
MORMONISM: WITHOUT PARALLEL, OR PART OF A CONTEXT?

By D. Michael Quinn

THE TWO PRECEDING reviews of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* serve to demonstrate a fundamental problem that arises any time scholars discuss Mormonism. The reviews do not state their central assumptions, which are diametrically opposed.

Butler as a Mormon-outsider assumes that Mormonism reflects or responds to its immediate environment and distant heritage in various ways, and that social environment and human heritage are part of understanding Mormonism. In the view of most academics, such assumptions are necessary for a rational approach to any development in human experience.

Ricks and Peterson as Mormon-insiders reflect a common Latter-day Saint insistence on seeing Mormonism as unique and without any parallel beyond those that are officially authorized by Mormon theology or by LDS leaders. Although rarely stated explicitly, this claim to a divine uniqueness without secular parallels has become a virtual proposition of faith among many Mormons. Thus there is often discomfort or suspicion when a Mormon-outsider or insider proposes to discuss Mormonism "in context."

At the extreme, this view can foreclose any real communication between Mormons of this view and anyone else, Mormon or non Mormon. Even a study of Mormon history that demonstrates the author's expressed intentions of fairness, sympathy, empathy, academic neutrality, or even faith will often appear as "anti Mormon," "negative," or "non-faith-promoting" to those Latter day Saint leaders and members who believe that Mormonism has no context except God and his prophets.

But if Mormons, particularly LDS academics, are going to have any reciprocal discourse with others about Mormonism, three ground rules seem necessary. First, as much as possible, the vocabulary should communicate the same meaning to every participant, and should use sparingly terms with specialized Mormon definitions. Second, Mormons should not expect to escape the requirements of a nonpartisan use

of the same words to describe phenomena that have the same or very similar outward appearance, particularly when Mormons are perfectly willing to allow such terms to be applied to such phenomena in diverse circumstances outside Mormonism. Third, Mormons and non-Mormons alike should agree that observing the first two ground rules does not amount to a position of belief or unbelief.

Butler's review follows the above guidelines, but the Ricks Peterson review does not seem to. The latter argues that the term "magic" is useless and should be discarded in favor of "ritual," or "religion," or "popular religion," or "folk religion." A major problem with that proposal is that "magic" is a sub-category of all the terms Ricks and Peterson advocate. "Magic" can communicate specific meaning even if that meaning must be refined carefully, but "ritual" could be anything from spirit incantation to baptism to the Boy Scout handshake to shaving the face daily. As far as my research indicates, every culture has concepts of both magic and religion, even if they overlap or even if the concepts are used polemically within the culture. According to the Ricks-Peterson view, the British Museum would benefit by retitling its massive collection of "Magic Manuscripts" as "Ritual Manuscripts" or "Religious Manuscripts." General terms always have problems, but those difficulties cannot be solved by substituting terms of even broader application.

The Ricks-Peterson review seems to be arguing without any substantiation for a unique dimension to early Mormon use of seer stones, divining rods, amulets, astrological guides, healing objects, house charms against evil spirits, and parchments inscribed with symbols from previously published handbooks of magic (or would Ricks and Peterson call them handbooks of religion?). The Ricks Peterson review assumes that these early Mormon activities bore no real relationship as phenomena to identical practices throughout early America and even by some of Joseph Smith's neighbors. In other words, since Joseph Smith did it, the activity was by definition not magic, or folk

magic. Ricks and Peterson do not seem to be seriously advocating the abandonment of "magic" as a term to describe the activities of Pharaoh's court, or of Simon Magus, or of John Dee. Nor do they seem to object to the standard use of the term "folk magic" to describe treasure digging ceremonies by other early Americans who did not happen to be numbered among Joseph Smith's family and other Mormon leaders. This effort at redefinition seems simply to originate in the demand to see manifestations of Mormonism and its leaders as beyond any comparative categories. For Joseph Smith and others in America and throughout the world, identifiably magic objects and activities have been part of their religious quest, but that fact does not remove the objects and activities from the category of the magical, nor does it lessen the religiosity and divinity of the quest.

Moving beyond those general observations about the two reviews, I have a couple of corrections for each. Ricks and Peterson have misread the book in a number of respects. For example, they complain, "In a single footnote paragraph ([p.] 131) at least a half dozen 'occult' parallels are cited to the name Moroni." To the contrary, that footnote begins with Hugh Nibley in citing non occultic parallels to the name Moroni, to which another reader has added that Moroni was the capital on the island of Grande Comore. Even though my book emphasized occult-magic parallels, it presented differing evidence and viewpoints. Ricks and Peterson also indicate that I tried to establish a link between the Vermont "Wood Scrape" in 1802 and treasure-digging in Palmyra in the 1820s based on distant cousin relationships. On the contrary, I began the discussion of various familial links by observing that the Palmyra newspapers of 1819 and 1824 verify the presence of a Justus Winchell in Palmyra, corroborating the claims of Vermont residents (long disputed by Mormon apologists) that Winchell of the Vermont Wood Scrape later associated with the Smith family in treasure digging at Palmyra.

Butler rightly points out evidences I present that Joseph Smith and other early Mormons engaged in folk magic activities and used magic objects, but he does not sufficiently acknowledge my view that the Book of Mormon and Mormonism (which I personally regard as God-given) transcend environmental explanations. Nothing touched by humans can avoid the human context, and nothing touched by God can avoid the transcendent. The sacred history of Judaism, early Christianity, and Mormonism comprise both the human and the transcendent.