2000

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Writing History Must Not Be an Act of “Magic”

Rhett S. James


ISSN 1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

Quinn's Contribution and This Review's Design

Michael Quinn’s revised and enlarged 1998 edition of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* makes its finest contribution as a resource about how selected Americans believed in “magic” within the complex of cultural varieties found in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Quinn shows himself an energetic collector of information, and his magic corpus will be of interest to anthropologists and folklorists. Quinn’s new 600-page edition includes 217 pages of notes, covering nearly as many pages as the main text and notes combined in his first 228-page edition. He increases the main body of his text by nearly one hundred pages and his introductory comments by more than a dozen pages. The 44 pages illustrating Mormon relics remain much the same but with improved reproduction. Quinn’s style of presentation is tight, sometimes even compressed, and his tone is businesslike and sometimes to the point. Parts of some chapters read like essays, many of which can stand by themselves. His treatment of information is occasionally uneven and given to sweeping generalizations and speculations not supported by
documentation. Sometimes his research is not thorough, which leads him into errors that could easily have been avoided.

While I find little passion in the main body of his text, the introductory writings and notes are full of emotion. In these pages, Quinn not only reacts to the reviewers of his first edition of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* but also confronts those who have disagreed with him and corrected his past research and analysis. In such cases, his emotions blunt the quality of his scholarship. In Quinn's haste to correct his reviewers, he is occasionally careless in his research and produces a flawed product. Sometimes the energy produced in his use of polemics overshadows his main text. Samples of these moments in Quinn's book will be examined.

The Book's Title

It is typically helpful for a book's title to accurately represent its contents. Quinn traces the development of Mormon attitudes toward magic and the occult into the twentieth century. This is well beyond "early Mormonism." He should have considered changing the title of his book to simply *Mormonism and the Magic Worldview*. With the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the largest and most influential among the Mormon communities) becoming an increasingly significant international religious group, the words *World View* in his title will become increasingly appropriate in years to come. Since much of Quinn's book contains information that is not just "Mormon," he might even have considered breaking from his present regional and provincial title, naming his book *The Magic Worldview*.

What Shall Be Defined as "Magic"?

Quinn argues that some persons converting to Latter-day Saint Christianity—as well as other Americans—brought with them from their cultural environment beliefs in a wide variety of things that some academicians lump today under the name *magic*. Among this bevy of artifacts and "magic arts" are divining rods, seer stones, amulets, talismans, occult handbooks, magic parchments, cards, healing objects, tea-leaf divination, treasure-digging, ritual magic,
folk magic, palmistry, astrology, alchemy, phrenology, pyramidology, numerology, and kabbalistic occultism.

Quinn writes that “converts to Mormonism came from diverse backgrounds. Some had previously integrated folk magic with conventional beliefs and practices of religion.” He argues, “They were sympathetic to continuing that synthesis. Others seemed to have adopted folk magic only after becoming Mormons. For them, something within early Mormonism sanctioned such practices” (p. 238). At the same time, Quinn acknowledges that the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants speak out strongly against sorceries, sorcerers, magics, magic arts, soothsayers, and witchcrafts. He also acknowledges that Joseph Smith recognized the reality of such practices and condemned them. Joseph Smith’s 1842 editorial in the Times and Seasons, entitled “Try the Spirits,” is an important Mormon denunciation of magic, the occult, false traditions, and corrupted religion. Quinn cites this source (see pp. 291–92) but surprisingly does not use this document to strengthen his argument that Mormon prophets and canon condemned magic arts, as did other Christian communities. Nor does Quinn use Joseph Smith’s writings about his 1820 first vision, in which the Mormon prophet wrote that he saw both God the Father and the Son Jesus Christ and felt an evil power that attacked him just before he received his vision. At the very outset of Mormon Christianity, the reality of ultimate good and ultimate evil was reportedly manifest. Joseph Smith’s challenge became one of leading people to God and away from evil, magic, and false traditions. This happened before the publication of the Book of Mormon, the revelations from Jesus Christ to Joseph Smith in the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price, each of which condemns magic arts and places God as the greatest power and true authority (see Alma 1:32; 3 Nephi 21:16; 24:1, 5; Mormon 1:15, 19; 2:10; D&C 63:17–19; 76:23, 103–6; Moses 1:2, 9, 13–14, 24–25). Why

1. The contrast between God and Satan as recounted in the various accounts of Joseph Smith Jr.’s 1820 vision are well-known; see James B. Allen, “The Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought,” Dialogue 1/3 (1966): 29–45. See also Alexander Neibaur, Diary and Family Biographies, 24 May 1844.
Quinn does not use Joseph Smith's first vision to strengthen his argument that from the outset of Mormonism, the Mormon Prophet takes a position against the acceptance of magic is not clear. On balance, these refutations of magic are almost hidden in the body of Quinn's presentation of Mormon converts bringing superstition with them into their new faith.

At the same time, Quinn tries to convince his readers that Mormonism encouraged magic even though Joseph Smith and the Mormon canon condemned it. Here Quinn may be wrestling with definitions of "magic" by using language that is, in part, that of a secular humanist and not that used by the leaders and scholars of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For this reason, Quinn's claim that he is a "Mormon apologist" and "a conservative revisionist in the writing of Mormon history" (pp. xi, xvii) is confusing and unclear. All that is certain is that Quinn uses a non-LDS dictionary when writing about LDS history, which does not make him a "conservative revisionist."

Quinn is sometimes given to sweeping speculations presented as fact rather than as hypothesis requiring additional study in the future. For example, he writes that "the overwhelming majority of modern Mormons have long since assimilated the general American population's attitude toward magic and the occult," and "in this respect, current Mormons are virtually indistinguishable from most twentieth-century American Protestants and secular rationalists" (p. 238). Where is the data to support such claims? Quinn's secularist language may suggest that he has been assimilated and that he is projecting his personal experience onto the larger Mormon population of millions. Yet, at the same time, Quinn insists and avows that he devoutly believes "in Gods, angels, spirits, and devils, and that they have communicated with humankind" (p. xxxvii). Quinn says he is a Mormon who believes in "Gods," etc. Does he consider himself "indistinguishable from most twentieth-century American Protestants and secular humanists?" If so, is he saying these groups believe "in Gods, angels, spirits, and devils, and that they have communicated

2. For a discussion on the definitions of "magic," see the review by William J. Hamblin in this issue, pp. 229–36.
with humankind?” I am sure some liberal American Protestants reject such beliefs. Conservative Protestants reject the idea of “Gods,” and all the secular humanists with whom I am acquainted don’t believe any part of Quinn’s devout confession of faith. Or does Quinn mean “general Americans” can reject the occult and at the same time accept angels? This just one example of Quinn’s confusion and inability to be clear. I am left with the sense that Quinn defines Mormons and Americans as he defines himself, which definition seems to be a synthesis of seemingly opposing behaviors and belief systems. This inability to be objective, to be precise in language, and to clearly define the environment that he researched is a weakness that also appears in his earlier books.

Quinn writes of his own pluralism, explaining that he admires “current Jews, Christians, and Mormons who privately adopt any folk magic practice that speaks to their inner bliss. Some call this a ‘new age’ religion, but I see it as a very old expression of religiosity” (p. 326). This movement away from LDS scriptures and the living LDS prophets and apostles to sympathy for “new age” religion is in serious conflict with Quinn’s claim to be a “Mormon apologist” and a “conservative revisionist.” I suspect that most Mormon apologists and conservative revisionists would think Quinn’s position radically different from their own.

Quinn expresses broad tolerance for all belief systems. He believes “folk magic practices facilitated the religious quest of persons who already perceived reality from that [magic] world view. At the same time,” he writes, “without magic views and techniques, other church leaders and believers enjoyed an equally rich experience of divine communication, charismatic gifts, and personal spirituality” (p. 326). How Quinn later matches these statements with his conclusion that Mormons have taken on the look of “secular rationalists” is unclear. Sometimes Quinn’s position seems to be that of the Greeks in Athens who built a monument to every god, even to the “Unknown God” (Acts 17:23). While such is his right, it does not help him to become a “Mormon apologist” or even a Mormon “conservative revisionist.” Could it be he has written here with tongue in cheek? If so, even irony should be clearly communicated.
My studies of Latter-day Saint history do not show the total Mormon assimilation of which Quinn writes. I see, instead, "the faithful" in the American and international LDS community becoming more orthodox in the doctrines and practices found in their unique scriptures—the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. It is certainly the intent of church leaders to convert LDS members fully toward a loyalty to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost and to the living prophets. This is not to deny that American Mormons are also influenced by non-Mormon beliefs and practices.

In apparent contradiction to his own argument, Quinn later makes the point himself in the title of chapter 7 that not only a "persistence" but also a "decline of magic" exists among Mormons "after 1830." This statement, of course, acknowledges the ongoing conversion process in Mormon Christianity. Movement away from belief in supernatural power not centered in God continues to take place among Mormons today, whether they live in the United States, Haiti, Africa, the South Pacific, Asia, or Latin America. Quinn makes a general observation about both the "persistence" and the "decline of magic" among Mormons living in the United States, but where is his scientific data? He does not cite available convert baptism statistics and related documents, which, given the direction of LDS doctrine to draw people away from worldly superstition, might suggest the "decline of magic" among Mormons. Quinn's speculation, however, seems to be directed toward traditional belief systems being taken over by secular humanism, which puts belief in the God-centered supernatural in the same category as any other belief system espousing magic.

Quinn weakens his argument when he contradicts his "persistence-decline" thesis by stating that Mormons have "assimilated the general American population's attitude toward magic and the occult." In the first place, what is "the general American population's attitude toward magic and the occult?" Second, the complexity of viewpoints about control over the supernatural and over forces of nature by extraordinary influence or power ("magic") that existed in 1830 was probably not nearly as great as that of the variants that exist for
Americans today. There are many more ethnic and national groups present in the United States today than in 1830, each of which comes with its own complexity of belief and practice of “magic.”

Quinn’s statement implies that belief in magic and the occult is not popular for “most twentieth-century American Protestants and secular rationalists.” What then of the present popular interest in angels, near-death experiences, Hinduism, and science fiction books and movies, as well as belief in extraterrestrial beings? Everything that I read and study points to a near explosion of interest in “magic” and the occult in the past two decades. Quinn also argues, “Still other Mormons were never interested in folk magic or most manifestations of the occult. Two exceptions,” according to Quinn, “were stone-divination and astrology,” which he believes had widespread appeal to pioneer Mormons (p. 238). At the same time, Quinn shows LDS Church presidents and leaders directing LDS members away from such beliefs (see pp. 280–91). He is unable to document by statistical studies how much belief in magic was actually occurring among Mormons. His assumptions, given as fact, are intuitive, based on a small sampling of all available Mormons.

Quinn argues that the presence of these “magic” things in the social environment prepared a way for the conversion of Americans and others to Mormonism. He sees “early Mormon folk believers” as “a people already prepared” by the social environment. This conclusion is one-sided; Quinn could have balanced his work with examples of how people were not prepared by magic and how the presence of “magic” attitudes turned people away from belief in the divine. James Turner’s Without God, without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America would have been helpful. Belief in magic within the religions and creeds also had the effect of preparing a people to be resistant to anything that was thought of as supernatural.


For example, Martin Harris, one of Joseph Smith's first supporters, who paid for the first publication of the Book of Mormon, felt compelled to test Joseph Smith from time to time to make sure Joseph and he were not being deceived. On one such occasion, Harris reportedly told Joseph Smith,

Joseph, you know my doctrine, that cursed is every one that putteth his trust in man, and maketh flesh his arm; and we know that the devil is to have great power in the latter days to deceive if possible the very elect; and I don't know that you are one of the elect. Now you must not blame me for not taking your word. If the Lord will show me that it is his work, you can have all the money you want.5

Martin Harris was not alone in this mind-set, but how many felt the same is not known. A reading of Quinn gives the feeling that all America was ready to join the Mormons or some other church. But the early nineteenth century was also an age of doubt, a topic Quinn should have considered. Quinn's lack of data on who believed what leaves the historian with little solid evidence.6

Quinn does, however, now and then make a balanced summary statement. "Like the rank-and-file," he writes, "LDS church leaders in the nineteenth century were all along the spectrum of practice, advocacy, indifference, and condemnation of these beliefs and practices [of magic and the occult]." Quinn also argues that "by the mid-twentieth century, church leaders consistently condemned various manifestations of folk magic and the occult" (p. 238). That LDS leaders felt the need to do so implies an unhealthy interest in "magic" by some Mormons but does not prove the "assimilation" of attitudes against magic into the general populace; Quinn speculates such attitudes were developing among Protestants and secular rationalists.

It does not naturally follow, however, that people believing in magic were somehow prepared to become Mormons. Again, this assumption is an intuitive speculation. The Book of Mormon’s rejection of magic and false traditions seemed to be part of what drew converts into the LDS Church, which was seen as a restoration of the New Testament Church of Jesus Christ. False traditions and belief in magic and the occult may evoke skepticism but can also create rival belief systems that influence people to reject the Latter-day Saint “restoration of all things.”

Quinn argues for a “gradual decline of magic in the LDS church throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—a process of Mormon secularization, high and low” (p. 238). But does the decline of “stone-divination” and astrology imply “Mormon secularization, high and low,” as Quinn generalizes? If so, how does he account for the “revelations” to LDS leaders in the selection process of every new stake president and bishop? What about the revelations placed in the canon of LDS scriptures such as Doctrine and Covenants 138 (dated 3 October 1918) and the Official Declaration 2 (admitted to the canon on 30 September 1978). Mormon journals are filled with faith-promoting incidents and visions and the appearances of angels, the Three Nephites, and even Jesus Christ. Also, Latter-day Saints believe that the decision to build every temple requires direction and approval of the Lord Jesus Christ to the living prophet of the church. Temples are being built as never before and for an ever-increasing international membership. This suggests an outpouring of revelations to the living prophet and leading councils of the church. African, Asian, and South American Mormon history and current events read like the book of Acts in the New Testament. The number of single adults and married couples serving missions continues in the tens of thousands. What Mormon missionary does not have at least a half dozen accounts of modern-day miracles accompanying the missionary experience? The twentieth-century Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is filled with verification of the reality of God and spiritual gifts, which Quinn also classifies as “magic.” Such events in the twenty-first century are already appearing in the Church News, general conferences, and church magazines. These developments
work against Quinn's judgment that a belief in miracles, what he sometimes calls “magic,” has declined in the last hundred or so years.

The whole doctrine of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the LDS Church, a subject and practice that falls within Quinn's humanistic and secular definition of “magic,” is ongoing and vibrant, not only in the United States but throughout all the world. Every patriarchal blessing given is an expression of God's power on earth. Quinn has ignored these elements of belief and practice in the LDS Church.

Quinn acknowledges that in the “dizzying procession of institution and theology” that flowed from the Prophet Joseph Smith, “magic was only an undercurrent” surrounding and touching Mormon Christianity (p. 238). This is a very important qualification to remember when reading his book. He is writing about an “undercurrent,” not about the direction and flow of the river. “Magic” for Quinn means something other than biblical-like experiences, which, of course, doesn't make him, as he confesses, a conservative revisionist or a Mormon apologist. It may be that the magic about which Quinn writes is more “shore wash” than “undercurrent.” As for the gifts of the Spirit in the LDS Church, the divine revelations (also called “magic” by Quinn) are not “undercurrents” but the central living stream of church life and theology from 1820 to the present. Anyone who studies the church from its archives will see this. Even the secular rationalist who does not believe in God, having researched the church archives, will come away with the conviction that the Mormons believe in this miraculous power that is regularly manifest in the lives of church members.

Quinn argues, “If we hope to understand fully the origins of Mormonism, we cannot ignore the environment and [magic] world view of its first adherents” (p. 326). It can also be argued with the support of more documentary evidence than Quinn produces that Joseph Smith and the first adherents moved against their environment, little of which was friendly. A mob within the environment eventually murdered Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum because they represented something very different.

Quinn further generalizes that historians and Mormons need to acknowledge “the place and meaning of magic as one of the compo-
ments of a complex mix that also included the common American's emphasis on pragmatism and common sense, together with devotion to the Bible, an intensely personal relationship with God, the belief in the reality of divine and diabolic intervention in daily life, expectations that God's true church should be like apostolic Christianity, and a conviction that the glorious return of Christ to the earth was imminent" (p. 326). Does Quinn include Native Americans, Blacks, Spanish Americans, and women in his perception of "the common American"? Nothing that he writes suggests that he does.

Controversy, Debate, Personal Agendas, and Polemics

Quinn's introduction, preface, and notes spill over with controversy, debate, and polemics. As suggested above, these sections of his book are the most lively. Here, the reader will discover Quinn's continuing efforts to clarify his own place as a writer and as a person within the Mormon community. He is concerned about what people think of his writing. I found these parts of the book more interesting and memorable than the main text because of a greater energy in the writing, a passion for defending himself (not always very well executed), and his counterattacks against reviewers (seriously flawed and often without force).

Quinn's autobiographical statements, his apparent need to respond to everyone who disagrees with him, and his defense in the introduction and preface suggest a troubled mind and a feeling of being accused (see p. xiii), which apparent rejections lead him into name calling, impatience, and informational errors (see pp. x–xii). Some may feel Quinn's attempt at debate creates a sour tone, supplanting an otherwise respectable performance. For example, Quinn describes himself as "excommunicated from the LDS church," charged "with apostasy" for his historical writings. This, of course, is not new information. Why Quinn writes again about his excommunication is not clear. Perhaps central to selling himself to the larger non-Mormon audience is his presentation of himself as a misunderstood martyr. Eventually, historians, both Mormon and non-Mormon, will tire of his "tale of woe" and respond with, "Quinn, you knew the
rules. You broke them and were put out of your church. If you want to return to it, keep the rules, but for the sake of sound history don't let your personal problems turn your research methods and writing into mush.”

As an apparent escape from his seeming isolation, Quinn reminds readers that he is “a seventh-generation member of the church,” remaining what he calls “a DNA Mormon,” unchanged in his “personal faith,” since he wrote the introduction to his first edition of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* in 1987 (p. xiii). He must know, however, that citing his genealogy is powerless to grant quality to his research methods and writing. His calling upon physical genealogy as an affirmation of religious faith, authority, or credibility is not central to the discipline of history. That he writes in this manner hints at his need for approval and reveals his interpretive bent and subjective posture.

Surprisingly, given his apparent lifestyle, which sets him at odds with his former church, Quinn writes, “I've always seen myself as a Mormon apologist” (p. xi). Certainly this self-view is either written tongue-in-cheek or refers to his acting as an apologist for his own brand of Mormonism outside that represented by the majority of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This playing with words, creating a new dictionary, and laboring to find fault on trivial points is part of the anti-LDS terrain. Even more surprising (unless also intended as frivolous), Quinn claims that he sees himself as the same kind of Mormon as historian Richard L. Bushman. “Bushman is a conservative revisionist in the writing of Mormon history, which is my self-definition as well,” Quinn declares (p. xvii). A devout Latter-day Saint, Richard L. Bushman, then H. Rodney

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8. Discussions of the problems arising out of Quinn’s dictionaries may be found in Mitton and James, “A Response to D. Michael Quinn,” 147–49. In Klaus Hansen’s review of Quinn’s *Same-Sex* in the same issue of the FARMS Review of Books, page 132, he calls Quinn’s terminology “Quinnspeak.”
Sharp Professor of History at the University of Delaware and now Gouverneur Morris Professor of History at Columbia University, described himself as "a humble follower of Christ who tells the story without pretense to friends whom I love and respect, then they will believe if they want to, and conversion is possible."\(^9\)

Quinn avows "a personal ‘testimony’" of Jesus as the Savior, of Joseph Smith Jr. as a prophet, of the Book of Mormon as God's word, and of "the LDS church as a divinely established organization," administering "essential priesthood ordinances of eternal consequence" to men and women (p. xxxviii). While in apparent agreement with LDS values by these expressions, he airs his past agitation at being refused access to church historical collections. Still, Quinn admits that "no historical documents presently available, or locked away, or still unknown will alter these truths. I believe," he writes, "that persons of faith have no reason to avoid historical inquiry into their religion or to discourage others from such investigations" (p. xxxviii).

Ancillary to Quinn's apparent desire to place himself somewhere as an authority in the Mormon communities is his need to define what is "good" and "bad" on the topics of "critical reviewers," "apologists," and "polemicists." In this regard, Quinn writes as an authoritarian, making summary judgments and presenting them as absolutes. This tendency in his writing moves him away from the position of serious and careful scholars. Quinn judges "some apologists" as "careful," yet he cannot resist describing others as "sociopaths"—a bit harsh and extreme (p. x). Apparently, he feels compelled to judge. He writes that he "must distinguish between polemicists and apologists" and does so as if building his own dictionary (an activity that flowered in his book about homosexuality).\(^{10}\)

Quinn's authoritative stance and style of writing sometimes lead him into unnecessary debates with his reviewers. He maintains, for example, in his 1987 introduction to Early Mormonism and the Magic

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10. See the discussion on "polemics" by William Hamblin in this issue, pp. 236–41.
World View, that he excluded Mark Hofmann's fraudulent 1830 Martin Harris letter (called the “White Salamander Letter”) from his book draft and denies having ever thought Hofmann’s forgery was authentic (see pp. xi–xii). And yet, in a footnote of the revised edition, Quinn admits that he “affirmed that its [the fake Martin Harris letter’s] content was consistent with everything I had found and was learning about pre-1830 beliefs in folk magic and the occult” (p. 330 n. 14).

Quinn then begins a lengthy discussion of salamanders and the angel Moroni, writing: “If [Joseph] Smith saw a salamander on the hill, rather than a toad, this was consistent with magic associations concerning the name Moroni and occult traditions concerning the salamander” (p. 156). Why does Quinn write nearly two pages of footnotes trying to explain that he never suggested Hofmann’s Salamander Letter was authentic, while at the same time admitting that the text fits his view of the mind-set of the historical period? If Quinn did not think the Hofmann fake was authentic and only intended to state why he felt others accepted the document as authentic, then he should have made his position clear. As it stands, Quinn’s writing is not sufficiently precise and leaves him open to misunderstanding, which ambiguity sometimes occurs when he writes about controversial or complex matters.

Quinn does not address reports among Utah historians that a Signature Press text editor and a pressman told of changes made in his first edition 1987 Magic book immediately before its publication. They reported the removal of passages showing that Quinn

11. In September 1984, my word study of the subject of salamanders in relation to Mark Hofmann’s fake White Salamander Letter showed that an angel or soldier was called a “salamander” in some cultures. When did Quinn discover this same information? Was it after the Church News article referring to my research, or was it before September 1984? If before 1984, did Mark Hofmann get his idea about salamanders from Quinn? They knew each other. Or, did Quinn do his study after mine but refrained from going public with the same information until three years later in 1987? For the published version of my interview, see “Harris Letter Could Be Further Witness,” Church News, 9 September 1984, 11, 13.

12. This unsolicited report apparently originated from a person referred to as the “mole” in Signature Press. I personally learned about the mole and the report by telephone from his-
accepted the “White Salamander” forgery as authentic when it became clear that the Hofmann document was a fake. Of course, no writer or publisher can be criticized for being a victim of crime. It may be that the reports were false. Still, such was rumored and becomes part of the history of the incident, revealing the mood of the time.

Reacting to “A Response to D. Michael Quinn’s Homosexual Distortion of Latter-day Saint History,” in which George Mitton and I wrote that Quinn accepted the White Salamander Letter as authentic—Quinn denies he ever accepted the fake letter as authentic; he then counters by writing that I “publicly endorsed” the Salamander Letter before I “examined it” (p. xii, 331), citing the Church News article of 9 September 1984. Quinn raises two issues: public endorsement by me and whether I had access to the letter to make an evaluation. An examination of these two issues reveals Quinn’s lack of care in research.

As a historian, Quinn should know that newspaper articles are rarely the best historical sources. Why didn’t he consult the stenographic record of the full interview between myself and the Church News? With a little effort, he could have investigated to see if such a document existed. Newspaper reporters often record interviews, as do those who are interviewed. Certainly, I would have supplied him with a copy of the transcript had he requested one. Instead, Quinn writes as if he got his information from Salt Lake City evangelicals Jerald and Sandra Tanner—unfortunately repeating the same mistakes the Tanners made.

The telephone record shows that I did not publicly endorse the Salamander Letter. I simply observed that the term salamander fit the symbolism for angels in some cultures and could therefore be further

tory and political science professors at Brigham Young University, from two former presidents of the Mormon Historical Association, and a person working for LDS Correlation.


14. The transcript is available as Rhett James, “9–5–84 Church News interview transcript, late August 1984,” in “The Rhett James Collection,” Martin Harris Pageant papers, Utah State University Special Collections.
evidence for the orthodox account of the angel Moroni appearing to Joseph Smith Jr.15 I made this speculation before I had completed my syntax study of the Salamander Letter.

While Quinn might be excused for not searching out the transcript of my telephone conversation with the Church News, he cannot be excused for failing to read Richard E. Turley Jr.'s mention of my October 1984 position on the fake document as found in Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case. This information was easily available to Quinn. Turley writes, "Rhett S. James ... had been following the debate about the letters for months and offered his opinion that the salamander letter was a fraud and that the Stowell letter might be too."16 Quinn should have read note 84 on page 425 in Turley's Victims, which shows that I took the position that the Salamander Letter was a fake in a 24 October 1984 letter to LDS Church Historian's Office employee Glen Rowe and in 26 October and 3 November 1984 letters to Steven F. Christensen, then owner of the Salamander Letter.17 It was a simple matter of checking the index to find the references. In short, Quinn's research is seriously flawed in this matter, showing that sometimes his research cannot be trusted to have been thorough.

15. The intent of the Church News article was correctly represented in the title of the news article: "Harris Letter Could Be Further Witness (for lack of forensic authentication)." The editor did not print the complete interview.

16. Turley, Victims, 103. The rest of the Turley text about me on page 103 reads: "He based his conclusions on the language of the documents, which he felt differed from what either Martin Harris or Joseph Smith would have written. Siding with James were Jeff Simmonds of Utah State University, to whom Hofmann had first shown the Anthon transcript, and Ronald Vern Jackson, a genealogist."

17. See also ibid., 219; see also 425 n. 84; 103; and p. 457 n. 28 (Pinnock journal reference). Quinn also faults my opinion before forensic authentication had been completed. The point of the Church News article is that I expressed an opinion before "forensic authentication." One wonders why Quinn would think I would endorse a document as authentic if a forensic test showed the letter a fraud. As it turned out, I held to my view that the Salamander Letter was a fake even after Steven Christensen announced to the Salt Lake Tribune, on 3 April 1985, that chemist Albert H. Lyter III of Federal Forensic Associates of Raleigh, North Carolina, reported to him: "There is no evidence to suggest that the examined document was prepared at other than during the stated time period"—1830."
Quinn's second error was in writing that I made a judgment on the Salamander Letter before I "examined it" (pp. xii, 331). Turley's *Victims* showed my correspondence with Glen Rowe and Steven Christensen in October and November of 1984, which suggests that I had an approved photocopy of the Salamander Letter. Also, copies of the letter had been circulated throughout the Mormon history community since the Sunstone Symposium and the Los Angeles Times report on the Salamander Letter months earlier. Why Quinn thinks I judged the Hofmann letter a fraud without reading it is difficult to understand. Again, Quinn cites no sources for his speculations. Of course, I had a copy of the Salamander Letter.

Once the Salamander Letter was owned by the LDS Church, Gordon B. Hinckley, then the first counselor in the First Presidency, made the purported 1830 Martin Harris letter available for examination. At that time, many historians, journalists, and evangelical detractors wrongly accused LDS Church leaders of trying to hide evidence. The truth was just the opposite. Only when the LDS Church owned the document did the letter become available for examination by interested parties. I was shown the original White Salamander Letter on 29 April 1985 by the secretary to the First Presidency. The photocopy from which I had been working matched the original. On 30 April 1985, having examined the original, I publicly announced my finding that the 1830 Martin Harris letter was probably fraudulent.\(^\text{18}\)

In a third example of leaping to conclusions, Quinn again cites a newspaper article instead of the typescript of an entire interview (see p. 331 n. 17). He cites my response to Todd Compton's *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* as reported in Logan,

\(^{18}\) "Fraudulent Documents: A Chronology for the BYU Symposium," Church History and Recent Forgeries, A Symposium, Brigham Young University, 6 August 1987. The historical community almost universally disagreed with my conclusion. Prominent historian Leonard Arrington told both Logan LDS instructor Gary Bennett and Utah State University President Stanford Cazier that he thought the 1830 Martin Harris letter was authentic and that I was wrong. Arrington told me that he felt that others such as Michael Quinn, Jan Shipps, Marvin Hill, and Ron Walker had studied the subject and were correct in suggesting the 1830 letter was authentic and part of a bigger "magic" picture.
Utah’s *Herald Journal*, 14 December 1997, as follows: “Many of Compton’s sources are hearsay and not primary sources,” James said, “Rumor, gossip and speculation do not make good history.” Then Quinn slips into a conclusion, writing: “Rhett James made those statements about the book’s sources before he had read one page of Todd Compton’s *In Sacred Loneliness*.” How does Quinn know what I read? What “magic” does Quinn use to divine such knowledge? Quinn accepts the news report as printed and again fails to consult the typescript of the interview conducted by Arrin Brunson, a reporter for the *Herald Journal* (Logan, Utah), or my three-page answer sent to Brunson.19 Had Quinn done careful research, he would have known I did read what Compton’s publisher released to the media and their agents before commenting to the *Herald Journal*.

As it turns out, my views on Compton’s book were not so different from those expressed by Daniel W. Bachman in his carefully written review of the book.20 I work with Bachman at the Logan LDS Institute of Religion and am very familiar with Bachman’s writing on Joseph Smith and plural marriage.

The point of these three examples is to show that Quinn’s research was not thorough. Many other such examples could have been cited, but space does not permit. Quinn acted to discredit a reviewer who faulted his work in an earlier publication, and in doing so rushed his effort and produced a flawed product.

19. Arrin Brunson, a reporter for the Logan, Utah’s *Herald Journal* called me on 11 December 1997 at 11:52 a.m. I was at lunch at the time and returned the call within the hour. A second phone discussion took place on 12 December 1997. After examining a press release and some excerpts from the book, I sent a three-page response by fax to Arrin Brunson at 4:49 p.m. I also sent a four-page response to Don LeFevere at LDS Public Affairs in Salt Lake City. These documents are found in “The Rhett James Collection,” Box 53: LDS Doctrine and History, fd 3. Oracles and Talismans, Forgery and Pansophia: Joseph Smith Jr. as a Renaissance Magus. Utah State University Special Collections Library, Logan, Utah. At the time I responded to Compton’s book, I was the multiregional public affairs representative of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and was asked in that capacity to respond to the media publicity about the book.

Conclusion

Quinn is an energetic collector of information, but his gathering sometimes overpowers his processing and analysis. This review has shown that his work is sometimes uneven and not carefully prepared. Nevertheless, Quinn's writing is tight, compressed, and generally businesslike. As a historian, he struggles with a creative flare that moves him into intuitive generalizations and speculations that cannot be documented. When engaged in polemics, Quinn rushes his work, fails to check available sources, and makes errors. He undertakes large, complex projects; often he is unable to direct his analysis and express his findings in precise and clear language. At the same time, his work also shows exceptional skill and insights backed up by sound documentation. So as not to be dazzled by his skills, the reader must be careful and questioning and must check Quinn's footnotes by going to the documents he cites.

Quinn professes belief in Jesus Christ, in Joseph Smith as a prophet, and in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as authorized to administer saving ordinances, yet he continues to write in the language of a secular humanist rather than in the language of faith. This results in a style and presentation as if two different people authored his work. I am left with the impression that Quinn writes to please the secular humanists in the historical community, yet at the same time expresses belief to suggest that he desires to participate with the community of his faith in full fellowship. The result is a style and methodology of writing history that is not integrated.

These considerations have bearing on anyone writing about Mormonism and magic. Joseph Smith wrote that he was a prophet of God and experienced the visions of God and of God's angels in the tradition of Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Peter, Paul, and John. That these administrations were part of a personal anthropomorphic/theomorphic God restoring his own system of knowledge and way of living to humans is an astounding and significant message. Those who knew Joseph Smith affirmed what he said and wrote about his reality. These Mormon beliefs suggest that at least some historians should approach the subject of the supernatural through Joseph
Smith’s eyes rather than through the eyes and language of one who is a skeptic or one who does not believe. Quinn has the background to do the believer’s work if he can muster the courage.

Finally, a quotation from Leonard J. Arrington:

Every history, though written as truthfully as possible, is always subject to future corrections and amplifications. That is the nature of our craft, just as in economics, sociology, anthropology, and other social sciences. We learn something, or think we learn something, and then we get new evidence and we have to revise our thinking. Then we discover that our new evidence was flawed and we have to rethink again. Our restless reexamination forces us to work out new understandings that are consistent with the known facts. This precise study, honest and sincere as it is, adds to our appreciation for our past. I can speak for most of my associates when I say that evidences continue to accumulate that deepen and strengthen our attachment to our faith. 21