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The Reluctant Metaphysicians

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Introduction

IN THE SUMMER OF 1829, Jesse Smith of Stockholm, New York, wrote an angry letter to his nephew Hyrum in response to a query about the Book of Mormon, which was being translated by Hyrum's brother Joseph Jr. Among other complaints, Uncle Jesse described Joseph Jr.'s new scripture as "discovered by the necromancy of infidelity."¹ These words do not

1. Jesse Smith (Stockholm, New York) to Hyrum Smith (Palmyra, New York), 17 June 1829; transcribed in Joseph Smith Letterbook, 1837–1843, Joseph Smith collection, 1827–1844, Correspondence, 1829–1844, 2:59–61, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City. Other contemporary references to Smith's "necromancy" include Eber D. Howe,

carry the same meaning they once did, but how to translate them isn't entirely clear. *Necromancy* often meant magic, but it also carried the sense of a frightful magic concerned with conjuring the dead, commonly treasure demons. *Infidelity* meant atheism, a broad and charged term that indicted most forms of non-Protestant belief. Whatever its precise meaning, Jesse's phrase cast his visionary nephew in a terrible light. For almost two centuries these and similar critical scowls at Joseph Smith and the Mormonism he founded have driven the narrative and interpretive approaches to Mormonism among critics, defenders, and onlookers.

Nearly two centuries later, discussions about the intersections of magic, heresy, and religion in Mormonism mostly exemplify the French aphorism "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" (The more things change, the more they stay the same). Many contemporary discussions still repeat old debates about religious legitimacy just as they were originally framed in the nineteenth century. In the last two decades, a handful of studies have attempted to break the pattern and provide a scholarly view into the cultural tensions surrounding the religious meanings of Mormonism and magic. These books, combined with the scholarly and public context in which they occur, demonstrate a slow movement away from approaches dominated, however inadvertently, by an uncritically Protestant worldview. Though the road has been rocky, several books have done much to further the discussion. This essay engages this literature, mostly in the context of religious studies, by considering what it means, and has meant, to call early Mormonism "magic" or Joseph Smith a "magician."

Mormonism Unveiled: Or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, from Its Rise to the Present Time (Painesville, OH: E. D. Howe, 1834), 12, 31–32, 43, 94; and Daniel Parrish Kidder, *Mormonism and the Mormons: A Historical View of the Rise and Progress of the Sect Self-styled Latter-day Saints* (New York: Lane & Sandford, 1842), 29.

Section 1: Magic and metaphysics

In the 1970s, the LDS Church hired Leonard Arrington, an economic historian, to lead its history department and begin to sort through its incredible archival resources. New documents came fast and furious as Arrington's group began to process these archives, opening narratives of Mormon history that diverged at times, sometimes sharply, from prior institutional accounts. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century devotional historiography had framed church history as scripture in an extension of the supernatural rationalism of early Mormonism, while academic history generally bracketed or excluded the supernatural. The Arrington period was the first time that Mormon historians moved beyond history as scripture in any sustained way, but it remained a fact that clear partisan lines were drawn in the sand and single documents as proof texts could exert disproportionate influence. The presence of ex-Mormon and evangelical countercultists on the one side and a conservative institutional church on the other increased the stakes of any historical discussion.

Within the overall context of polemical controversy and the Arrington period (later dubbed the "New Mormon History"), Michael Quinn published his book *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* in 1987, an exhaustive and sometimes exhausting litany of "magical" items, dates, practices, and possible exposures for Joseph Smith, his family, and his followers. *Magic World View* reiterates, albeit with the scientific authority of prolix footnotes, the old polemical claim that Joseph Smith was a magician.² The content and context of Quinn's book led to harsh, even cruel,

2. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987, 1998). Most of the evidence adduced in *Magic World View* was tangential, circumstantial, or contextual—of the two main "smoking guns" in which people close to Smith explicitly endorsed folk "magical" practices, one proved to be a forgery and the other was misinterpreted. The "salamander" letter tying Smith to typical early modern treasure magic practices was a Hofmann forgery, as recounted in Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988). Quinn misreads (first edition, pp. ix, 127–33, 128n5; 2nd edition, pp. xi–xii, 152, 330n14, 465n124, 467n137, 469n157) Lucy Mack Smith's ostensible confession

criticism from many orthodox Latter-day Saints. Quinn, a smart historian with an encyclopedic knowledge of early Mormonism, became a sort of casualty in an internecine battle among Latter-day Saints about the meaning of their tradition. Although it drew some of its momentum from the Mark Hofmann forgeries, Quinn's *Magic World View* relied primarily on evidence not terribly different from that discussed in Jon Butler's more influential book *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (1990), which documented the persistence and influence of esoteric folk traditions in early America, or Alan Taylor's work on the "supernatural economy" of late colonial America.³

Yet scholarly writing about magic was already in the process of moving on in the 1980s, leaving Quinn and his critics outmoded before publication of the revised edition of *Magic World View* in 1998. The argument over whether Joseph Smith was a magician was as old as Mormonism. Changing the terms of the discussion would require greater scholarly distance.

A scholar of nature religions and women's studies with an emphasis on marginal or "new" religious traditions, Catherine Albanese brought considerable intellectual and textual resources to bear in *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (2007), a survey of American "metaphysical religion."⁴ Working through the overall arc of American religious history, Albanese challenges two predominant theories of the development of American Christianity. The first, represented by William McLoughlin, sees the story of recurrent evangelical revivals as the critical engine of American

of participation in folk magic. On this see Samuel M. Brown, "Reconsidering Lucy Mack Smith's Folk Magic Confession," *Mormon Historical Studies* 13/1–2 (Spring–Fall 2012): 1–12.

3. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); and Alan Taylor, "The Early Republic's Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780–1830," *American Quarterly* 38/1 (Spring 1986): 6–34.

4. Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

religion, in what has been termed the “evangelical thesis.”⁵ Jon Butler responded in 1990 by arguing that it was the transition from European establishment churches and folk traditions to post-Revolutionary denominations, rather than the evangelical impulse per se, that drove religious change in America.⁶ Albanese joined the broader debate by suggesting that there is another important influence in American religion: an identifiable and persistent metaphysical tradition that did not end with the close of the eighteenth century but still continues to inform and challenge America’s religious mainstreams.

Watching for continuities with Renaissance esoteric traditions, Albanese’s *Republic of Mind and Spirit* encompasses English cunning folk, Afro-Caribbean shamans, Puritan hermeticists, séance spiritualists, Indian powwows, phreno-mesmerists and magnetists, Shakers, Fourierists, Christian Scientists, Universalists, Transcendentalists, New Thought and New Age practitioners, Americanizers of Eastern philosophies (particularly Buddhism, Taoism, and yoga), Theosophists, and physiological reformers. And, of course, nineteenth-century Mormons. Albanese’s use of the terms *metaphysics* and *metaphysicians* will probably not gain academic or popular currency for various reasons. Still, like the more standard term *Western esotericism*, Albanese’s terminology displaces polemical terms like *magic* and *occult* and captures something of the nature of the

5. William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607–1977*, ed. Martin E. Marty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), as discussed in Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 2. Paul K. Conkin provides a sophisticated treatment of mainline Protestantism in *The Uneasy Center: Reformed Christianity in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

6. Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*. Keith Thomas’s book *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) previously provided a background on early modern Europe and the Protestant campaign to eliminate Catholic mysticism from the reformed church. Frances A. Yates provided the overview of European hermeticism in *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), while Herbert Leventhal had emphasized other aspects of occult culture in his book *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in Eighteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1976).

philosophical and spiritual impulse behind the movements whose stories she tells.

Albanese's specific treatment of Mormonism is largely a minor updating of Quinn, whom she cites extensively. Her distinctive claims about Mormonism are intriguing but incorrect arguments for the male-female divine dyad in Mormonism and Smith's theological dependence on Swedenborg. (Smith was probably aware of Swedenborgianism but never a follower to any important extent.)⁷ Though she moves beyond Quinn's obsolete "magic world view" framing, Albanese's argument that Mormonism belongs in the tradition of American metaphysical religion is also not new: critics have been comparing Smith and his followers to various heretics, mystics, and practitioners of Western esotericism almost since the church was founded. Mormons were Swedenborgians, they were mesmerists, they were Camisards or the apocalyptic Anabaptists of early modern Muenster. In the nineteenth century, comparisons to similar heresies mostly represented an argument from providential history—a view of history that maintained that because Protestantism conquered America and prior heresies had faded into the past, anything that resembled those heresies was destined for demise.⁸

While Albanese treats her subjects sympathetically, her classification largely follows the Protestant precedent—these traditions are what Protestantism is *not*.⁹ This is-not-ness can represent merely the Other,

7. The relationship between Smith and Swedenborgianism still awaits a definitive treatment. On the possibility of a direct encounter, Albanese (*Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 142) and Brooke (*Refiner's Fire*, 212; see n. 15 below for full citation) rely on Quinn (*Magic World View*, 174, 1987 ed.), who adduces a single quote from a late autobiography of an erstwhile Swedenborgian who became a prominent Mormon. Mormons did mention Swedenborgianism occasionally, generally in derisive terms. The entry in Charles Buck's extremely popular *Theological Dictionary* provided a minimal overview of Swedenborgianism for American readers in the early 1800s. I personally doubt Smith knew much more about Swedenborg than is contained in that entry.

8. Matthew Bowman and I are working on a treatment of competing theologies of history in antebellum Protestantism and early Mormonism currently titled "Fragments of Mormonism': Ancient History and the Early Mormon Assault on Protestantism."

9. Jonathan Z. Smith does an excellent job of thinking through the use of "magic" in comparison and categorization in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 215–29.

the this-is-not-me, or it can represent what remains uncategorized after a binary classification. When the world divides into two categories, there is always a remainder, something left over. Objects in a remainder demonstrate that the classification is not as secure as one might hope. Such a remainder has various names depending on the context: *triton ti*, *tertium quid*, liminal entity. The category “magic” is such a remainder when religion and science define their polar opposition. There is substantial power and risk associated with objects that either span or exist between the poles of a binary classification. As anthropologists have observed for a century, such liminal entities can threaten, destabilize, and transform.¹⁰ In the case of religion and science, magic has allowed science to remake religion in significant ways. By defining specific elements of religion as “magical,” science has managed to hollow out religion’s ritual and supernatural center. (This process makes possible Stephen Gould’s “non-overlapping magisteria” concept, a culmination of the modern Protestant and Enlightenment project of disenchanting religion.)¹¹

The disenchantment of religion by naming its various elements “magical” is an interesting topic in its own right. For scholars of religion and culture, though, the important analytical problem is that the category “magic” or “metaphysical religion” is a hodgepodge, a miscellany. Studying a remainder as if it were unitary is generally poor methodology. Saying something is magic is not saying much with any rigor. The coherence of the category is an artifact of the observer rather than something true of the entity under study. Such a categorization primarily facilitates partisan manipulation. While Albanese celebrates an encyclopedically diverse and fascinating group of rebels against the Protestant mainstreams and clearly moves beyond the polemical impulse behind discussions of magic, her

10. See, for example, Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage: A Classic Study of Cultural Celebrations* (1909; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*,” in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967); and Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; repr., London: Routledge, 2002).

11. Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002).

project ultimately cannot free itself from the methodological and theoretical limitations of a study of conceptual remainders.

Randall Styers, in his *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*, takes a theoretical and historiographical approach to magic and modernism and carefully demonstrates the elasticity of these too-flexible concepts.¹² Building on important theoretical work by Jonathan Z. Smith, Styers outlines how scholars have used the category of magic as part of their elaborations of religion, science, and modernism. Styers knows the key thinkers well, describes their arguments with precision and insight, and draws attention to two basic phenomena. First, scholars and others defined magic as the “bastard sister” of religion as a way to corral religion into a “rationalist” pasture. Normative Protestantism became a private, nonmaterial “devotion” in the thinnest sense of the term. Second, the elaboration of science required magic as a foil and a place to store past sins or missteps: early science that was visibly religious or supernaturalist could be dismissed as nonscience. This process created a sanitized version of science with an impeccable pedigree.

In parallel with the Enlightenment mainstream, the Protestant mainstream found uses for the concept “magic” in its contests with opponents, particularly internal heretics like the subjects of Albanese’s *Republic of Mind and Spirit*. However else this concept has been used, it has helped to defame and defang critics and opponents to the mainstream. Styers provides a rigorous approach to understanding this concept and explains in some respects the methodological problems with prior efforts to analyze a remainder as if it were a unity.

Wouter Hanegraaff, the Dutch holder of one of the few endowed chairs in esotericism or hermeticism, extended Styers’s arguments within the much broader space of Western esotericism. While the discipline within which Hanegraaff wrote remains in its infancy, his *Esotericism and the Academy* furthered the debate considerably.¹³ Struggling with

12. Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

13. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

nomenclature as everyone working in this space does, Hanegraaff settles on the neologism “Platonic Orientalism” to describe key traditions within Albanese’s “metaphysical religion.”¹⁴ Although Platonic Orientalism is a slightly opaque term, Hanegraaff is true to Styers’s insights as he follows the threads of the heavily interpreted survival of the religion and culture of the antique Mediterranean. Although he explores some tangents of more modest significance, Hanegraaff importantly focuses on a coherent *what*: antique Mediterranean culture—especially Egypt-derived wisdom and late Platonism—as it survives into the modern era. The most important survivals encompassed some Platonic philosophy, some syncretic henotheism, some Egyptophilia, and some theurgy. Hanegraaff sees terms like *magic* or *occult* or *esoteric* as words fitted for battle rather than scholarship, and he is largely correct. While at times overwrought, his sections on the evolution of these controversial terms represent a useful extension of Styers’s analysis into occultism and esotericism. While Styers is more rigorous, both authors provide methodological and conceptual tools for beginning to interpret “magic” both within Mormon history and within the academy writ large.

Section 2: Antique survivals and anti-modernism

Hanegraaff focuses on early and late modern thought, mostly European, at its intersection with the academy. He correctly identifies the impulse behind “Platonic Orientalism” and other kindred traditions commonly grouped under “Western esotericism”: a reverence for antiquity, the persistence of the cosmological worldview, and a reluctance to embrace modernism in its entirety. More immediately relevant to Mormon studies, between the first and second editions of *Magic World View*, John Brooke, a prominent American political historian, published an account of “hermetic” continuities between the Radical Reformation and Mormonism in *The Refiner’s Fire*.¹⁵ His Bancroft-winning book became a

14. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 12.

15. John Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

flashpoint of controversy within the insular community of Mormon history, a controversy that demonstrated how separate much of that community still was from other American and religious historians.¹⁶ Brooke's engaging and informative book provided a plausible trail from the Radical Reformation of sixteenth-century Europe to the religious ferment of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America. While *Refiner's Fire* encountered considerable criticism, it suffered from only a few of the faults of which many Mormon readers accused it. Overall, Brooke depended too much on Dame Frances Yates's hermeticism thesis (first elaborated in her 1964 book *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*), attributed too much conceptual gravity to counterfeiting, and was unable to provide secure textual evidence of direct hermetic influence on early Mormonism beyond Masonry.

But those problems should not distract from the book's significant contributions. While Brooke occasionally relies on Quinn, he contributes substantial original insight into various esoteric threads in the Atlantic world between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries and correctly situated Mormonism within Atlantic culture. Further, *Refiner's Fire* was perhaps the first book by an academic outsider to take Mormon theology seriously, as a subject for careful, systematic interrogation. Until a reading community appreciates the robustness and coherence of an alternative cultural tradition, it is difficult to frame cultural rebels as anything but idiosyncratic. With Brooke's foundation, it became easier to see that Mormonism represented a principled and coherent assault on Protestantism.

Antique survivals like those described by Brooke and Hanegraaff are a key enemy to the modern project of Enlightenment, a cultural entity that is itself commonly misunderstood. In *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*, Leigh Eric Schmidt clarifies the meanings and mechanisms of the American Enlightenment through the lens of the rising science of acoustics.¹⁷ While optics had long been a

16. Jan Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 204–18.

17. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

major focus for physicists and philosophers, acoustic science was an upstart discipline. But acoustic science had an important impact not just directly in the debates over the meaning of sound, but as an exemplum that clarifies what was happening in the broader culture.

Using Enlightenment exposés of the ancient Greek oracles as elaborate ventriloquism, Schmidt fleshed out a compelling narrative about “modernity” and “Enlightenment.” Schmidt’s story is of disenchantment—the banishment of God from nature and human experience. In an extreme form, the overwrought Friedrich Nietzsche declared God dead; in a milder form, some early Americans subscribed to Deism (a nebulous term that overlaps roughly with a disenchanted theism). Modernism as disenchantment is a familiar trope in academic writing. By *disenchantment* scholars mean any of a number of things: the waning of the cosmological worldview, the loss of religion/theocracy as the organizing principle of society in the global West, a transition in religion from the medieval Catholic focus on church community toward the Protestant emphasis on the believer and his private conscience, or the disruption of divine immanence in the natural world. All of these are accurate depictions, in varying degrees and at various points in history, of the disenchantment associated with modernity.

Joseph Smith strongly resisted this disenchantment. This resistance placed him in many respects on the wrong side of the Enlightenment, as Schmidt perceptively observes. But Smith simultaneously welcomed other elements of the Enlightenment project. Smith’s relationship to modern ideals of Enlightenment, as that of those who followed him, is complex. Smith loved logical exegesis, enjoyed puzzling through intellectual or theological problems in pursuit of consistent solutions. He cherished common sense, albeit in a way specific to him and his followers.¹⁸ Smith stands as a reminder that the Enlightenment wasn’t ultimately about rationality per se—people had been rationally religious for

18. Jared Hickman and I explore the meanings of “common sense” philosophy and theology in Mormonism as part of our work in progress on translation and the Mormon challenge to modernity.

a very long time—it was a story about shifting contexts and authority and axioms.

Section 3: Mormon reluctance

Understanding the historiographic context facilitates comprehension of an important problem in the study of Mormonism and esotericism: Mormons generally rejected any such comparison. That they rejected the word *magic* is unsurprising, as that was mostly a term of simple derision. But Mormons rejected other, more sophisticated comparisons as well. What does Mormon rejection of comparisons to Western esotericism mean? An extreme version of the religious studies technique of *epoche*, or bracketing, would require that we take Mormons at their word. If they say they are not a Western esoteric tradition, then they are not. But that approach, which largely abandons hope for analytical comparisons, is not what I am advocating here. Asking questions, “looking under the hood,” and seeing whether people’s accounts of themselves and their cultural systems accurately describe those cultural systems are the appropriate role of the academic. I am suggesting, though, that the Mormon reluctance to accept their characterization as practitioners of Western esotericism is worth considering in its own right. The reluctance tells us a lot about both those comparing and those being compared.

Whereas many practitioners of Western esotericism are explicit about their dependence on particular esoteric traditions (such a dependence was generally the point of an esoteric tradition), Joseph Smith and the early Mormons generally rejected any explicit ties with esotericism. When confronted with Shakers, Fourierists, the French Prophets, Quakers, Swedenborgianists, or mesmerists, Smith denounced them as readily as he denounced the evangelical groups that attacked him and his movement.¹⁹ Smith was not constrained by the authority of an esoteric tradi-

19. See, for example, *Times and Seasons* 4/9 (15 March 1843): 137; 5/1 (1 January 1844): 395; 6/5 (15 March 1845): 833; and Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 375, entry for 6 May 1843 (contrast B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980], 5:383).

tion. Even the treasure quest, to which he brought a surprisingly rich vision of matter and the resurrected earth, met with denials and rejections on Smith's part.²⁰ While he engaged in something like the *prisca theologia* of Patristic and Renaissance esoteric thinkers, he ranged across the breadth of Western and ancient Mediterranean history.²¹ There was something eclectic about Joseph Smith—he was a syncretist or a bricoleur or, as he and his followers saw it, a prophet. Smith situated himself firmly within historic Christianity—or at least a reenvisioned Christian history. For someone who was continually translating, seeing to the center of things, *magic* was the wrong word to describe what Smith was pursuing.

In his influential essay “What a Difference a Difference Makes,” Jonathan Z. Smith argues that communities and observers emphasize difference when it is informative or required to differentiate conceptually adjacent entities.²² Mormons strenuously rejected the comparison to Western esoteric traditions in part because there are important similarities between the traditions. But that is only a partial explanation of why Smith and his followers have been so reluctant to allow others to classify them as representatives of Western esoteric traditions. The important question is not whether Smith's apparent innovations can be classed as metaphysical or esoteric or magical. Smith and the other metaphysicians were all rebels against the Protestant mainstream, some similarities are readily apparent, and “Western esotericism” is nebulous enough to allow a comparison even without strong evidence of a direct link. The more important question is why Smith so adamantly rejected the association. To my mind, there are four principal reasons that Smith rejected claims of dependence on Western esotericism.

First, comparisons to magic or esotericism were generally pejorative partisanship. Smith was a biblical prophet building a biblical Zion, and

20. Samuel M. Brown, “Relics, Graves, and the Treasure Quest,” chap. 3 in *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

21. Matthew Bowman and I cover these topics in our study “Fragments of Mormonism,” currently in preparation.

22. Smith, *Relating Religion*, 251–302.

allowing for allegiances with dark arts, however much he thought he could see the meaningful reality behind some esoteric practices, prevented his more important work of recovering ancient biblical religion. The one esoteric tradition Smith explicitly embraced was Masonry, during its post-Morgan resurgence. Masonry was on its way back to cultural dominance, and Smith was building an empire on the Mississippi. He hoped Nauvoo, his Zion city-state, would be the greatest city in America. Masonry had the potential to help in this grand effort. (Some have overstated this point in the past—Smith was not using Masonry solely for political advantage.) Denial is what people tend to do when they are placed in a blighted remainder, particularly when that classification is meant to prevent their social progress.

Second, Smith was in competition with other rebel traditions during this period of dramatic religious growth in America. Other groups—Shakers, Universalists, the followers of various charismatic prophets—represented competing paths to religious enlightenment critical of normative Protestantism. So, frankly, did radical Methodism in its beginnings. Though they inhabited a cultural space recognizable to outsiders, Mormons and these other groups competed with each other. Much as ostensibly ecumenical Protestants recognized a body of Christ but fought each other for converts, so did sectarians compete outside the evangelical establishment.

Third, Smith was attempting to build a coherent community, a church. Smith's important 1842 editorial titled "Try the Spirits" was all about constraining supernatural power for the purpose of establishing a stable society. The editorial announced the importance of distinguishing normative (priesthood-based) supernatural encounters from those mediated by "necromancers, soothsayers, and astrologers."²³ Smith, implicitly following a long interpretive tradition (which Styers describes in some depth, most visibly in association with Durkheim), used magic as a marker for centrifugal, anti-communal behaviors that imperil the

23. [Joseph Smith and coauthors], "Try the Spirits," *Times and Seasons* 3 (1 April 1842): 745.

integrity of a church. Smith was adamantly communalist in his vision and his theology. The “metaphysical” traditions contained anarchic tendencies as witnessed by the common centrifugalism of esotericism. The Shakers struggled during the charismatic Era of Manifestations to control the power unleashed. So did Methodists and Baptists during their early development in America. Mormons faced similar problems. American esoteric traditions were powerfully independent, whereas Smith was crafting a coherent community for the ages.

Fourth and most importantly, Smith rejected the Protestant formulation of history and ecclesial authority. Smith had a complex relationship with the Enlightenment, but whatever the specifics of that relationship, he was assiduously anti-Protestant. Allowing Protestant control of terminology (like *magic* or *occult*) to describe his rejection of Protestant norms would have meant ceding to Protestantism moral and cultural authority over Mormonism. That was intolerable for a movement so adamant that the entire edifice of Protestantism was a lie. Mormons were the only true Christian church, not a post-Protestant sect with some esoteric tendencies. And while the attitudes dismissed as magic were a potent rejection of the excesses of modernism, the opprobrium attached to the term was enough to require the rejection of the framing itself.

Few if any scholars would still be comfortable using the term *magic world view* to describe much of anything. But the term *magic* remains important to practitioners and participants. While the jargon often obfuscates more than it clarifies, for the last half century many scholars in the humanities have used the adjectives *emic* and *etic* to describe concepts that are meaningful to insiders/participants (*emic*) versus outsiders/observers (*etic*). Whatever terminology is used, the current scholarly consensus is that magic is an *emic* rather than an *etic* concept or category: participants know what the word means and use it in their interpretation of their and others' lives and beliefs, but “magic” functions poorly as an analytic category for scholars. To call something “magic” is to engage it as an insider embroiled in partisan conflicts. It is not an act of scholarly comparison. Given that discourse about magic expresses *emic* rather than *etic* perspectives, that Mormons rejected associations with magic, and that *magic* is

usually a shorthand for some other conflict or point of comparison, I doubt that the term *magic* is of any real utility for scholarly understanding of Mormonism.

The title of Quinn's *Magic World View* can serve as a thought experiment to illustrate my point. The original title is roughly synonymous with *Early Mormonism and the Crazy World View* or *Early Mormons Were Superstitious!* or *Early Mormonism and the Demonic World View*. Assuming that content follows title, a more academic approach might have been titled *Mormonism and the Fight against Modernity* or *Antebellum Folk Religion and Early Mormonism* or *Early Mormonism and the Persistence of Pre-Modern Atlantic Culture*. I am not arguing that Quinn sinned in the 1980s by titling his book or writing the way he did. I'm arguing that he was participating in insider polemics in a way many scholars (both inside and outside Mormonism) once did. From a temporal and academic distance we can see, though, that this approach is no longer terribly relevant.

Were early Mormons magicians? Was Joseph Smith the Wizard of Oz? Recent scholarship makes clear that framing the topic like this begs the question in the pedantic sense of the phrase: the question itself defines the answer. There is no real answer because it is not a question; it is an assertion. When Mormons rejected accusations of magical or occult ties, they were not dissembling. They were saying something very important and true. Framing Mormonism as magic wears a patina of science, but it invokes a troubled, methodologically flawed legacy. Contemporary analytic methods and interpretive traditions make possible investigations that can move well beyond prior efforts.

Joseph Smith and his early followers present an illuminating test case for evaluating the meaning and significance of the academic practice of categorization and classification. The Mormons remind us how often the distance required for scholarship proves shorter than hoped, like a map that crumples under pinched fingers. Particularly when it comes to societal master narratives like science, Enlightenment, magic, and metaphysics, scholars and participants must attend very carefully to their personal views and concerns. Without such methodological caution,

insights and inferences are likely to be misguided and misleading. Such has been the case with discussions about Mormonism and magic, but thanks to recent excellent scholarship, this need no longer be the case.

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