
REVIEWS

MAGIC AND THE COMPLEXTITIES OF MORMON HISTORY

EARLY MORMONISM AND THE MAGIC WORLD VIEW

by D. Michael Quinn

Signature Books, 1987, \$14.95, 313 pp.



Reviewed by Jon Butler

D. MICHAEL QUINN'S thesis that a magical world view structured Joseph Smith's religiosity and early Mormon religious practice inevitably makes Quinn's book controversial. It could hardly be otherwise, given the murderous recent interest in Mormon history in Salt Lake City. But this is not a merely trendy book. It is a major work of scholarship, formidably researched and vigorously argued, and it challenges scholars in a variety of disciplines, not just those in Mormon history. The issues it raises are as important to religious history generally and to American religious history in particular as they are to Mormonism.

Quinn's book is important for three reasons. First, it undermines traditional interpretations of Mormonism's origins and thereby shatters the exceptionalist myth about American and Mormon religion. Second, its choice of evidence opens up major questions about the historian's conceptualization of scriptural texts. Third, Quinn's argument brings both Mormonism and American religious history more tightly within the Western intellectual and religious orbit, meaning the expansive West of Europe, not the narrower confines of Utah.

Quinn's argument is spare and economical. He finds Mormonism rooted in a "magic world

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view" often hostile to orthodox Christianity yet sometimes combined with it in powerful ways, especially in Christianity's popular forms. This "magic worldview" took root in both intellectual and folk sources and showed a distinct preference for a "white," or positive, magic that answered difficult questions, found lost objects, cured disease and prevented death (as first described in Keith Thomas's magisterial *Religion and the Decline of Magic* [New York, 1971], a classic book required for any reader interested in Quinn's argument, pro or con). In Joseph Smith's case, this interest led from treasure seeking to apparitions to golden plates to healing to miracles, finally to Mormonism in its pre-1880 varieties. Nor was Smith alone. Mormons of many backgrounds and views followed Smith in these practices until they were discarded in a modernizing process of sharp, swift effectiveness that occurred after about 1880.

Is Quinn's thesis valid? Previous historians (and anti-Mormon detractors) pursued their arguments about Mormon magic through analogical proofs. Their reasoning went as follows: 1) Smith searched for fortunes using weird objects and devices; 2) these objects and devices looked a great deal like the paraphernalia early modern European occultists used to invoke supernatural aid; 3) therefore, Smith was an occultist or practitioner of magic. Direct evidence about eighteenth- or nineteenth-century magic was hard to come by;

the century of the Enlightenment seemed to furnish few exemplars for Smith to follow. Worse, Smith's activities were themselves poorly documented, often only sloppily so by anti-Mormon propagandists. Smith's behavior sometimes *looked* magical but it was extremely difficult to demonstrate that it was magical.

Quinn's book caps investigations begun some twenty years ago by Mormon and non-Mormon historians who sought to understand, not discredit, Mormon origins. Even as these investigations began, the distinguished Mormon historian Marvin Hill wrote that their evidence about Mormon magic was too abundant and pervasive "to brush aside or ignore." Quinn makes that evidence mountainous. No one has so amply documented the interest of Joseph Smith and other early Mormons in fortune-finding and witchcraft, their possession of seer stones and use of divining rods and healing sticks, and their ownership of daggers and parchments engraved with acknowledged "magical" symbols. The result is a stunning turn from the mere possibility that early Mormons imbibed magic to an overwhelming probability that they did so.

Quinn accomplishes his feat (to paraphrase John Houseman) the old-fashioned way—with evidence. The book is an encyclopedia of American and Mormon occultism from the 1780s through the 1860s, and it culminates in a sixty-plus page bibliography and meticulous index that will allow friend and critic alike to pursue every one of Quinn's arguments and evidences. Moreover, every one of his important proofs comes from Mormon contemporaries who were not bothered or embarrassed by such practices, such as Lucy Mack Smith and Oliver Cowdery. This kind of proof gives the book special power for historians, who, like jurors, thirst for direct rather than indirect manifestations of an alleged and important behavior. Quinn's book accomplishes another aim as well. His prodigious research allows him the luxury of never depending on anti-Mormon agitators to substantiate his points. They become little more than interesting antiquarians and controversialists who sometimes correctly perceived magic in early Mormonism but who never understood its origins, depth, or even its importance.

One sometimes wishes that Quinn had written a more leisurely book, as much for himself as for his readers. He might have felt more free to speculate on some of the broader implications of his findings, such as the issue of intellectual chaos in a new religious movement or the competition to define orthodoxy as a religious movement matures. Still, the obsessive pursuit of every scrap of evidence about

Mormon magic also accounts for the power of the book and even gives it a certain charm. Certainly, no one will mistake its message.

No, Quinn has not settled the question about Smith's occultism. Such questions are never settled, at least not in the way that federal budgets are settled. Historians who still are debating John Locke's influence on the Constitution hardly can be expected to reach quick agreement on an interpretation of Joseph Smith's occultism. Yet we have made the necessary leap. Like Zeezrom healed by Alma, we need no longer be buffeted by doubt that Smith harbored occult or magical notions and that these found sympathetic responses in thousands of followers.

But what kind of response, to an occultism of what meaning? No longer burdened to demonstrate any influence, we will now contest the ground of *what* influence. The question about Smith's occultism—Was Joseph Smith a “magician” and, thereby, a charlatan? (this is not at all the same as asking whether Smith used magic, which is Quinn's concern)—now will fragment into a thousand slipperier questions, each one of which will be as difficult to answer as the original query. What did Smith take from occultists, metallurgists, and alchemists? What did he transform? Which occultism was more important, the magic that descended from early modern European intellectuals like Francis Barrett, Nicholas Culpeper, and John Heydon, or the anonymous occultism which circulated through visual and verbal “folk” traditions? Did single, coherent folk magic and alchemical traditions find homes in early America, or, like Christianity, did conflicts and tensions characterize their internal histories and dynamics? Was the magic important to Mormon origins also important to Mormon expansion and to its development as a major religion? A Mormon history bloodied by the mere suggestion of magic among its founders surely will be further disturbed as scholars now probe the certainty of that practice.

Quinn's expansive view of early Mormon thinking opens additional questions about the canon of religious movements, including Mormon canonical texts. Jan Shipps already has demonstrated that modern Mormonism accords “First Vision” an importance unknown to the first Mormons. Quinn extends this reconstruction of Mormon texts by reexamining the Book of Mormon and the physical artifacts that Smith frequently carried with him. Quinn's techniques are commonplace among European medievalists, none of whom would write religious history by focusing, for

example, on only a few of Thomas Aquinas's works. Texts from many sources, some avowedly “popular,” as well as sculpture, painting, and physical artifacts have long comprised their canon, and Quinn and the medievalists may yet teach American religious historians important lessons about textual diversity in all facets of American religion.

Quinn also tells us something important about the breadth of the Mormon texts. Quinn's subject is Mormonism as well as Joseph Smith, and he quite rightly examined many “texts” produced by many Mormons who “founded” as fully as Joseph Smith did. Puritanism, Presbyterianism, Christian Science, and Scientology all cry out for similar canonical redefinition because historians too often restrict themselves to the most familiar and traditional materials, thereby missing movers as much as movements. In taking this expansive view of the canon, Quinn has raised an important question: are a movement's texts comprised of only a few sources taken from a few persons, or are they defined by many sources culled from many adherents? The answer defines the subject and its history simultaneously: whose text, whose scripture, whose religion. In the case of Mormonism, only by adopting the broadest conceptualization of “text” can we understand its tumultuous origins and take seriously the extraordinary proselytizing that established Mormonism as the most important religious tradition born (but not conceived) in the antebellum American spiritual hothouse.

Finally, Quinn's argument about magic and Mormonism demonstrates that we can no longer consider Mormonism the uniquely American phenomenon we once believed or

hoped it was. Quinn's Mormons are not nearly so idiosyncratic or unique as historians might have dreamed. They fit with surprising ease into intellectual and spiritual traditions relatively common in early modern Europe. An interpretation that stresses Mormonism's links to its surrounding cultures is not surprising, of course. David Davis long ago uncovered Mormonism's Puritan roots; Gordon Wood has written about its evangelical origins; Jan Shipps has reminded us of its developmental complexities. Now, Quinn has uncovered new cultural matrixes important to shaping Mormon origins, from seventeenth-century Hermeticists to Emanuel Swedenborg to early nineteenth-century popularizers of traditional folk wisdom to Christianity, of course, in both learned and popular varieties. No one who has read Quinn's book and likes it could any longer describe Mormonism as exemplifying the naive tradition in American culture. This realization might also encourage the same reader to rethink stereotypes about more general American-European cultural and religious separation, which guide American historical scholarship more fully now than they did thirty years ago.

In the end, Quinn's book does what good books always do. In telling us about Mormonism's magical heritage, its multiple “texts,” and its churning European intellectual and cultural roots, it tells us about Mormonism's intricacies and, especially, its vast, often rambunctious complexities. These complexities always have distinguished Mormon religiosity. Increasingly, they distinguish its history. Quinn's book reflects that growing maturity. It would be a shame for both American and Mormon religious history if complexity, which always reflects maturity, were banished in favor of alluring, but always false, simplicity.

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