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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 Benson Whittle (excerpted from a longer essay).

Magic is real; it works. Readers of Michael Quinn's new book must be prepared to accept this or never understand the argument. In the absence of direct experience, or of a scientific appreciation of magic, a kind of imaginative leap is probably advisable. We would need to walk into hilly, heavily wooded country interspersed with fields and roads, with head and heart wide open, trying in a most receptive way to realize that everything seen is materially connected to things invisible, and by these latter intermediaries to each other. It would be necessary to befriend and be befriended by witches, soothsayers, and magi and to take them seriously as friends and as divines. In so doing we might get glimpses of Joseph Smith, the young treasure-seer, his face buried in a hat which he holds upside-down in his hands, a stone in the bottom of it. We accept his seership, which eventually yields a treasure. We see the Smiths take up the hearthstones in their living room, enabling Joseph to conceal his find there. We watch as one disgruntled treasure-hunting colleague, Alva Beaman, demands to see or share the trove: taking up his divining rod, the resolute rustic promptly "witches" the whereabouts of the "golden plates." Everyone present shares something that Michael Quinn calls "the magic world view." All know that magic is real.

Any approach to Quinn's book by a Mormon of any hue must be partly concerned with reconciling the vast differences of belief between now and when magic was going strong among our forebears—the more so as we have moved from bizarre folk marginality to full partnership in technocratic neo-industrialism in one tenth the time between Archimedes and Einstein. Quinn, the Church, and the demagicalized worldview will survive the furor over magic in Mormonism, but what about magic itself? Will we fall for another revisionist history just because the picture of Joseph Smith, with hat and stone, cannot fit in with word-processors and remote-control garage door openers, or with our late and refined view of what a true prophet may be? And what of our poor little salamander? Accommodated by the status quo as soon as it became necessary to deal with that forged letter of Martin Harris, is he now to be thanklessly cast off?

Magic is something very big, with many centuries behind it. Science, magic, and worship once walked hand in hand. Magic deserves defending because it belongs to a worldview that has given long service while yielding both modern science and modern religion. In confronting magic, Michael Quinn has recreated a birth of Mormonism in which

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credulity, identified by Sir Richard Burton—with impeachable irony—as an important organ of the human brain, is restored to its true place. In this he seems to have the backing of Richard L. Bushman, Ronald W. Walker and Klaus J. Hansen, among others. It is possible too, according to Quinn, that the salamander may have a place in it.

Quinn's is a serious, scholarly work, aspiring to, and surprisingly often achieving, objectivity. The author, a Mormon of religious convictions, has attempted to assemble, relate, and analyze available data concerning attitudes towards, and the practice of magic (more generally, "the occult") among the founders of the faith and its early adherents. He has also made a thorough study of postmedieval magic texts, especially of those that were in print in English during the genesis of the new religion, and has taken account of important antecedents to these. Thus, by the establishment of connections, both direct and thematic, it has been possible, through scientific and extrabiblical means, to broaden our view of the cultural environment from which Mormonism sprang and to situate the religion of the Latter-day Saints, to some extent, in a nonparochial, non-Protestant tradition stretching back through Reformation Europe and the Middle Ages to late antiquity and beyond. The latter probably was not a leading aim of the author; certainly it is only one of the results. In fact it is not always easy to see what case he is making. But the book, on balance, deserves our thanks, praise, and attention.

The book lives up to its title. Quinn erects the framework of magical lore—largely literary—by which alone at this late hour Joseph Smith's activities as magus may be interpreted. He then methodically fits the known historical events of early Mormonism into this framework, with minor additions and major elaborations. However, a problem in this approach is the presence of quite a lot of undigested material. Often the author seems simply to be taking every opportunity to glue scraps of information (not always evidence) to the bones of his case whether or not they stick, and sometimes whether or not they are relevant.

The largest single difficulty is that there is virtually no conclusive proof that Joseph Smith paid inordinate attention to astrology, ever used any magic parchments, or practiced spirit conjuration. Detractors, therefore, will find much scope for attempted refutation, and the burden of proof must fall upon the author. As I see it, however, the case proceeds from suggestion to plausibility to likelihood, and finally, on the whole, convinces. I believe that in time we shall be forced to contemplate what Howe called "the juggling [conjuring] arts of Smith."¹

It is reassuring to surmise that the old story of a world steadily prepared for "the Restoration" by a relentless succession of more or less unwitting Protestants and proto-Protestants from Wycliffe to

Jonathan Edwards has been junked by serious historians. Also, it is nice not to be hearing of the “burnt-over district.” Quinn’s aim may not be to rewrite the early history of Mormonism, so much as to assemble, as it were, under one roof, all the data old and new and freshly sifted, relating to magic, money-digging, and astrology, and at least to make a case for the thorough immersion of the Smiths in magic. Quinn seems justified in having decided to publish his findings now, rather than await, possibly forever, the emergence of conclusive data to unite and fully illuminate the strange and often obscure beginnings of Mormonism. His inconclusive history should be regarded as an indispensable step in the dialectical process through which many Mormons are now gaining important self-knowledge.

Chapter 1, “Early America’s Religio-Magical Heritage,” begins with the explanation that the study of the occult in America—that is, as an academic subject—has begun only recently, partly because magic is a secret ancient tradition. Quinn discusses the occurrence of magic in the Bible, an appropriate effort in view of Mormonism’s claims to replicate the religion of both Testaments. The author alleges magic in Judaism on the basis, for example, of a zodiac built into the floor of an ancient synagogue. Throughout the work, Quinn erroneously considers astrology a branch of magic instead of a separate, archaic science, once the astronomy of its day. Nevertheless, astrology is serviceable as an ally of ceremonial or astral magic.

It is more difficult and controversial to ascertain the position of magic in the New Testament than in the Old. Many have rallied to both sides of this question, but the implication one draws from Quinn’s examination of the controversy is that it is political factors, mostly prevailing prejudices against magic, that keep Our Lord from being considered a magician. Other than noting magic in medieval Christendom, Quinn says little of it. All pre-Christian peoples of Europe practiced magic, which was eventually marginalized but not eradicated. Spellbinding was of particular importance among northwest Europeans, as were transformations—for example, shape-shifting, such as alleged in the metamorphosis from salamander to Angel Moroni. In addition, alchemy infiltrated Western Europe from North Africa beginning in the tenth century. Magicians on bad terms with the Church were often persecuted as sorcerers, but there is increasing support for the view that the countryside of Western Europe was effectively Christianized only in the wake of the Reformation. And by that time, magic, astrology, and Hermetic science were well established among even the upper classes of Italy. Certainly much scope remained for the practice of the “Old Religion” during most of recorded history. Quinn does show that the occult persisted among all classes, in America as well as in Europe, in spite of clerical opposition. Thus, until the end

of the seventeenth century learned men such as Bacon, Kepler, Locke, and Newton were often students of alchemy or astrology.

This troublesome context of early Mormonism, which from our twentieth-century vantage point seems so perplexing, had a rationale sufficiently convincing to sway English aristocrats, Protestant clergymen, and devout men of Groton, Massachusetts. Quinn notes that Vermont, when Joseph Smith was a boy residing there, was “something of a treasure-digging mecca” (22). The author here is not trying to make treasure-digging look respectable, but rather understandable. Even so, one begins very early to discern an apologetic stance in this work, but with a peculiar twist: the author is not defending the faith to the infidel; instead, he is defending the history of a heretical prophet-founder, and his associates, to his own coreligionists, so that they may not be ashamed of their origins to the point of falsifying their history.

The second chapter deals particularly with treasure-digging, divining rods, and seer stones. Quinn, who regards treasure-seeking as an acceptable aspect of “folk religion,” holds that Joseph peeped—and to a lesser extent dug—from 1819-20 to 1827. He cites a digging experience that occurred after the recovery of the golden plates. Besides establishing the extent to which some early brethren believed in the reality of supernatural treasure-enchancement, the incident tells us that the Book of Mormon was not regarded as the “only true treasure,” to which all previous divining and digging had been mere preparation. Slim but direct evidence connects Joseph Smith, Sr., and the father of Oliver Cowdery to a Christian “Fraternity of Rodsmen” in Vermont. Quinn argues for the right to quote from “hostile” sources and discriminately uses Howe’s *Mormonism Unveiled*, without which we would have a less interesting history.

In chapters 3 and 4, Quinn’s case begins to emerge. Some readers will find it endearing, as well as illuminating, to be able now to imagine the Smith family in the 1820s as, among other things, a small circle of poor rural occultists living as much as possible for the things of the Spirit while dreaming of prosperity, digging for buried treasure, and trying to get a little income from some of their favorite interests.

The third chapter treats ritual magic, astrology, and talismans, especially a number of relics of the Smith family. From the standpoint of calculating his “nativity,” casting his horoscope, or “doing his chart” (natal), Joseph’s most significant planet, Quinn argues, was not Saturn, which rules Capricorn (his “sun sign”), but rather Jupiter, which governed the year of his birth and the first decan (ten degree arc) of Capricorn. Accordingly, his physical appearance was that of one ruled by Jupiter. Somewhat oddly, Quinn then argues that Joseph’s constitution conformed to Capricorn (“under Jupiter’s governing influence” [63])

right down to the bone operation with consequent limp and the slight whistling sound he made in speaking.

There are several problems here. It is at first hard to ascertain what Quinn is trying to prove, but something like the following eventually emerges. Factors in Joseph's nativity, when combined with his Jupiterian appearance, might incline him to think himself governed by Jupiter. If the Prophet demonstrably had grounds for thinking himself governed by Jupiter, then this might explain and confirm Quinn's interpretations (for example, of Joseph's talisman and cane) and strengthen a major segment of his case. Allowing the above, there persists the illogicality of attributing physical appearance to the influence of Jupiter and, in the same individual, bodily infirmities to Capricorn, ruled by Saturn.

What matters, in any event, is what Joseph Smith thought. I see no reason why he would have needed to think himself fully governed by Jupiter due to his nativity, in order that the talismans, his cane, and the births of his children be explained. He only needed to wish it. If that were the case, then Quinn's position is even more engaging, for Joseph might be thought to have chosen Jupiter as an ideal and a protector, even as kind of patron saint. The Prophet might have practiced what Frances Yates has called "astral magic," or

a way of escaping from astrological determinism by gaining power over the stars, guiding their influences in the direction which the operator desires. Or, in the religious sense, it is a way of salvation, of escape from material fortune and destiny, or of obtaining insight into the divine.²

Quinn makes a good case for the possible employment in magic of the Prophet's Jupiter talisman, which by all accounts he did wear. The case is less convincing for another silver piece formerly belonging to Joseph. This piece *could* be used as a talisman, *could* be regarded as a symbol of Venus, *could* fit into "the magic world view," as could much else. But the residual effect of the argument is an impression that the case itself is being mustered to endow the proof with meaning, rather than the other way around. Such instances, in which the author makes his case suspect by revealing the outer edges of the body of evidence essential to its establishment, cause us to reflect that, stripped of speculations and questionable connections, this book might be a rather slenderer volume.

According to Quinn, all ascertainable wedding dates of Joseph Smith, Jr. and Sr., have astrological correlations. A problem here is that three different methods of reckoning favorable days are offered. Joseph Smith, we are told, resorted to all of them. So diverse are astrological orientations that just about any choice of a wedding date might be made to seem propitious according to some system or other. Yet, ascribing astrological significance to all eighteen of the known or probable dates

of Joseph's marriages required diligent thoroughness, which is found throughout the text.

In chapter 4, "Magic Parchments and Occult Mentors," the action starts to pick up. Quinn glimpses dim outlines of what he thinks may have been a sort of proto-Mormon clan of Christian seeker families, inter-related by blood, marriage, an interest in the occult, and, in some cases, participation in the Vermont "Wood Scrape." At or near the center of this presumed inchoate movement is Joseph Smith, Sr., together with a pair of possible "occult mentors" to young Joseph—Justus Winchell and Luman Walter(s), who will not be warmly received into Mormon hagiography. Winchell, an accused counterfeiter and bigamist, is thought to have introduced rhabdomancy to the Wood group. Walter(s), a footloose polymath possessing strange books, seems also to have shared the sometimes questionable reputation of the Smiths themselves. Rather vaguely, by means of a lot of "may-also-link-him's," the author connects Winchell, Walter(s), Wood, and others through former residency in adjacent areas of Connecticut, marriages, connections to the Congregationalist church, shared migration patterns, interest in the occult, or any of several inexhaustive assortments of the above, to the Smiths and to other early Mormons, including the Rockwells, Beamans, Lawrences, Whitmers, and many families prominent in the Church at Kirtland, Ohio, in the early 1830s. This will no doubt tantalize students of the subject, but confirmation would require a great deal of work and good luck. Quinn here is working from a very interesting intuition, based on a scant handful of hard facts and a lot of potentially related information all held together by conjecture. Again, he fails to say exactly what he is trying to prove. Still it may turn out to be the most revolutionary chapter of Mormon history ever written, prior to his next two.

The work at this point seems hurried, with insufficient proof, some of the speculation therefore somewhat idle. The ideas do excite, partly because it is refreshing to see a friendly scholar even attempting to deal with this evidence. It would seem that the case Quinn is suggesting here as an explanation for the Smith family amulets has greatest bearing, potentially, on chapter 6, in which he examines Mormon scriptures and their relationship to the "magic world view." If there are discernible close parallels, as Quinn later demonstrates, between Mormon scripture and preexistent occult texts, this is ultimately more interesting and important than the manufacture of parchments.

Quinn reassures the reader that the three Smith family magic parchments have nothing to do with black magic, and are "God-centered" (97). Also, they are apparently the only documentary evidence of non-biblical literary sources for any religious practice, teaching, or artifact of Joseph Smith. Curiously, Quinn has established that an expression

found on one of the amulets must have come originally from a magical text published in America in German in 1820 and unavailable in translation before 1833. Because of the strength of Rosicrucianism among Pennsylvania Germans, a possible German connection might be worth pursuing. Comparison of source texts indicates that at least two of the parchments could not have been constructed earlier than 1784. Quinn's halfhearted attempt to attribute the manufacture of the "Holiness to the Lord" and "St. Peter Bind Them" lamens to Winchell and Walter(s) through numerology is unsuccessful.

Chapter 5 is titled, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon." The now quaint phrase "coming forth" prepares the reader as never before for the emergence of the record from the ground—from "low out of the dust" (Isa. 29:4). But can the reader really accept that Joseph is going to the hill to get the plates by magic? Quinn has been keen to make his readers surmise, on their own if possible, that the practice of magic can truly be fitted into a not disreputable tradition. However, the oft-recurring phrase "folk magic" tends to denigrate the status of Joseph Smith's activities as magus. Did Joseph really "usher in"—nay, conjure—the last dispensation by folk magic? The golden plates, whose existence it is as pointless to question among believers as the resurrection, were buried in the earth, controlled by (a) spirit(s). The young seer, having ascertained the presence and the location of the record, must go to that place at the right time, divested of pecuniary motives and wearing black, and must be in the company of the right person. He must enter the magic circle, divine the trove, summon the spirit, break the spell.

The time was 21 September 1827, the autumnal equinox. Quinn's case at this point—resting on Joseph Smith's reasonably well established knowledge of astrology, on the amulets of parchment, on precise pinpointing of times of invocation reported in friendly histories, on the literature of magic known to have been potentially accessible to Joseph, on the Prophet's known involvement in magical treasure-seeking during that period, on at least one acceptable statement that the plates were located by means of Joseph's "wonderful stone" (123)—effectively places the recovery of the plates in the thick of the magical tradition. As we follow the narrative, disjointed though it be, we realize that the story of the "coming forth" will never be the same again. We witness the magical, autochthonous birth of a new religion, or the first and only great find of the Palmyra area treasure-seeking fraternity, or the enactment by the young prophet of a retrieval rite undertaken to convince believers of the reality of the desired event—or some blend of the above. In any event, if we have been extremely attentive in following—and at some points in industriously ascertaining—the author's case, I believe we are prepared for this major

step in the argument and must conclude that it works. The case suddenly seems very strong. If much evidence is tenuous, it must be countered that much of it is very solid. It convinces when the whole, composed of diverse strands, is woven together into a fabric suddenly greater than the sum of its parts. I have hazarded elsewhere that an imaginative act is necessary if one is to appreciate a work of the imagination. Quinn has met the one with the other and has produced a case far from imaginary.

Interestingly, Quinn has elected to add the famed Mormon salamander to his reconstruction of what occurred when Joseph went to retrieve the plates. Two accounts are known of “something like a toad” (124) or a something that “looked some like a toad” (126) seen by Joseph at the time. At first one is drawn instinctively to the author’s argument. The salamander is an engaging literary image, for one thing, while a toad is just a toad. Unhappily, there is no proof of the material existence of a salamander at the retrieval of “the record.” We are given instead much well-informed conjecture. Really, the only strong argument for the salamander is textual and occurs in chapter 6, connecting the words *Nephi* and *Moroni* to a cabalistic notion of an outer soul. This intelligence is then tied to the “Nephilim” of Genesis, offspring of elemental spirits, or in other words “salamanders, known as Moron in books available at Palmyra” (157–58 n. 2). This too must qualify as a tenuous proof.

It seems that, in terms of the inner logic of his case, Quinn, in spite of vagueness, must be alleging the objective presence of a salamander. It is one thing to suggest that there was a salamander in the “hole” or “box,” and something different if the creature beheld by the young seer was any sort of small amphibian, transformed on the internalization of whatever the Prophet may really have seen, or projected from the inside of his mind out, when whatever may actually have been in the box or hole appeared. If the salamander lore allegedly rife in the region at the time had truly made an impression on young Joseph Smith, surely he would have said “salamander” to Chase and the Saunders family. The reptilian fire-sprite fits the picture only if Quinn holds, on poor evidence, that it really was a salamander, and that there was an actual sighting, the significance of which Joseph was ignorant. Instead, the author says “it is possible” (131). Nevertheless, it is interesting and may someday lead somewhere.

The obvious alternative explanations must be addressed, of course—that it was a toad, for example, or a frog feeling suddenly out of place and diving for a crevice. Yet, a sharp-eyed young seer would know a toad, while Joseph did say, “something like a toad.” By the same token, would he have failed to recognize a frog? Perhaps some mutant or deformed batrachian perplexed him there. At least one more view of the matter presents itself: supposing Moroni the messenger were himself a highly accomplished conjuror?

There is, too, the reference to “The Golden Pot,” a tale by E. T. W. Hoffman, which received notice in Palmyra and seemed to presage many elements of the Book of Mormon’s creation. I fear that many will think, when presented with frequent declarations concerning the availability to the Smiths of literature relevant to their magico-religious activities, that an attempt is being made to prove direct influence on the Prophet by literary works; that he preconstructed his own history, inventing not only the *modus operandi* by which the plates were secured, but also the framework in which they were proffered, all in accordance with the prescriptions of magical texts and fictional works. I infer instead that Quinn’s intention has been to put down any and all findings that seem relevant to the mindset Joseph Smith took with him into his prophetic calling.

Quinn tries to demonstrate that the thrust and style of the new gospel had intrinsic appeal for Americans sharing Joseph’s “magic world view.” Accordingly, in introducing his discussion of occult teachings in Mormon scriptures (chapter 6), he is quick to say that he will not argue for direct influence of prior texts on the new revelations and translations. His position is that they can have been affected by “the language, concepts, and heritage of the religio-magical culture that was part of the early nineteenth-century audience to which the communication was addressed”; but that this influence, according to “early Mormon theology,” still “would have constituted divine communication,” since God reveals his truths to humans in their own language (151). A problem is that Quinn at the same time denies that the Prophet could have had access to the texts from which many parallels to the Mormon scriptures are then adduced (150).

If I understand the argument, Quinn seems to be pushing apologetics to its outermost limit. The revelations with their occult religio-magical content would still, according to his explanation, have been channeled through the mind of God. So keen is this God to enlighten his people that he inspired his leading Prophet to transmit new truths echoing well-published occult old truths, to which Joseph allegedly did not have physical access. However, when it does suit the author—in the case of amulet manufacture, for instance—the necessary books were readily available. Viewing this objectively, why limit the strange books of Luman Walter(s) to reference works and procedural manuals? The number of parallels, referred to as “subtle echoes” (151), is impressive. I fear that Quinn’s version of how they came to be, in the long run, will not do. The parallels are far more than subtle echoes, and I see no reason for ascribing them to God in the way Quinn is suggesting. Did God the All-Knowing need pre-Mormon occult lore in order to couch his new teachings in suitably intelligible language? Surely the only need for linguistic formulation was in the mind of the Prophet. And what is lost

if the Prophet Joseph did consult pre-Mormon occult texts in the creation of new scriptures? Is it unreasonable to propose that, in many cases, Joseph's mode of obtaining the Divine Will involved a preconceived text? Why is it a problem if Joseph drew on the very texts, or *verbal accounts of them*, in which parallels are discerned by Quinn, who has established a case for the awareness, by someone in the presumed pre-Mormon occult association, of works by Agrippa, Sibly, Barrett, and Scot?

All of the evidence, looked at with the author's accustomed objectivity, which now deserts him, suggests that Joseph Smith, or someone near him, did have some "strange books" (82). The reader may well feel that after allowing the author the use of "hostile sources" because he is being "scientific," Quinn at the last minute makes a show of backing off from the consequences of his discoveries, resorting to a misconstrued, untenable cliché (151; see also D&C 1:24) about the character of revelation, Mormon style. Possibly Quinn himself is uncertain of his position and is offering an escape hatch to the fainthearted. But anyone who has attentively waded this far into the study does not need help of that kind in drawing inferences. In the one instance where the very circumstantial case is made to look very solid, the author does not seem to be offering the right conclusion.

Much of chapter 6 is taken up by a discussion of magic in the Book of Mormon and, more particularly, the problem of freemasonry as the alleged contemporaneous target of attacks on secret societies in that work. Somewhat less than convincingly, Quinn considers the Book of Mormon's negative position on magic as limited to black magic (sorcery) and therefore not inconsistent with his own thesis.

There are many points of special interest in chapter 6, including an antecedent in occult literature (Ascension of Isaiah, translated in 1819) for the Book of Mormon's seemingly anachronistic treatment of pre-Christian Christianity; occult features of the Book of Moses reminiscent of the pre-Mormon Book of Enoch (Englished in 1821); "occult" parallels in revelation on the priesthood, angels, baptism for the dead, discernment of spirits, and the nonimmateriality of spirit; and parallels between the Mormon temple endowment and the "ancient mysteries."

I find this most enlightening. Possibly, however, Quinn underestimates some difficulties of his position in this chapter. To sum up: It is impossible to rule out the availability to Joseph Smith of texts to which some of his revelations seem indebted, from which may partly derive key instances of doctrinal deviance canonized by the Latter-day Saints. The author's definition of "revelation" in Joseph's case is inadequate. Faced with Quinn's evidence, I believe many will eventually be forced to favor the view that Joseph Smith, like the narrator of Poe's "The Raven," had spent some nights poring over "quaint and curious volumes of forgotten

lore.” In my opinion, the sooner we cope with this, the more interesting and healthy our history will be. Obviously, “oral transmission,” and a powerful synthetic faculty in the mind of the Prophet, can have been great aids to divine inspiration. It is possible that, in Quinn’s carefully stated belief that no historical documents will alter what are for him essential religious truths, he has neglected the fact that many people do not establish an antiseptic division between their faith and their profession, and even if they wanted so to dichotomize their awareness they could not.

I question, too, the advisability of publishing a study of this importance without a creative attempt to solve the problems it poses. The book in its present form is a bombshell, without sufficient devices for a defusing. Whither do the new facts lead? How, for example, is the vital golden plates retrieval scene to be summed up? Is it to remain an essential mystery?

Studies of primitive Christianity, and of the territory and ambience in which it emerged, reveal the most extraordinary borrowing from other cults. Thus, James G. Frazer proposed indirectly that there was nothing new in the Christian religion. Might not Mormonism, already programmed with the belief that there is nothing new, unrevealed in former “dispensations,” and faced with the facts, eventually content itself with a God playing a somewhat diminished role in the Restoration, guiding Joseph in the selection of true precepts from among many others less true? The presence of much occult lore in Mormonism’s extra scriptures certainly enhances its claim to be the “restoration of all things” (D&C 27:6).

Quinn’s final chapter, “The Persistence and Decline of Magic after 1830,” is not the most engaging one, having something of the character of a “denouement,” following the “catastrophe” of chapters 5 and 6. Still, it is full of good things. Indeed, part of the letdown probably results from sadness in seeing the old worldview fade away in forty or fifty years or less, as the Saints get down to the business of taming the desert and coming to terms with the Gentiles.

Quinn is careful to correct the view that seer stones were not used after 1829. The disaffection of Page and the Whitmers apparently began over the diminished role of seer stones in the Church. From the 1880s, seer stones became relics of a time more devoted to magic, which may have been a more magical time. Divining with a rod has had a less interesting history since 1830, surviving mostly in well-witching. Most other aspects of this chapter are less interesting, often revealing more about Quinn’s attitude to rounding up the evidence than about Mormonism or magic. Mormons, according to the author, were practicing predictive astrology, which in another age would have got them classified as sorcerers and burnt, but no strong proof is given.

In all, it is not a very good advertisement for the substance of the Mormon experience with magic that it faded so soon from the picture after Joseph Smith's death. It amounts almost to an official parody of the institutionalization of charisma that Joseph Smith the Prophet-magus was succeeded by that pragmatic Yankee who took over the now useless stones but not the attendant calling, while saving the outward Church. Joseph, for all his genius, may well have been over his head in magic, as in Masonry, real estate, women, ancient tongues, politics, etc. But it would seem that he had as much of magic as was needed when he needed it.

Whatever admixture of divine inspiration and revelation we ascribe to them, may not many of those marvelous features of Mormon doctrine that distinguish it from Protestantism really be viewed as the venture of the Prophet-magus out of the realm of operative magic onto a more conceptual plane without the surrender of his basic animistic intuition of the way things are? It has occurred to me since reading Quinn that I inherited from Joseph Smith this view of the nature of things, which has stayed with me, informing my own artistic vision, and for which I am most grateful. The Prophet steadfastly taught spiritual values, even while succumbing, like most people, to material ones. Some aspects of the magic worldview have not suffered an early death, and may be called back by souls in need of them. The passing out of common use of certain implements of magic, such as seer stones and divining rods, would not necessarily mean that no one is seeing or divining the unseen any more; and as long as Moses 3:5 remains in the canon, anything from magic to middle Platonism might flare up in Mormonia.

A troubling aspect is the lingering of treasure-digging, which I think has not died despite the passing of seer stones, divining rods, magic circles, and ceremonial daggers. Quinn argues that the ethos of treasure-seeking was such as to confirm the acceptability of the practice after the organization of the Church in 1830, even though Joseph Smith himself played it down. With village seers and the specific treasures of western New York out of the picture, there still remains a large contingent who harbor the major assumption that God will aid us in becoming rich when we become sufficiently purified, with resultant boon to "the lap of the church," as alleged by Ezra Booth in 1834.³ In spite of all other changes, the pursuit of material treasure, deriving from a kind of folk Calvinism, seems little affected by the decline of magic.

One of the roles of the "folk" seems to be that of preserving and conserving elements of culture forgotten or passed over by the "mainstream"—the upper classes, the creative bourgeoisie in latter times, and such other elements of the populace as may desire to emulate their ways. This ability of the folk to preserve has often resulted in

important, even astounding, cultural transfusion by which the established order is quickened and renovated through the receptivity of some of its members. Examples are the romantic movement, the Celtic Revival, the revival of lyrical poetry in Spain earlier in this century, and the folk revival in English and American music these past decades. The same quickening may be witnessed in individual careers of unique cultural innovators. Francisco de Goya inaugurated the modern revolution in European painting partly by reviving popular shapes and subjects of the Middle Ages.

Joseph Smith's folk environment of magic may be viewed partially in this light. Joseph pulled himself up most admirably by his bootstraps and still never fully came abreast of high culture. Any serious religious revival, let alone a movement claiming to restore an entire ancient religious tradition lock, stock, and barrel, must embody folk elements. New religion often has come about through the agency of marginal individuals with extravagant pretensions and, from the standpoint of prevailing prejudices, a smattering of learning.

More cultural factors than could be effectively laid aside and done away with by the successive European cultures lurked among the American (and European) people. Inevitably, some would emerge, not among the learned who were busy with other things, but from their true repository, the folk. Much of what Quinn calls occult others have sometimes described as "pagan." Western religion and art consists typically of a blend of Christian and pagan matter, as in the cases of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Coleridge. Pagan is first of all another way of saying "rustic," or of the countryside. A dire sectarian prejudice, shared by many of us, insists that there be one true orientation to life, roped off and surely classified; yet Mormonism is pagan, as well as Christian, and all the better for that. It remains to be seen whether pagan elements were restored in vain.

For the Smiths, the Whitmers, and the Knights, who were faced with the creation and maintenance of "the only true church" out of a lot of Yankee seekers and English non-Conformists, God had to be "juggled" (conjured) out of his hiding place. The churches of Joseph Smith's day did not provide a framework in which his important mission of restoration could occur, any more than his own church does today. At present many Mormons, in gaining enlightenment from the standpoint of a more secular worldview, come to feel duped. Yet Michael Quinn's new study helps us realize why our ancestors were not, or did not feel "taken" by Joseph Smith in the sphere of the sacred. Joseph Smith was one of the folk, offering access to the divine. We have found him, the greatest of men in our recent spiritual heritage, all too human. Yet for countless thousands, he has put the living God back into religion.

There is a sense in which religion in the West is folk, in which “folk religion” is a tautology. A disproportionately high percentage of theophanies happen to weird poets, shepherd boys, coopers’ and carpenters’ sons, housewives, shoemakers, and tailors’ apprentices. It seems that this holds equally before, during, and after the institutionalization that eventually subordinates the supernatural to theology and ecclesiolatry. A startling feature of Mormonism in view of its folk origins is that of its having been institutionalized almost from its inception. (This was Yankee ingenuity.) Unique to Mormonism, it would seem, is an intricate authoritarian organization with an inchoate theology full of folk elements yielding an exaggerated literalism (partly, I propose, because of the speed with which it was canonized). As Mormons depart, economically and intellectually, from the folk, the risk of loss of belief naturally increases.

An aspect of the magic worldview may offer a solution to this difficulty, especially if Mormonism does not insist on maintaining a perpetual low-church profile involving all faithful adherents. I mean Hermetic science and related neo-Platonic doctrines which through their peculiar ways of knitting metaphor to materiality could help to mitigate the hard, extreme materialism of modern Latter-day Saints. Much of the scriptural material Quinn deals with in chapter 6 would obviously be happier in a context far less folkloric than the focus of the present study, and less orthodox than that particular framework offered by Sterling McMurrin. Quinn’s work is interpretable as a sign that attempting to view Mormonism in some other world-historical context may soon be the order of the day. I hope that someone will perform this service on behalf of Mormonism’s more esoteric doctrines, which are in even greater need than others of being accommodated within an appropriate historical framework and developed in accord with their potential.

Some may be unaware that Hermetic theology, while much neglected, is an important strain of Western culture. Indispensable to the rise of modern science, with major repercussions in philosophy, it appears to have bequeathed to us a number of important ideas much cherished by Mormons: for example, the preterrestrial divinity of man, the indestructibility of matter, and the denial of the immateriality of spirit (ascribed by Quinn also to neo-Platonism), all of which appear coincidentally in the restorationist system of the sixteenth-century arch-heretic Servetus, who got them from Hermetic texts. Teachings of the “old alchymists” were noted among Mormon doctrines by Sir Richard Burton, and it may be more than coincidence that the Paracelsus Institute, a school of alchemists, flourishes in Salt Lake City. Hermetic theology was once regarded by the learned as a branch of revealed religion. Hermetic writings ranked with the Torah and the New Testament, and their pseudonymous author, Hermes Trismegistus, was

considered to be an actual historical personage on a par with Moses. This view was discredited by classical philologists during the Renaissance, and the power of scholarship to undermine the foundations of religious revelation was underscored.

Among the most interesting new ideas on the role of Joseph Smith as a Prophet-magus is that offered by Klaus Hansen. Deriving partly from a controversial application of brain hemisphere theory by Julian Jaynes in *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Hansen's theory suggests that Joseph's preternatural spiritual gifts, and the capacity of his disciples to appreciate and participate in them, are made more readily explicable by the Prophet's alleged possession of a very old-fashioned psyche, a mind so archaic in organization as to involve functions we might think of as prerational. According to this view, characteristically modern mentality, because of evolving habits of communication between brain hemispheres, is no longer adapted for direct experience of the supernatural, which it nevertheless craves. This is interpretable as a view of the folk as an atavism of society in remote times, in the midst of which the Prophet is distinguished because he possess the paradoxically retrograde mental organization to a far greater and more felicitous degree than his fellows.

I mention this partly because of the need to further develop the occult aspects of Mormon teaching. As we depart from our rural origins, would the right hemisphere not still want an unmodern role in our lives? If not, do we not at least retain, for other reasons, an inordinate interest in the divine? What will satisfy the metaphysical hunger of a generation of Mormons alerted to modern professions and academic disciplines? Certainly not a watered-down, Protestantized theology.

This disparity between one tendency of mental organization and another helps prepare us for difficulties posed by *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, whose author seems driven both by strong religious convictions and belief in the inevitable vindication of objectivity in religious history. E. D. Howe, once the arch foe of Zion, was the first to note Joseph Smith's conjuring arts, of which Latter-day Saints are hearing only now. Now are we being told by insiders that the Whitmers were extremely radical, religious nonconformists, but this only confirms Howe's allegation that "they were noted in their neighborhood for credulity and a general belief in witches."⁴ Many of us Mormonites today, whether pious believers or critically objective students of history, are closer in mental outlook to the position of Howe than to that of the Prophet Joseph and his early followers. Would we rant and rave, walk penniless to Missouri, witch a trove with a hazel rod, or join a communistic society? Do we really want to know what was in and around that stone-box/hole on 22 September 1823?

A “scam” brought the salamander to our attention, but it may have been lurking in our history all along. Too much could be made of this, but evidently a decision is wanted whether to try to keep the little soft-skinned reptile. Where did he come from? Is he good? Have we the right to make him part of our history? Are there advantages to keeping him? My answers are: He came from the collective unconscious, which craves renewed enthusiasm in an aging charismatic sect threatened with blandness. Hence a fire-sprite for inspiration. Yes, he is good, especially since the salamander is replete with symbolic potential for poetry, theology, and the visual arts. What has the seagull or the ox to offer next to the salamander? There is no comparison. Use a seagull once or twice, and its imagistic potential is exhausted. But the salamander is, among other things, a god, an elemental, and sire to a race of giants. Yes, we have every right to incorporate it into our history.

Apparently a little animal did appear. The toad and frog possibilities are less than satisfactory. Possibly, the choice has been made for us already. If we must add an important, spotted amphibian to our history, let it be the elegant black fire-sprite, the pedigreed batrachian with historical connections not only to magic but also to theology and poetry. Let it be a literary incarnation of “the spirit of God like a fire.” For Augustine, it is incorruptible by fire, proof of the power of God; for Quevedo an image of emotional stamina: “The cold salamander, to which learned lore gives the lie, I dare to defend, inasmuch as my heart dwells in fires, which I drink thirstily, without feeling them.”⁶ “Salamandra” is the title poem of an important anthology by the Mexican poet Octavio Paz. What else do we have in the way of poetic images with which to launch a fight against literalism? It is as though the little creature were sent mysteriously from on high to restore and expand spirituality among a people long stricken by this troublesome infirmity, and thus deprived of poetic revelation.

For many, religion is real and it works, as I said of Alva Beaman’s magic. Quinn’s book heightens our awareness of the supernatural, reminding us that God is still alive and kicking for many modern people. Some people, myself included, gain access to the divine only through the symbolic, through acts of the imagination; and the salamander is, as precisely as possible, a visible voice from the other world. Surely Mormons, to remain faithful to their roots, must seize every chance to restore much lore cut away from Western culture long ago. The salamander, we have observed, has a life of his own, and may not soon fade away, no matter what position anyone takes concerning him. May he therefore delve into our brains and fill our awareness with divine fire. May he be carved in stone over our doorways. May he sire a race of spiritual giants to keep us from slipping irretrievably into the death-maw of Protestantism.

Go, then, little sprite, and do thy work. Go and wake up the Saints. Help them to accept their amazing history in all its rugged harshness and primitive divinity. Help me to remember that there still is much for me in my people's culture. Be fruitful and multiply, and spread thine influence. Restore to our art and our theology the ineffable mystery of the divine. Go and undermine all edifices erected without spirituality. Crawl up the skirts of puritan ladies and give them a fright. Go and help religion not to be the opiate of the people.

NOTES

¹E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painsville, Ohio: E. D. Howe, 1834), 16.

²Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 60.

³Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 187.

⁴*Ibid.*, 16.

⁵Author's translation of Francisco de Quevedo, "Examples of Other Flames Which Seem Possible Compared with His," in bk. 4 of *Spanish Parnassus* (N.p., n.d.).