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Early Mormonism and the Magic World View by D. Michael Quinn

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QUINN, D. MICHAEL. *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987. xxii; 228 pp.; 94 figures. \$14.95.

Reviewed by William A. Wilson, professor of English at Brigham Young University.

Because I know the circumstances surrounding the establishment of Mormonism only in a general way, I shall leave to the professional historian the task of commenting on those circumstances as they are presented by D. Michael Quinn in *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*. In what follows, I shall discuss the book from the point of view of the general reader for whom Quinn says he intended the work and from the point of view of my own discipline, folklore.

After listening to much heated debate generated by Quinn's book and after reading the work twice (once fast for general impressions and a second time line upon line, precept upon precept), I would like to make two points at the outset. First, Quinn genuinely tries to view the Restoration through the eyes of those who brought it about. He does not, as some have suggested, attempt to ridicule Church founders or belittle their achievements. He clearly believes that these founders could have been followers of magic and at the same time righteous men capable of establishing the kingdom of God. These were not mutually exclusive endeavors. Second, Quinn does not believe that the magic practiced by Joseph Smith and his contemporaries was something evil or sinister. Indeed, one wonders at times if Quinn has not accepted what he calls "the magic world view" himself, believing that magical practices, as followers of the occult claim, were revealed to Adam by God in the beginning and that "the restoration of all things" included reestablishing these practices. Quinn's discussion of the restoration of the temple endowment (184–90) could certainly lead one to that view, just as his treatment of magic in general led Sterling McMurrin to comment that Quinn "seems to be remarkably generous in his attitude toward such things [magical practices], almost as if, after all, they are really God's way of dealing with the masses, or even with their prophets."¹

What all this means is that those who disagree with Quinn, as I do, should base that disagreement not on the issue of Quinn's faith, but on the merits of his arguments. I believe that Quinn is often wrong, but I also believe he has the right to be wrong without having his integrity called into question.

I may never have read a book more heavily documented than is *Early Mormonism*. I am much impressed, and sometimes awed, by Quinn's command of magical sources from the 1500s to the present, but it is easy to get lost in the maze of details with which Quinn loads his pages. And I am frankly annoyed by his extensive in-text references. It may be necessary to give eighteen citations (41) to prove

that Joseph Smith used a particular seer stone in treasure digging, but I am ready to believe that Sally Chase was a notable Palmyra seer who used a greenish-colored stone by the time I get half way through the ten references Quinn cites to establish this fact (38). If such lengthy documentation is necessary, then, to help readers more easily find their way from the end of one sentence to the beginning of another, Quinn should return to the old system of footnotes or end notes.

Further, Quinn's references may sometimes mislead rather than guide the reader. It is not just extensive documentation that constitutes proof but the way one uses that documentation. As I read the first chapters of *Early Mormonism*, I am persuaded that Joseph Smith did indeed dig for treasure and that he used seer stones and divining rods to aid him in the search. I am also convinced that the detailed explanations Quinn gives for the magic parchments in the possession of Hyrum Smith are accurate—though I am equally convinced that to know and understand these complicated explanations, Smith family members would have needed a sophisticated knowledge of the occult to match Quinn's own.

As I move to other parts of the book, I find much to tease my imagination and to suggest directions for future research, but I remain unconvinced by the bulk of the argument—primarily because it rests on possible connections that are suggested but seldom proved and on parallel evidence that often lies beyond proof, and because Quinn argues from a concept of folklore that is both antiquated and misleading.

Throughout *Early Mormonism*, Quinn attempts to picture the cultural milieu that produced the Smiths and to explain them according to their culture as *typical* representatives of the way of life that nurtured them. He writes, for example: "America from the late 1700s to the early 1820s provided the cultural environment that would encourage a village family like the Smiths to have . . . magic parchments" (80). This is a perfectly legitimate approach if we are simply trying to discover what a typical or statistically average person of a given time might have been like. Following this approach, Quinn fills his book with statements such as "it may be," "it is reasonable to expect," "evidently," "it may have been," "it could be," "it is possible," "possibly," "probably."

But too much rides on Joseph Smith's actions to reduce them to what might have been or what could have been. We need to know not what was *possible* but what *was*—and sometimes silence in the absence of convincing evidence is better than speculation. Joseph Smith could have been influenced by magical practices as he established the Church and could have incorporated some of those practices into his new theological system. But was he, and did he? Quinn's answers to those questions are based partly on associational evidence, on possible connections. About 1800, people in Vermont, not far from the Smith family, began using divining rods for revelatory purposes (30–33); from this we

are to infer that the Smiths began doing the same. References to guardian angels appeared on the magic parchments in the possession of the Smiths; in a talk he gave in 1844, Joseph Smith referred to “my guardian angel” (100); from this we are to infer that the reference in the talk was based on the parchment. The Smith family had in its possession a silver dagger with which magic circles could be drawn (80); from this we are to infer that the family drew such circles. Influential books on the occult—Scot’s *Discovery of Witchcraft*, Agrippa’s *Occult Philosophy*, and Barrett’s *The Magus*—“were part of a large bookstore inventory near Palmyra”; from this we are to infer that “the availability of these European occult works near Palmyra would account for the citations from these texts in the Smith family’s magic parchments” (80).

This last technique occurs again and again in the book. Quinn will recount an occult practice or belief—that Cain headed a robber band committed to plundering, for example (165)—and then will point out that a book detailing this belief was advertised in a local paper, or was in a local bookstore or library, and thus, either directly or indirectly through his contemporaries, was available to Joseph Smith as he developed the concept of the Gadianton Robbers. But in no instance does Quinn clearly establish that an idea passed from a particular book into the head of Joseph Smith. The actual connection is never made. Thus much of the argument is built on non sequiturs. B is assumed to result from A because it follows A. These possible connections would be useful to supplement arguments built on a more solid foundation, but when they become the foundation, then the conclusions must be suspect. Unsupported by demonstrable evidence, they lead to a world in which nothing occurs by chance, free from magical intent: Joseph Smith’s conceiving children (64), invoking the spirit of Moroni (118–22), returning to the Hill Cumorah on the same day each year (133–34), choosing the appropriate number of Book of Mormon witnesses (152), or establishing offices in the priesthood (180–82).

Quinn’s parallel evidence—that is, explaining actions, practices, and beliefs in Joseph Smith’s life by reference to actions, practices, and beliefs in the occult world—is equally troubling. Using such evidence, Quinn can discuss Joseph Smith’s experience with the angel Moroni, compare it with occult practices, and then conclude: “For those who shared a magic world view, the times and seasons of Smith’s 1823 experience would have directly applied to instructions for spirit incantation by Reginald Scot, H. C. Agrippa, Erra Pater, Ebenezer Sibly, and other occult works in frequent circulation in early America” (119). Some of Quinn’s parallel evidence is convincing—relating Pearl of Great Price statements about Enoch to statements in Richard Laurence’s 1821 *The Book of Enoch the Prophet, An Apocryphal Production*, for example;

some of it pushes credulity to the limits—relating lineage in the priesthood to lineage in bearers of astrological knowledge; but none of it is provable—or, for that matter, disprovable. And that's the problem. In spite of the cautions Quinn establishes for the use of parallel evidence, his own magical reference-seeking seems at times to be something of a game in which Quinn finds occult background for everything: the names of Book of Mormon prophets (154–57), Book of Mormon brass plates (159), secret combinations (159–65), the concept of spiritual and physical creations (169–70), three degrees of glory (173–75), proxy baptism (181), and the temple endowment (184–90).

I don't mean to be glib. Quinn is deadly serious about his conclusions and deserves to be taken seriously. Once again, the problem is not that all of the parallels are implausible—some of them make good sense—but that instead of using them to bolster an argument based on some provable facts, he uses them as his primary argument. In this, he reminds me a little of the nineteenth-century nature mythologists who, through comparative philology, reduced the names of folktale and myth heroes to metaphors for natural phenomena. Just as they found a nature myth behind every culture hero, so Quinn tends to find magic or the occult behind major events in the establishment of Mormonism. Reductionist approaches are intriguing—but too easy.

From my perspective, the main problem with *Early Mormonism*, and one from which other problems grow, is that Quinn operates from a concept of folklore that few contemporary folklorists would find credible. The problem begins with definitions, or perhaps with the lack of them. In his introductory chapter, Quinn does define what he means by magic, or by “the magic world view” (x–xii), but though he uses the term “folk magic” again and again throughout the book he never tells us what it means. Are we to assume that it is the same thing as magic? If so, why the introductory word “folk”? If not, then what is the difference? Other terms also need careful definition because their meaning is much more elusive than one would think: the term “folk” itself, “folk religion,” “folk belief,” “folk believers,” and even, heaven forbid, “folk apostle.”

Despite these missing definitions, it is not difficult to infer from *Early Mormonism* a definition of “folk” that folklorists have given up long ago—a definition unfortunately shared by some other Mormon historians.² No one, of course, has a monopoly on a term, but one would expect the careful scholar Quinn usually is to pay at least some heed to what contemporary professional folklorists say about his subject. Nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century folklorists and ethnologists believed that the “folk” were unsophisticated, unlettered, country people, little touched by the refining influences of civilization and supposedly sharing a worldview, or psychic unity, with people like themselves—a worldview that stretched relatively unchanged across

cultural boundaries and from age to age, from the ancient Egyptians to the present. As a scientific worldview gradually replaced the older magical perspective, the people were divided into two groups: the educated, or cultivated, who abandoned old ways for more rationalistic perspectives; and the “folk,” who adhered to the old ways and kept alive the traditional learning of the centuries. What this meant, of course, was that with the spread of education and scientific rationalism, folklore would eventually disappear.

These ideas occur frequently in Quinn. In the magic worldview he finds “a timelessness unifying occult manifestations” (xx), “a certain unity of perspective” (xix) that existed in the outlook of Joseph Smith and in books “written hundreds of years before” his birth (xviii) and resulted in close parallels in certain of Joseph’s teachings, translations, and revelations to “esoteric, occult, and magic traditions extending to the ancient world” (226; also xix). And he points out that among the common folk in Joseph Smith’s America there existed an “indifference to the priorities of the educated elite” (11), an indifference that led to a preoccupation with such practices as folk medicine and folk magic “in rural areas and among people with limited education” (21; for other expressions of this view, see also 14, 18, 20, 22, 23, 27, 50, 76, 80, 81). Given this “unity of perspective” in the magic worldview, the questions of parallels becomes easy. One can discuss an action of Joseph Smith, compare it with a practice of someone else far removed from Joseph in time and space, and then explain Joseph’s action in terms of the other practice. That was what James Frazer did in *The Golden Bough*, as he cataloged similar practices from around the world and then, ignoring historical and cultural contexts, argued that similar practices had similar meanings. It was also what caused Frazer to fall out of favor with contemporary ethnologists.

In the main, this is Quinn’s approach—an approach he makes clear when he explains that his aim is to present “the events of early Mormonism from the astrological and magical perspectives that are explicit in these magic artifacts, since the previously discussed subjects of treasure digging, seer stones, and divining rods, as well as the magic artifacts themselves, all involve a certain world view,” and, again, to examine “in detail each artifact attributed to the Joseph Smith family and to discuss the textual derivation and *normative meaning* of those artifacts within the magic world view” (54, emphasis added). Following this approach, Quinn relates the silver divining cup of the Old Testament Joseph with similar divining cups from around the world (2–3), and he relates Joseph Smith’s use of a seer stone to similar practices in Elizabethan England (36–37).

Contemporary folklorists now understand that there is no monolithic, unchanging group of people called the “folk”; there are

instead many “folks”—that is, many folk groups (or clusters of people with similar interests and identities), constantly changing and constantly generating or reshaping folklore as they respond to the circumstances of their environments. From this point of view, Joseph Smith would no more have been a member of “the folk” than would a sophisticated city-dweller who tried to discredit him; both would have had their folklore generated in response to the circumstances of their own environments. (Students in my classes, for example, have collected folklore with equal success from both farmers and medical doctors.) Further, Joseph Smith’s rural New England society would not have shared a common worldview with all other rural societies; instead it would have held to a worldview resulting from its own historical development. And still further, even in Joseph’s rural New England, sharp differences between people would have occurred (and Quinn notes some of these)—that is, there would have been no all-inclusive cultural homogeneity.

If there is no monolithic “folk,” neither can there be a monolithic magic worldview. At best, there can be only a variety of worldviews. What this means is that similar practices can have different meanings and that a researcher cannot explain one practice in terms of another until he has set each one in its proper historical and cultural background and has inferred meaning from context.³ One cannot, as Quinn seems to, assume that because Joseph Smith wore an amulet he did so for the same reasons other people in other contexts have worn amulets (65ff.). Where’s the proof?

Quinn is aware of the close interplay between oral and written sources, each of which draws on the other. But, though closely related, oral and written traditions are not the same. Quinn states: “Oral tradition is fundamental to folk magic, but as Keith Thomas noted, ‘For some kinds of popular magic[,] books were essential. . . . The most obvious was the conjuring of spirits.’ ” (79). The key word in Thomas’s statement is “popular.” What Quinn again and again traces Joseph Smith’s actions back to is not a folk culture but a popular culture, a media culture, a book culture. Though material contained in this book culture can and does change as it is transferred from book to book, it still remains comparatively constant in form. The one constant about folk culture, on the other hand, is that it is ever changing; it is subtracted from, added to, and created anew in every new performance or ritual enactment, as the practitioner adapts traditional knowledge to the demands of the social and physical environment. Indeed, it is these changes, or variations, that will tell us what is going on in the cultural life of a people.

What this means is that if Joseph Smith performed actions which are tightly parallel, as Quinn suggests, to practices outlined in books printed two or three centuries before his birth, he would have had to learn these practices rather directly from written sources. In the folk tradition

they simply would not have continued in such static form. This places an added burden on Quinn to show that Joseph did indeed learn the practices from the sources cited. For example, Quinn convincingly demonstrates that the intricate symbolism and designs contained in the Smiths' magic parchments derive from Ebenezer Sibly's *A New and Complete Illustration of the Occult Sciences* (1784) and from Reginald Scot's 1665 edition of *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (97ff.). He then states: "Although still leaving unanswered the question of who inscribed the lamens, a probable explanation is that due to the previously described availability of Reginald Scot's works in early America (chap. 1), someone in the Smith family or acquaintance used both the 1665 edition of Scot and the 1784 or more recent edition of Sibly to construct the . . . characters on the three magic parchments" (104). If we cannot be sure who inscribed the parchments, how then can we be sure that the Smiths fully understood all the symbolism that Quinn, in painstaking detail, spends many pages describing? More important, how can we be sure that Joseph Smith would have known and understood the myriad of symbolic and ritual details in the Scot and Sibly publications that the parchments are based on—details that supposedly explain a number of later actions and events in his life: initiating a meeting with Moroni (118–19); meeting Moroni at a particular time (119); invoking Moroni's spirit (120); associating a salamander (usually thought of as magical) with Moroni (132); determining that the hereafter is comprised of different degrees of glory (173). Again, these are highly evocative and intriguing parallels, but the proof is lacking. One thing is clear—they cannot be attributed to an enduring folk magic that has come down unchanged from Scot and Sibly to Joseph Smith.

Finally, throughout much of *Early Mormonism* Quinn stresses the difference between the magic worldview of Joseph Smith's America and the more rational, scientific view of our twentieth-century world. He points out that among Mormons some old folk practices still persist and probably always will, but he also argues that with increasing education, those who subscribe to the magic worldview will become fewer and fewer.⁴ Had Quinn paid any serious heed to contemporary folklore and to contemporary folklore scholarship, he might have had some difficulty defending that point of view. (Quinn has not entirely avoided folklore sources, but with a few exceptions the works he cites come either from scholars writing from older points of view or from badly outdated publications.)

Folklorists now understand that folklore has come into being not just in the distant past but in all ages. Just as people in earlier eras generated and transmitted folklore in response to the circumstances of their lives, so too people in the present create and pass along folklore as they react to the strains and stresses, the joys and the sorrows of their

lives. We also understand that folklore belongs not just to rural, unsophisticated, and unlettered individuals but to all people. All of us, to answer an earlier question, are the “folk.” We generate, transmit, and enjoy folklore because these acts are imperatives of our human existence—that is, we tell stories, recite proverbs, and participate in rituals because these are the ways we have as human beings of dealing with basic and recurring human problems. And one of the problems that will ever be with us is the difficulty of coming to grips with anxiety and uncertainty—forces that all our science will never completely eliminate. In their excellent *Water Witching U.S.A.* (1959), Harvard professors Evon Z. Vogt and Ray Hyman cite a researcher who thirty years earlier summed up the older view of magic as a relic of a prescientific age:

The magical mind, rather than the scientific attitude, tends to prevail in rural America. . . . Expressions of magical mindedness are seen in numerous superstitious beliefs and practices in regard to harvesting and planting. . . . With much prestige already established for this method, there is every reason to think that fairly rapid headway will be made in the immediate future. To the degree such progress is made, the magical mindedness will disappear.⁵

Vogt and Hyman then point out that, in spite of the continued growth of education and the advance of science, this prediction has not come true, that, on the contrary, “water witching has continued to flourish.”⁶ Then, after showing how water witching can give practitioners a feeling of control over an uncertain world, they cite a contemporary study that takes a functionalist rather than survivalist point of view:

Magical beliefs are more likely to be used in decision-making situations where a high degree of risk and uncertainty are involved. Farmers who relied upon agricultural magic were more resistant and less likely to adopt new technological farming practices. Many respondents, however, saw no ideological conflict between magical beliefs and science.⁷

This is precisely the point made by Wayland Hand, whom Quinn does cite, as he explains the persistence of magical folklore in Utah and elsewhere: “Folk beliefs and superstitions arise naturally out of situations of hazard and doom. . . . Physical hazard is bad enough; far worse, however, are pursuits fraught with psychological hazard such as the stage, stock market operations, gambling, and sports.”⁸

In certain desperate and trying circumstances, in both rural and urban life, many of us still turn to cultural means outside ourselves to save the day. That is particularly true of religious people. Obviously, the twentieth-century Mormon world is not the nineteenth-century world of Joseph Smith and his contemporaries, but so long as present-day Mormons continue to believe, as did their predecessors, that through prayer and ritual they can manipulate supernatural powers to their

advantage, much will remain constant. The precise forms may change and the meaning of each ritual enactment will have to be inferred from its own context, but, as rich stores of material in university folklore archives already testify, the ends remain essentially the same. Consequently, though supernatural experiences are not the sum of their religious values, many Mormons today still divine the future, seek hidden treasure, use home remedies, tell ghost stories, experience dreams and visions, invoke angels and spirits, exorcise devils, seek information from the spirits of the dead, heal the sick through ceremonial means, and use talismans to ward off evil. As Sterling McMurrin suggests, our own activities can become "so commonplace and habitual" that we forget to pay them proper heed when we compare them to practices in the past.⁹

Quinn's own statement is, perhaps, the best evidence I can marshal in support of this point of view. He states: "I believe in Gods, angels, spirits, and devils, and that they have communicated with humankind. In Mormon terms, I have a personal 'testimony' of Jesus as my Savior, of Joseph Smith, Jr., as a prophet, of the Book of Mormon as the word of God, and of the LDS church as a divinely established organization through which men and women can obtain essential priesthood ordinances of eternal consequence" (xx). So long as rational individuals like Quinn continue to hold that view, as they have held it in the past, what I would prefer to call a "Mormon worldview" will, I trust, not soon disappear.

NOTES

¹Sterling M. McMurrin, Review of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, by D. Michael Quinn, *Utah Historical Quarterly* 56 (1988): 200.

²See, for example, Ronald W. Walker, "The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting," *Brigham Young University Studies* 24 (Fall 1984): 429-59.

³See Alan Taylor, "Rediscovering the Context of Joseph Smith's Treasure Seeking," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19 (Winter 1986): 18-28; particularly 20.

⁴See chap. 7; for a similar view see Walker, "The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting."

⁵Cited in Evon A. Vogt and Ray Hyman, *Water Witching U.S.A.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 191.

⁶*Ibid.*, 191-92.

⁷*Ibid.*, 211.

⁸Wayland D. Hand, "Magic and the Supernatural in Utah Folklore," *Dialogue* 16 (Winter 1983): 53.

⁹McMurrin, Review of *Early Mormonism*, 199.