? It was difficult to access. You know some of these kinds of sources ... How many people were really going to take the time to get a PhD and read all these books and things like that? So some of this more obscure knowledge was really the purview of the kind of academic elite. Well the Internet changed all of that. It democratized knowledge. It flattened the world, you know, to use Tom Friedman's language and it created an information-rich environment for everybody, including for religious people.

And so now things that were very difficult to know, knowledge that was difficult to access about Mormon history ... Scholars knew this stuff. I mean that's the interesting thing for me is that for a lot of people who encounter this stuff on the Internet, this is a revelation to them, well, scholars have known this for a long time. But nobody listens to scholars.

**Benavidez:** Yes and no. Patrick, we can talk about that in a second. So if I Google Joseph Smith and polygamy, yeah, then I'm going to...

**Mason:** You'll find all kinds of stuff, right. Whereas before, you know, it was the church that controlled the narrative for its members. And the church wasn't talking about Joseph Smith's polygamy. And we could talk about, was the church hiding it or lying about it or were they just not talking about it, right? They didn't think it was relevant. But now, exactly, anybody can do a quick Google search and come up with all kinds of information about Mormonism and we've seen this happen both for people within the church and people outside the church. And so all religions, all institutions, have to have to deal with this, a new era of transparency. How do you deal with things in an information-rich era?

**Benavidez:** And to me it's interesting too. And I'd like to get your take on this as someone who studies Mormonism that popular culture seems to be to a certain extent taken with it. The HBO series *Big Love*—very popular show, not just with Mormons at all...

**Mason:** Mostly not with Mormons...

**Benavidez:** ...Mostly not with Mormons. And then of course on Broadway, *The Book of Mormon*, and you know I mean, how do you how do you feel about that?

**Mason:** And before that, *Angels in America*, the Tony Kushner play that won the Pulitzer Prize was based on it. I mean so Mormons do pop up in popular culture.

**Benavidez:** They're part of American culture.

**Mason:** Absolutely. And in a lot of ways this is one of the great successes of Mormonism to be pilloried on Broadway, right? But in a kind of loving way.

**Benavidez:** No, I think it's actually very endearing. I'm not a Mormon, but I'm just saying when I saw the play, I just thought, Oh, this is like a fun kind of love letter, almost.

**Mason:** That's right. I mean you know it's poking fun at the religion, right? But it's not hostile to the religion or its members. And that's actually a great victory because if you would have turned back the clock a hundred years ago right to the early ... to the turn of the 20th century ...

**Benavidez:** ...the Mormon menace...

**Mason:** Exactly. I mean my first book is on anti-Mormonism in the late 19th century. People don't realize this, but Mormons were sort of Public Enemy No. 1 in the United States, especially in the 1880s. The Supreme Court ruled against Mormons. The president of the United States was issuing orders trying to prevent Mormon immigrants from Europe. Congress passed a series of anti-Mormon legislation ... the federal Congress, which at the high point of that or the low point, in 1887 they passed very draconian laws which seized the church's property. We just saw a similar thing happen with Russia and Jehovah's Witnesses. And in every presidential State of the Union address in the 1880s, Mormons were identified as one of the greatest threats to the nation. And so you take that from the 1880s, and within a couple of generations Mormons are

succeeding in business, we're succeeding in entertainment and the academy and all the different kinds of institutions of American society, and then in 2012 we get Mitt Romney, you know, who becomes the GOP nominee for the presidency, almost wins ... you've got Mormons on Broadway, right?

**Benavidez:** So you're mainstream.

**Mason:** They've been mainstreamed, right. And still people are a little unsure. Polls show that Mormons remain one of the less popular religious groups within America. People aren't quite sure about it. You know the kinds of questions we've been talking about. But still Mormons are part of the mainstream. I mean they just live in ordinary houses and drive ordinary cars and work ordinary jobs. And everybody recognizes they're good neighbors and good family people and all that kind of stuff. Such a huge transition in the space of just a few generations. I mean again as a historian, the rapidity of this change, I mean how fast Mormons go from being absolute pariahs, with every branch of the federal government going after them, to almost winning the presidency, you know? That's remarkable.

**Benavidez:** Speaking of that, where you know the presidents were railing against Mormons and Mormon immigrants, etc. ... now speak more as a professor of religious studies, not just Mormon studies. What we're seeing today with Islam, and you know we have a travel ban against ... which has been held back by the courts... but by today's president saying we don't want people from these seven Islamic countries. What's your take on that? Because it seems kind of similar.

**Mason:** It does, and I actually was just part of a group of scholars that signed an amicus brief that will go to the court in Hawaii, the federal court, which is ruling on President Trump's executive order, in which we looked back at Mormon history and we say in this country we have a history of the federal government banning people from this country, based on nothing more than religious affiliation, right? And the fear of what they would do if they came into this country to undermine its institutions and democracy and all these kinds of things.

And so we used the tools of Mormon history to say, of course it's not exactly the same, I mean you can never draw an exact parallel, but just for the courts to reflect on this as part of our history, where we've gone down this road before in this country. And I don't think we would go back and look on the 1870s and 1880s the way that the presidents you know tried to ban Mormons from this country... I don't think any of us would go back and look on that favorably, or like, that was you know, a high point in American history. And so as a scholar again, I mean I got together with many of my other colleagues and we participated in writing this brief, saying are there some lessons from history that it should at least give us pause here and make us think about current policies towards other religious minorities who want to come into this country.

**Benavidez:** That was a strong statement, where you would do that, because that, as you said, gives people pause. Most people probably didn't know that there were folks in the 1880s who were saying that Mormons were Public Enemy No. 1. We hear it today from some quarters in our society that Muslims are Public Enemy No. 1. So you're right that there is something going

on there. And at a bigger level you know, just as an American, how do you see religious freedom here? I mean people ... this is exactly what you're talking about, obviously people were trying to limit Mormons' religious freedom at this point in history, some people who are trying to limit other religions freedom now ... Can you talk a little bit about why you studied it.

**Mason:** Yeah, it's a great question for me. This is one of the reasons why I love studying Mormonism because it's a great laboratory to think about these kinds of questions. I mean I'm a citizen. I care about these kinds of things. I mean one of the things I love about the United States is that religious freedom is built into the First Amendment of our Constitution. It's oftentimes called the "first freedom." And I think that is a very, very serious thing. I think one of the great legacies of the founders is that they created a nation based at least in theory on religious pluralism. It took us a while to figure this out.

And in fact Mormons were ... early Mormons were more often than not, the victims of a lot of the nation's failure to live up to its best ideals. Again a lot of people don't know that Mormons in 1838—so only eight years after the church's founding—the majority of Mormons were living in the state of Missouri, trying to create settlements there, and they made some overblown claims about, God gave us this land. So they contributed to this, but it resulted in a violent conflict between Mormon settlers and the non-Mormon settlers in Missouri. It's called either the Mormon War or the Missouri War in late 1838. And it got to the end, there was a massacre of Mormon citizens. Women were raped children were killed. There were pitched battles between these militia members. It got to the point where at the end of October 1838, the governor of the state of Missouri issued what was called the extermination order....

**Benavidez:** Extermination?

**Mason:** Extermination order in which this executive order from the governor said that Mormons must leave the state of Missouri or be exterminated.

**Benavidez:** Sounds a lot like Nazi Germany or something.

**Mason:** It's horrible. as it is really one of the low points. I mean of course it doesn't compare to the Holocaust in terms of the ....

**Benavidez:** Trying to exterminate a religious group ...

**Mason:** Targeting this group for whatever reasons but, right. And so Mormons are forced to flee the state.

**Benavidez:** So that's how they ended up in Utah?

**Mason:** So they go to Illinois next. And the citizens of Illinois actually welcomed them in as refugees. It's actually this great story. It's a great story of American compassion and mercy and recognizing the plight of these victims of violence.

Within a few years, things fall apart, right, and Mormons were part of this. They made some grand claims and they were conflating religion and politics and sort of creating a kind of theocracy in the city that they created. Mormons are not innocent in a lot of these conflicts. But at the end of the day they recognize that the First Amendment failed to protect what they saw as their religious freedoms. And so then eventually they got ... Joseph Smith is killed in Illinois. So the founder of the religion is violently killed by a mob in Illinois in 1844 and then Mormons are forced out of the city that they built on the Mississippi River and that's when they go to Utah. They leave in 1847 ... at the time. Utah was not part of the United States. It was Mexican territory. They were leaving the United States.

**Benavidez:** 1847 ... you're right.

**Mason:** It's not till 1848 and the Mexican-American War, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, that that part of the country becomes part of the United States. And so they're leaving the United States because they feel like the United States has failed to live up to its promises in the First Amendment to guarantee religious freedom. So for Mormons, I think, both believers and scholars like myself, you know, I look back on that and I say this is an example from American history where we didn't live up to that.

Now it's complicated. Do we want to protect the right to polygamy? I mean religious freedom cases are always tricky, especially when we get into politics, when we get into certain practices, but fundamentally, do we want to preserve this as the "first freedom," as the founders of the country enshrined in the First Amendment.

**Benavidez:** So what you're saying when you talk about it as being a laboratory ... there were these failings on the First Amendment, which you referred to as the "first freedom," and many people have as well. So suddenly you have this. So how did the Mormons ... when they get to Utah ... a year later after the treaty and after the war with Mexico, that becomes part of the United States. How did they then build from there? Because they obviously are the power, you know, in Utah, in terms of many things, not just religion, but economy, politics...

**Mason:** Yeah, they were the main settlers, and of course there had been native settlers there and this is part of the tragic tale which again is now coming out because of historical research including from some of our students here at CGU. We just had a doctoral student write a very fine dissertation on the violence the Mormons used to displace the native peoples of Utah. And so there's a kind of tragic tale there as well.

But Mormons came in and they were the primary Euro-American settlers in the region, and you're right, they built the economy, they built the society. I mean there were a few non-Mormons who kind of came in, but it was primarily a Mormon society in what became known as Utah, and they tried to get statehood over and over and over again. But this is when they were practicing polygamy, and this is when we get into this period of really pronounced federal and national anti-Mormonism.

But I think we have to recognize just what a tremendous achievement it was for them to settle what is now called the Great Basin. To send settlements not just in Utah, but actually San Bernardino here in Southern California was founded by Mormon settlers and they were there in the San Francisco area before the gold rush. And they sent people up into Idaho and into Wyoming and into places in Canada or even down into Mexico. So a lot of the settlement of the American West Mormons were primary contributors to.

**Benavidez:** You know one thing that's interesting here is the word "violence." You know when you talk about your book *The Mormon Menace*, sounds like there's been a lot of violence around religious beliefs. People saying, I don't agree with you, we want you out, you know, to issue an extermination order and then kill the founder, violently kill him. And these kinds of things... so what is it about religion that these are such deeply held beliefs that it sometimes does engender violence?

**Mason:** That's absolutely right. And this is ... there was a great 20th century theologian named Paul Tillich who talked about religion as the ultimate concern. I mean the thing that you care about the most, right? It's your belief. Because for a lot of people it's not just what's going on in this life but it's the next life too. Everything is riding on this, on having the right beliefs or the right practices, and we see this throughout history, of course—this is one of the tragic elements.

**Benavidez:** And a paradox.

**Mason:** Exactly that. On the one hand my dissertation adviser back at Notre Dame, his name is Scott Appleby, he wrote this great book called *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, and what he meant by that is that every religious tradition, I don't care if you're talking about Mormonism or Buddhism or Hinduism or you know Methodism, there are elements within that that can provide resources for violence, or there are certain leaders who will stoke that up.

**Benavidez:** I think of the Crusades..

**Mason:** Absolutely. But there are also in that exact same religion, in every religion, there are also resources for peace and peace-building, right? You know to turn the other cheek and you know that the Golden Rule is found in every religion.

**Benavidez:** Well you said you want to go into peace studies.

**Mason:** That's exactly right. And one of the books I'm working on right now is a Mormon theology, an ethic of peace building. What resources do we have in this religion to think about a nonviolent approach to society?

And so this has always been the struggle of religious believers throughout history, is this tension, the appeal and draw of violence to force their beliefs on others and their practices on others, but also the call to peace and to use religion—and religion has tremendous power and we see it around the world today. We oftentimes focus on the religious violence with ISIS and with other groups like that, which is terrible and it's real. One of the things ... I just taught a

course last semester on religion, violence and peace building, and I kept telling my students there are sometimes people who want to explain this away and say, oh that's not really religion. It is religion, right? I mean those people who are perpetrating that violence are motivated by their understanding of religion. Now we can disagree with that understanding, we can say it's wrong, that they are doing violence to these sacred texts, but they are motivated by religion—that's real, right? And we have to deal with that.

And so the question is how do we use religion in all of its various forms to work not just for peace but also for human development, for poverty alleviation, to provide medical care, you know, to create ... I mean the civil rights movement in this country was you know ... the main players in that were religious folks, where Dr. King was a reverend. You know he was a minister. And a lot of the other leaders of that movement used their religious commitments to advance the cause of social justice. And he was into nonviolence.

**Benavidez:** One thing that's interesting in looking at where Mormonism is at, is why it's becoming so popular all over the world. I mean it just can't just be the missionaries—there's got to be something that's speaking to people in these other countries and continents. Do you have any sense of what that might be?

**Mason:** Well, I think Mormons themselves, from kind of a church perspective, they would say this is the Holy Spirit working on people, that is, that people feel the presence of God. As a historian, I can't document where the Holy Spirit is working or what he's doing on a Tuesday at 3 o'clock, right? So as a scholar I have to come up with other explanations. And so I think Mormonism provides a lot of things for people. It is a coherent world view that is healing to a lot of people. One of the main teachings of Mormonism is that families can be together and marriages can be together, not just till death do you part, but forever, for eternity. And a lot of people find that to be one of the very attractive doctrines of Mormonism, and Mormonism is a very family-centered. And Mormonism has very strong values, what we would call traditional or conservative values, but a lot of people are attracted to that as a way to live their lives in what they see as times that are unsettling and changing, and they're looking for an anchor in their lives. You know a lot of people read *The Book of Mormon* and just have a kind of very powerful spiritual experience and feel that this is God talking to them.

**Benavidez:** And it has been translated into all... I mean how many languages.

**Mason:** Nearly 200 languages. And so it's been sent literally all over the world. In fact statistically it's one of the most the top five most published books in the English language in history.

**Benavidez:** I've heard that before. I don't know it was the top five.

**Mason:** But yeah the Bible of course is No. 1, and then you have like *Lord of the Rings* and *The Boy Scout Handbook*, and literally, Harry Potter, the first volume of Harry Potter, and *The Book of Mormon* is right up there. I'm not saying that many people have read it, but the church has printed that many copies and distributed them, and it's probably found its way into a lot of

garbage cans. But I mean it shows the commitment that the church has to get the word out. To try and spread the word to people all around the world.

**Benavidez:** Well as we're coming to a close of the podcast today, I just wanted to ask you ... This year as you know was the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, which was a big deal in, of course, Christianity, with Luther, et cetera. And what is your take now, 500 years later? Because a lot of the ... you know it's been celebrated all over the Christian world. And what's your take on the Reformation, and is it still relevant today?

**Mason:** Yeah. That's a great question you know. A lot of people point to the Reformation as really the kind of beginnings of modernity. I mean scholars debate this all the time when it began with the Reformation or the French Revolution or what, but you do see there were things going on in society. The printing press—again an information revolution which we've already talked about,—that led to this change of religious sensibilities which included the Reformation.

And I think we're experiencing that right now in global religion. Again I don't think we have even begun to grasp the importance and the power of the Internet and social media and kind of the digital age that we live in. It changes everything, of course, we know it changes the way we interact with each other, it changes our politics, it changes our economy—it has changed the way that universities do their business, right? But it changes religion too, and every religion has to deal with this.

And so I do think in the early 21st century we're in an age of global religious reformation. It's not just affecting just Christianity or Islam or something like that. But I think the entire globe is going through a kind of cultural Reformation which includes religion. We're trying to grapple with what is the nature of human society in a digital age and that includes our beliefs about God, the kinds of rituals and practices that we have the way that we affiliate with one or another. And so I don't know what the end is going to look like—historians make very poor prophets. And so I don't know what the future is going to hold, but I do know that we're in a period of tremendous change, the likes of which human society has actually very rarely seen.

**Benavidez:** It's like a major tipping point. And when you were talking earlier about the aspects of what a religion is, talking, you know, specifically about Mormonism, people have said that we're now in the second machine age or the fourth industrial revolution, or the other day I read that somebody said we as human beings can't even fathom the knowledge that artificially intelligent robots possess. And so this calls into question, you know, the nature of religion, because it's a belief system, and yet we have all these other things like you're talking about going on. So you're saying we're going through a massive cultural reformation globally—that's a big statement.

**Mason:** It is a big statement. And we're having to deal with things and ask questions and come up with answers of things that even our parents couldn't even imagine. And so the question is will we as a species and as a human society, will we create the tools necessary to deal with the problems in front of us? I hope we can. And I think religion can be a big part of the solution, not

just particular religions, but every religion can be part of the solution, but they're also going to be part of the problem along the way. And so for me that's why it's a fascinating time to be a scholar of religion. You know my own little corner is Mormonism, but I'm really interested in these religions all around the globe, and how are they going to address the problems of human society and opportunities of human society in the 21st century.

**Benavidez:** Well, on that note, I want to say, thank you, Patrick, for being on Claremont Graduate University's podcast, the Campfire. This is our first episode. I want to thank you for helping launch it. And good luck with all your work.

**Mason:** Thank you, Max.

**Benavidez:** Patrick, if people want to get in touch with you, talk a little bit with you about or learn more about Mormonism, Mormon studies, what's the best way to get in touch?

**Mason:** So people can e-mail me at [patrick.mason@cgu.edu](mailto:patrick.mason@cgu.edu). I also have a Twitter feed @PatrickQMason.

**Benavidez:** Great. Well, thank you, Patrick.

**Mason:** Great, thank you.

**Benavidez:** We'll provide links to the contact information on our show notes. Once again, I want to thank Patrick Mason for coming on the Campfire and talking about Mormonism, taking us through the history, and in such a short period giving us such a full picture of this American religion.