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“An Obstacle to Deeper Understanding”

John Gee

“Are these magic cloaks?” asked Pippin, looking at them with wonder.

“I do not know what you mean by that,” answered the leader of the Elves. “They are fair garments, and the web is good, for it was made in this land. They are elvish robes certainly, if that is what you mean.”

J. R. R. Tolkien

Some Historical Context

Michael Quinn made a big mistake in publishing the first edition of his Early Mormonism and the Magic World View. His publisher (see p. xiii)3 and his friends4 warned him about the mistake he was


4. At least one of the historians whom Quinn thanks in his acknowledgments (see pp. xviii–xix) has told me that he advised Quinn before he went to print the first time that it would be a mistake to publish this particular work because of major historical flaws.

making. He chose to publish the book anyway. When Quinn's first edition came out in 1987, the reviewers pointed out fundamental flaws—including a tortured thesis,\(^5\) twisted and forged evidence, and problematic and idiosyncratic use of loaded language—and it became clear that these flaws irreparably marred the entire framework of the book.

In the decade preceding the first edition of Quinn's book, a small resurgence in studying "magic" as part of the lives of major religious figures, notably Jesus, was occurring. Morton Smith claimed that Jesus was typical of wandering Greek "magicians" who traveled around working miracles.\(^6\) Smith thought this because there were dozens of "magician's" handbooks that had been gathered together as the so-called Greek Magical Papyri. As a result of Smith's work, Hans Dieter Betz, a New Testament scholar, headed up a project to publish translations of all the so-called Greek Magical Papyri.\(^7\) And if Jesus can be viewed in such a context (see pp. 4-6), why not Joseph Smith?

The decade or so after the original publication of Quinn's book has produced several significant developments in the field of "magic" studies, some of which deserve mention. In 1986, the year before Quinn published his book, Princeton University Press published Garth Fowden's *The Egyptian Hermes*,\(^8\) in which Fowden argued that in Roman Egypt "neither in principle nor, often enough, in practice, is there any difference between this sort of religion and what later, more sophisticated generations call magic."\(^9\) Fowden also reassembled the archive from which many of the so-called Greek Magical Papyri derived.\(^10\) In 1990, Cambridge University published Stanley Tambiah's *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*, which showed that the definitions of many of the most important writers

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9. Ibid., 80.
10. See ibid., 168–72.
on "magic" were heavily influenced both by their backgrounds and their personal ideological agendas: they defined "magic" as religious beliefs other than their own. In 1992, the International Interdisciplinary Conference on Magic in the Ancient World failed to come to any agreement on what "magic" was. The plenary speaker, Jonathan Z. Smith, in particular voiced strong opinions:

I see little merit in continuing the use of the substantive term "magic" in second-order, theoretical, academic discourse. We have better and more precise scholarly taxa for each of the phenomena commonly denoted by "magic" which, among other benefits, create more useful categories for comparison. For any culture I am familiar with, we can trade places between the corpus of materials conventionally labeled "magical" and corpora designated by other generic terms (e.g., healing, divining, execrative) with no cognitive loss. Indeed, there would be a gain.

As a result of the conference, Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki decided to jettison the term magic in favor of ritual power, whatever that term may mean. In 1993, Robert Ritner's doctoral dissertation was published. It contained an extensive critique and revision of notions about "magic" in ancient Egypt and a warning about and polemic against imposing universal categories derived from studies of one culture onto studies of another culture. In 1994, Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith published a collection of translations of Coptic counterparts to the so-called Greek Magical Papyri. This collection

12. I was a participant at the conference, as were William Brashear, Marvin Meyer, Paul Mirecki, Stephen Ricks, Robert Ritner, Jonathan Z. Smith, and others. I do not remember Quinn's having made an appearance.
included an introductory essay by Edmund Meltzer, which argued that because of “the loaded, evaluative connotation of ‘magic’ as false, deceptive, discredited, or morally tainted” in contrast with science and religion, “‘magic’ is relegated to the ‘they’ side of a ‘we/they’ dichotomy. This is simultaneously unfair to the materials and practices studied under the heading of ‘magic,’ and self-serving for the materials (mainly those we identify as ‘our own’) that are exempted from that label. It perpetuates a complacent double standard.”\(^{17}\) In 1995, twin studies by Robert Ritner\(^{18}\) and William Brashear\(^{19}\) showed that the manuscripts Morton Smith had identified as indicative of a plethora of wandering Greek “magicians” all came from Egyptian temples (most of them from a single find); the so-called Greek Magical Papyri are Egyptian religious papyri from a temple archive and thus should not be considered Greek and need not be considered “magical.” A lemma to this conclusion is that no class of wandering Greek “magicians” ever existed; thus the evidence of Jesus (and consequently of Joseph Smith) as a magician needs reassessment. A 1997 reevaluation of “magic” by Michael F. Brown concluded that “the traditional distinctions between magic, science, and religion have outlived their utility and, in fact, represent an obstacle to deeper understanding.”\(^{20}\) In fact, “the index to the volumes of the American Ethnologist published between 1985 and 1989 lists more references under ‘fisheries’ (two) and ‘tattoos’ (one) than under ‘magic’ (none). Such a decline of interest . . . reflects irreversible changes that have taken place within anthropology.”\(^{21}\) So much has the field changed that Brown stated at the beginning of his survey that he resisted the temptation “to argue that magic doesn’t exist” “only with great difficulty.”\(^{22}\)

\(^{17}\) Edmund Meltzer, introduction to Ancient Christian Magic, 13.

\(^{18}\) Robert K. Ritner, “Egyptian Magical Practice under the Roman Empire: The Demotic Spells and Their Religious Context,” in Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), II.18.5:3333–79.


\(^{20}\) Brown, “Thinking about Magic,” 130.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 122.
These important publications give good reasons to reevaluate Quinn’s stance on Joseph Smith with a very skeptical eye. Quinn, however, has chosen to ignore the recent developments and has now published a second edition of his “obstacle to deeper understanding.” But to say that Quinn remains unrepentant and has refused to correct his errors would be an understatement. If anything, the problems with the first edition have only compounded in the second. Only a few of the numerous mistakes in the book can be detailed here. The reader can only wonder what has caused a once-talented author to write utter nonsense.

One might construct an analogy of historical books to buildings. The hypothesis is the foundation, the sources are the building materials, and the logic is the design. Quinn has erected an unsightly edifice on Mormon history. The design is faulty, the foundation is shifting, and the building materials are warped and misshapen. Although Quinn’s sources range in quality from superior to inferior, he places far too much weight on the inferior materials, and the way in which he mishandles even good materials causes concern. Experience in checking his sources has revealed time and again that Quinn cannot be trusted to quote his sources correctly. For Quinn, there is no citation without misrepresentation. Every quotation, every reference, every source, every detail in every statement Quinn makes must be checked for accuracy. To test every brick in Quinn’s edifice, only to discover that most of them are sponges, is hardly a proper occupation for mortals. The instances of Quinn’s erroneous quotations that will appear in the course of this review will have to be taken as representative of the whole. Quinn’s distorted logic mars the entire structure of his thesis, but most of this review will concentrate on the lack of a solid foundation to Quinn’s thesis, for without an adequate

23. I have not checked every reference in Quinn’s book, but every reference that I have checked has been inaccurate in some way. In some cases Quinn has misinterpreted the source. In some cases he proof texts the quotation, and a fuller reading of the text undermines his case. And sometimes he is just plain wrong.

24. Quinn has been noted in the past for reporting facts inaccurately and distorting the tone of the remarks of others; see Duane Boyce, “A Betrayal of Trust,” FARMS Review of Books 9/2 (1997): 148–51. The present book contains innumerable instances of this same problem, but we can highlight only a couple. One of these is Quinn’s repeated false assertion that the
foundation Quinn's structure will not stand and deserves to be condemned despite the protestations of those unfortunate wandering souls who have chosen to seek shelter under it. To that end, I will examine one of Quinn's poorly concealed agendas and his heavy reliance on nonstandard definitions and the fallacy of equivocation. In the process we will also glance at other assorted absurdities that Quinn parades as historical research.

Quinn the Apologist

One could consider this book to be the result of Michael Quinn's skewed view of reality. Quinn has "always seen [him]self as a Mormon apologist" (p. xi) and "a conservative revisionist in the writing of Mormon history" (p. xvii), although few others see him this way.25

The anti-Mormon John L. Smith, for instance, refers to "D. Michael Quinn who evidently believes little of Mormonism."26 On the other

Encyclopedia of Mormonism "was an official product of the LDS Church" (pp. 338 n. 60, 339 n. 2).

Another: Daniel Peterson's statement, "Let me simply say, in passing, that, if we have occasionally been guilty of levity at the expense of some of our critics, this has been because they tempted us with irresistible targets. It isn't our fault. Like most other Americans in the late twentieth century, we are victims. A few of us, indeed, may have been born that way, with the nastiness gene—which is triggered by arrant humbuggery" (Daniel C. Peterson, "Editor's Introduction: Triptych [Inspired by Hieronymus Bosch]," FARMS Review of Books 8/1 [1996]: xxxvii n. 98) becomes "Peterson even boasted that some FARMS writers were born 'with the nastiness gene'" (p. xii). So an ironic "may have been" in passing becomes boasting that such is the case. Is this what Quinn means by "verbal viciousness" (p. xi)?

25. Quinn acknowledges this on page 330 note 13. Quinn's view of himself as an apologist ignores several important items: (1) his work is widely promoted by anti-Mormons, (2) he claims that he was excommunicated for "heresy" (p. xiii), and (3) others see him not as defending the Mormon religion but attacking it (acknowledged on p. 330 n. 13). These people may not know the real Michael Quinn. Having only his published work by which to make a judgment, they conclude that his published work can be considered Mormon apologetics only by a stretch of the imagination greater than that of which they are capable, and therefore that Quinn is not an apologist. Is it not odd that a self-proclaimed "heretic" [p. xiii] — the term is not generally used in Latter-day Saint parlance — would consider himself an "apologist" for the religion in which he thinks he is a "heretic"? I would be thrilled were Quinn a Mormon apologist, but he is not. Taken as a whole, his recent work constitutes, and is widely interpreted as constituting, a deliberate prolonged assault on the faith of millions of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the historical underpinnings of that faith.

side of the spectrum, Stephen E. Robinson noted that Quinn's book manifested "a total lack of any pro-Mormon bias. . . . Quinn is clearly no LDS apologist. There is not a single page of the main text that would appear to be motivated by loyalty to the LDS church or its doctrines or to be apologetic of the Church's interests."27 Unfortunately, Quinn shows no sign of having understood either this fact or the reasons for the criticism of his book in the first place, and thus he is very defensive in his second edition. If anything, Quinn is now even less loyal to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints than in the last edition.

The origins of this book might provide a clue to this lack of loyalty. Stephen Robinson noted of Quinn's first edition that Quinn must have begun his research when he still had the Hofmann letters and the salamander to serve as the rock of his hypotheses. It was those solid, indisputable historical documents that would give credibility to the rest of his data and make his case come together. Quinn's speculative notes would merely hang like decorations on the solid mass provided by the Hofmann documents, and the greater would justify the lesser. However, as Quinn approached publication, the Hofmann materials were pulled out from under him, leaving a huge salamander-shaped hole in the center of his theory. . . .

With the salamander letter and other Hofmann materials, Quinn had a respectable argument; without them he had a handful of fragmented and highly speculative research notes. It appears to me that when he was faced with the choice of seeing months of research go down the drain for lack of a credible context to put it in or of putting the best face on it and publishing anyway, Quinn simply made the wrong choice. This would explain why his remaining arguments are so strained and the scanty evidence so overworked. This would explain why the book is such a methodological nightmare. Having lost the turkey at the last minute, Quinn

has served us the gravy and trimmings, hoping we won’t notice the difference.28

Robinson was on target with his criticism.29 The Hofmann forgeries inspired Quinn’s interest in researching the subject in the first place (see p. xx). With the discovery of the forged nature of the source documents, one appropriate response would have been to trace the accusations of “magic” in early Latter-day Saint history to their basis in forgery and dismiss those accusations out of hand. Having undeniably invested a good deal of time and effort in research, Quinn believed “the historical issues these forgeries first raised still require a careful re-examination of other evidence” and thus produced his book (p. xx). In doing so, he apparently felt that accepting the modern charges of “magic” at face value and then claiming that Joseph Smith was guilty but excusable because everyone was doing it was an appropriate line of defense. The anti-Mormons predictably loved this type of “apologetics” and promoted it.30 Several individuals both in and out of Mormon apologetics questioned Quinn’s line of defense as it did not seem to them to be a defense at all. Indeed, it rather reminds one of that species of argu-

28. Ibid., 94–95.
29. I had hoped to explore this in greater detail here, but in the interest of space this material has moved to John Gee, “Forging Mormon History: The Impact of Hofmann Forgeries on the Study of ‘Magic’ in Early Latter-day Saint History,” FARMS Occasional Papers 2 (forthcoming). One Mormon historian told me that at the time of the original publication, Quinn bragged that he would not have to change a single thing in his book as a result of the Hofmann documents being exposed as forgeries.
mentative fallacy of the genus *ad hominem*, known as *tu quoque*, "in which it is suggested that an opponent has sometimes held the view which he now opposes, or that he has adopted the practice which he now condemns" (Quinn argues that Mormons now reject the "magic" practices they once embraced);\(^{31}\) it does seem rather odd for an "apologist" to employ an *ad hominem* argument against those he is supposedly defending. Quinn’s critics rightly pointed out the tortuous reasoning of the volume and the unquestioned adoption of a problematic definition of the term *magic*. Both anti-Mormons and apologists viewed Quinn’s book as a brief for the prosecution, not the defense, which means that as an apologist Quinn failed. But he seems to have failed to comprehend both that he failed and why.

With the publication of the second edition of this work, therefore, the tone of Michael Quinn’s writing takes on a distinctly defensive quality. He uses the opportunity to settle any scores with anyone he feels may have slighted,\(^{32}\) misrepresented, or criticized him in the past, particularly anyone who has ever viewed his work negatively. His hubris in this is, at times, breathtaking.\(^{33}\) Oddly, for a self-proclaimed “Mormon apologist,” Quinn chose not to take issue with any of the anti-Mormons who have recognized his work as an attack on Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.\(^{34}\) (Does he agree with them?) On the other hand, anyone who has the temerity to question his infallibility is, in Quinn’s view, *ipso facto* a “polemicist.”\(^{35}\) To Quinn, accordingly, those who criticize him “don’t mince words—they mince the truth” (p. x). They engage in "astonishing misreadings" (p. 334 n. 31; cf. 59), “distortions” (p. 337

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32. Some of this gets quite comical (see p. 340 n. 2).
33. Thus, he accuses an English professor of not knowing English (see p. 340 n. 7), a folklorist of not knowing about folklore (see p. 334 n. 31), and a scholar of the pseudepigrapha of not knowing the pseudepigrapha (see p. 358 n. 11), while congratulating himself on a greater mastery of the relevant field.
34. He is aware of this (see p. 357 n. 140) but apparently chose not to address the misuse of his work.
35. See William J. Hamblin’s review of Quinn, in this issue, pp. 236–41.
n. 52), “dishonest polemics” (p. 341 n. 20), “intentional misrepresentation” (p. 334 n. 31), and a “religiously polemical campaign, not scholarly discourse” (p. 334 n. 31). (Ironically, these terms give a good description of Quinn’s own work.) Quinn admits that if one of the reviewers whom he vociferously attacks had agreed with him, “I could regard him with compassion” (p. 403 n. 248). Thus those of us who do not subscribe to the dictum “When Michael Quinn speaks, the thinking has been done” will have to settle for being dismissed as “polemicists.” He seems much like a soldier who, dazed in the battle, insists on attacking his comrades and is surprised that they consider him a traitor to the cause and treat him as such. Thus, in his second edition, if Quinn comes across as an apologist for anything, it is as an apologist for himself.

Quinn views himself as misunderstood and persecuted for being a “heretic” (p. xiii). He sets out to defend himself, thus proving once again that there is nothing more tedious than the spectacle of disgruntled authors complaining that they have been misrepresented or, even worse, whimpering that they have been “misunderstood.” Academic authors, above all others, should be immunized from such concerns, after years of seeing the versions of our lectures we get back in blue books at the end of the term. Quinn’s decade-long absence from academia definitely shows.

36. For example, Quinn apparently feels that there is some special policy at FARMS about him: “Every time FARMS reviewers quote me in support of a faith-promoting position, the FARMS format requires putting the statement in a footnote and attaching a disclaimer” (p. 330 n. 13). Quinn is simply wrong. There is no policy about this at FARMS. Individual writers publishing with FARMS who care enough to read what Quinn puts out treat the material as they would any other anti-Mormon rhetoric. Those individual writers, not the editors, attach the disclaimers. Our consciences about Quinn’s questionable work and anti-Mormon stance, not FARMS format, require the disclaimer.

37. It does not take long before Quinn’s self-apologetics becomes amusing. Readers might want to count the number of times Quinn pats himself on the back. If Quinn’s arguments were so convincing, would we need to be reminded so often about the individuals who like his work (see, e.g., p. xxi)?

But it should not be imagined that he only views himself in this odd way. Quinn insists that Joseph “Smith’s first vision occurred within the context of his family’s treasure-quest” and interprets the vision as sanctioning if not promoting “a wide range of magical practices” (p. 31). But who, including Joseph Smith, ever took his first vision as doing anything of the sort? Readers should be aware that, as with a fun-house mirror, reality is distorted and nothing is quite as it seems in Quinn’s book.

A Method for Misunderstanding

Indeed, Mrs. Smith, we must not expect to get real information in such a line. Facts or opinions which are to pass through the hands of so many, to be misconceived by folly in one, and ignorance in another, can hardly have much truth left.

Jane Austen

It is instructive to compare Quinn’s theoretical reflections about how to write history with his actual practice. Several years ago Quinn opined that writers are certainly “dishonest or bad historians” if they fail to acknowledge the existence of even one piece of evidence they know challenges or contradicts the rest of their evidence. If this omission of relevant evidence is inadvertent, the author is careless. If the omission is an intentional effort to conceal or avoid presenting the reader with evidence that contradicts the preferred view of the writer, that is fraud whether by a scholar or non-scholar, historian or other specialist. If authors write in scholarly style, they are equally dishonest if they fail to acknowledge any significant work whose interpretations differ from their own.

39. In a footnote, Quinn at least comes out in support of the 1820 revivals (see p. 380 n. 3), but it is significant that his only attack on anti-Mormon allies is buried.
41. D. Michael Quinn, editor’s introduction to The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), xiii.
Quinn's ambitious ideal is utterly unrealistic, in my view. From personal experience, I know that it is all too easy when working with any complex subject that has any amount of secondary literature to forget about information that supports one's case, much less information that disagrees with it. Omission of such sources may or may not be honest. The point is that Quinn does not come close to living up to his own ideal. One example of many will have to suffice. Quinn begins his discussion of "magic" with a superficial and misleading look at "magic" in the Bible. Unfortunately, Quinn knows about important discussions of "magic" in the Bible that fundamentally alter the way "magic" is viewed but that he does not utilize in his discussion (see pp. 1-7). This is clearly a case in which Quinn has "conceal[ed] or avoid[ed] presenting the reader with evidence that contradicts the preferred view of the writer."43 In his double standard, one is reminded of another statement of Quinn's: "Dishonest apologists insist on these standards for everyone but themselves and in every subject but their own."44

His method of gathering and analyzing information guarantees a warped perspective. Often Quinn is not consistent, but when he is, his method is to gather all gossip and treat it as substantiated fact, not to sift out the eyewitness reports and rely on them. Any source, regardless of bias or veracity, is taken uncritically at face value (see, e.g., p. 45). For example, Quinn relies greatly on the Hurlbut-Howe affidavits without explaining why; it has been demonstrated from contemporary official records that those who supposedly gave them lied—not just gave inaccurate reminiscences but told blatant falsehoods.45 Why, given the fact that they are demonstrably false, should Quinn insist that "both scholars and casual readers should give

42. Such as the work by Stephen D. Ricks, "The Magician as Outsider in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament," in Ancient Magic and Ritual Power, 131-43. Quinn cites this on page 346 note 64, so he at least knew about it but seems not to have read it. For another example, see p. 209 below.
43. Quinn, editor's introduction to The New Mormon History, xiii.
44. Ibid.
greater attention to the reports by Palmyra neighbors” (p. 47)? Apparently because so much of his case depends on them.

Another suspicious source Quinn refers to repeatedly is a money-digging agreement that Joseph Smith Sr. and Joseph Smith Jr. are supposed to have entered into in 1825. This source looks suspiciously like a forgery. The original is not known despite diligent searching. Instead, a secondhand copy was supplied by one B. Wade to the Salt Lake Tribune, at that time a virulently anti-Mormon newspaper, for their 23 April 1880 edition. Indeed, according to another historian, the source of the publication combined with the lack of an original make “the document’s actual existence somewhat suspect.” The presence of the supposed signature of Isaac Hale, who was always opposed to money-digging, seems unusual. Yet instead of exercising discernment or critical acumen, Quinn assumes that the document is genuine without discussing its dubious nature.

Quinn’s sources cannot always be confirmed. For example, he supports one of his speculations with “early Utah folklore of the Dibble-Pierce families” (p. 44); however, a member of the Dibble family has denied to me that any such rumors as Quinn reports exist in his family.

Quinn insists that “both scholars and casual readers should give greater attention to the reports by Palmyra neighbors” because they “tend to carry greater weight than later recollections” (p. 47), but on the next page he bases his chronology and “fixed point” on the reminiscences of “cousins of Joseph Smith’s wife,” given fifty-five years after the fact (pp. 48, 394 n. 158).

Along with many others, Quinn places much emphasis on the comparison of the miracles of Jesus with the techniques from the so-called Greek Magical Papyri as establishing proof of Jesus’ involvement in “magic” (see pp. 4–6). But, as already noted, since the publication of Quinn’s first edition, the so-called Greek Magical Papyri

46. The article is reproduced in Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History, ed. John Philip Walker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 325.


48. Those interested in this flawed approach may consult Quinn’s sources, which are a much better presentation of material than Quinn’s.
have been shown to be neither Greek nor necessarily "magical" but rather to be from an Egyptian temple archive. Establishing a context for these documents creates major problems for those who wish to use them to establish that Jesus is guilty of "magic," since that comparison assumes that the documents are "magical" and not part of a particular religion in the first place. Now that the documents have been placed in their proper context, to argue that Jesus' practices mirror those of the Theban cache is to argue that Jesus was an Isis worshiper—an utterly absurd claim. If Quinn had been revising his book to reflect the change in current scholarship, he would have had to eliminate this section; instead, he defends the older, less-informed view, and his rearguard action seems absurd.

Equivocation Exercises

Magic, n. An art of converting superstition into coin. There are other arts serving the same high purpose, but the discreet lexicographer does not name them.

Ambrose Bierce

Quinn has a definition problem. He is neither careful nor accurate in his use of words. This problem not only extends to his non-standard definitions of polemics and polemists51 but especially to his

49. See Ritner, "Egyptian Magical Practice," 3333–79; Brashear, "The Greek Magical Papyri," 3380-684; John Gee, "Abracadabra, Isaac and Jacob," Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 7/1 (1995): 35–46; and Fowden, The Egyptian Hermes, 168–74. Quinn's misunderstanding of the issue (pp. 529–30 n. 480) does not help matters. The fact that some scholars continue using the term magic does not change the provenance of the texts nor the issue involved. Egyptologists use the terms magic and religion synonymously, and the papyri continue to be called "magical" because they have been called that for so long that the term has become traditional. Moreover, the fact that the full implications of their temple provenance have not occurred to everyone working in the field does not negate those implications. Nor does it aid understanding to label Egyptian temple texts as "magical."


51. See William Hamblin’s discussion of polemic/polemics, in this issue, pp. 236–41. Quinn's claim, "I have tried to avoid engaging in polemics" (p. xi), is not true under the standard definition and not even true under his own definition. Quinn's second edition is nothing if not "polemical."
definitions of magic and occult. What he needs to do is select and define a term that includes all the phenomena he wishes to discuss and then discuss those phenomena. However, he has made a most unfortunate choice in the term magic, which he then defines in a deceptive, unhistorical, and fundamentally dishonest way; finally, he does not discuss all the phenomena encompassed by the term.  

A Term of Opprobrium ...  

To understand the unfortunate choice that Quinn has made, we need to understand the history of the English term magic. Magic entered the English language from French during the Hundred Years' War; the adjectival form was borrowed and quickly became a substantive. Gower preserves the French spelling magique but Chaucer anglicized it to magyk and the present spelling is attested at least as early as Dryden in 1679. The Old French forms magique (adjective) and magie (noun) are directly descended from the Latin forms magicus and magia, of which the practitioner is called a magus. These, in turn, are Latinized forms of the Greek words magikos, mageia, and magos. The adjective magikos describes a magos, while the abstract noun mageia describes the actions of a magos. The term magos entered the Greek language during the Persian war from the Persian magus, which originally referred to a priestly class of the Medians. Since the Persians and the Greeks were enemies, the term magos

52. His method of definition is very similar to that used in Eric Johnson, “What Constitutes a Cult,” Mormonism Researched 13/1 (1991): 5.
54. All these may be found in Henry G. Liddell et al., A Greek-English Lexicon, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 1071.
55. Ibid. For the adjectival formation, see Herbert W. Smyth, Greek Grammar (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956), 237 §858.6.
56. See Liddell et al., Greek-English Lexicon, 1071. For the formation see Smyth, Greek Grammar, 231 §840.9.
57. See Liddell et al., Greek-English Lexicon, 1071; Roland G. Kent, Old Persian, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society, 1953), 201.
58. “The Medes have the following tribes: Bousai, Paretakenoi, Strouchates, Arizantoii, Boudoi, and the Magoi.” Herodotus, Histories 1.101. “Without a magos it is not lawful for them to make sacrifices.” Herodotus, Histories 1.132.3; see also 1.140.2–3.
came into Greek with a bad if not evil connotation, and this connotation has been retained through all the terms subsequently derived from it. "Modern Western terms for 'magic,'" writes Ritner,

function primarily as designations for that which we as a society do not accept, and which has overtones of the supernatural or the demonic (but not of the divine). It is important to stress that this pejorative connotation has not been grafted onto the notion of magic as the result of any recent theoretical fancy but is inherent in Western terminology virtually from its beginning. It constitutes the essential core of the Western concept of magic. 59

Brown notes that "The Western scientific tradition that spawned anthropology cultivated disdain for all that was 'magical.'" 60

The Greeks were certainly not the only culture to describe the religion of another culture with a term of opprobrium that can be translated as "magic." The Old English term for magic was drycraeft, "the craft of the druids," and many of the words for magic or magician in the Hebrew Bible derive from terms for priests in other religions. 61

Thus Hebrew hârûmmîm (KJV "magicians," Genesis 41:8, 24; Exodus 7:11; 9:11; Daniel 1:20; 2:2) comes from Egyptian (Âry-hb.t) Âry-tp "chief lector priest." 62 Hebrew aṣṣâpîm (KJV "astrologers," Daniel 1:20; 2:2) comes from Akkadian aṣîpu, a type of priest sometimes translated "exorcist." 63 Hebrew kaṣdim (KJV "Chaldeans," Daniel 2:2) is apparently related to Akkadian kaldu "Chaldeans" and refers to an ethnic group. To label a group's religion as "magic" is merely to tar it with a pejorative label. It is therefore unsurprising that individuals and groups react negatively when their particular beliefs are labeled

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“magic.”64 “For non-dogmatic religions the very notion of ‘heresy’ would be either meaningless or irrelevant. The inherent bias of this category has long been recognized. The same recognition must now be extended to that of magic.”65

Recognition of the fundamental negative bias of the term that Quinn has chosen to employ is something that he fails to acknowledge in either edition. Instead, he rationalizes the accusation of “magic” and “occult” by saying that “millions of Americans living today have turned to systems of the occult” and other forms that he sees as “magic” (pp. xvi–xvii). But would these individuals identify themselves as being involved in “magic” or “systems of the occult”? Given that Quinn includes “Jews, Christians, and Mormons” among his millions (p. 326), the answer is probably not. Since witch-hunts are not a thing of the past, such accusations are irresponsible. As Quinn’s book was being prepared for publication, the press issued reports from several towns in Indonesia, where hundreds of people, including Muslim clerics, were murdered by mobs because someone accused them of practicing “magic.”66 This problem also persists in Africa. One might, accordingly, accuse Quinn of reckless endangerment with a loaded term. Quinn should not bandy the terms magic and occult about without regard to their polemical implications.

... Used Contrary to Its Historical Context

One of Quinn’s problems is that he discloses little about the current discussion of the use of the term magic. The debate among scholars revolves about whether the term can be used as a legitimate scholarly category, and if so, what it means. Among those who decide that the term can be used, absolutely no consensus exists about what

64. Bill McKeever’s outrage when the means by which a born-again Protestant believes he has become saved was labeled “magic” is typical; William McKeever, “Black Magic,” Mormonism Research Ministry 2/3 (March 1980): 1.
it means, 67 nor has such a consensus ever existed. Thus "magic" becomes an equivocator's paradise. When John L. Smith says that person X practices "magic," he merely means that person X is not a Baptist. When Edward Tyler says that person X practices "magic," he means person X believes in more than the mere existence of supernatural powers. Both Tyler and Smith would see the other as practicing "magic" while neither would view himself as practicing "magic." The problem this presents for the historian is determining for each individual who uses the term what that individual means by it. To this end, various scholars have developed definitions of magic that differ substantively from each other.

Noah Webster. Although Quinn trumpets his use of the definition of magic from Webster's Third New International Dictionary, this is actually anachronistic. The 1828 dictionary by Noah Webster at least comes from Joseph Smith's time. Noah Webster gave two definitions of magic, the first of which is "The art or science of putting into action the power of spirits; or the science of producing wonderful effects by the aid of superhuman beings, or of departed spirits; sorcery; 68 enchantment. [This art or science is now discarded.]" (italics and brackets in original). 69 This piece of information undercuts Quinn's entire thesis, for either Webster was incorrect in assessing the situation in his own day—which seems unlikely, as Webster's use is supported by the use in Palmyra—or the widespread practices that Quinn discusses from Webster's day were not considered "magic" by Webster and his contemporaries. The second definition Webster gave for magic is "the secret operations of natural causes." 70 It should be noted that the definitions given by Noah Webster are completely different from the Webster's definition that Quinn claims to use (see p. xxiii).


68. The synonym sorcery is "divination by the assistance or supposed assistance of evil spirits, or the power of commanding evil spirits." Noah Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language (1828; reprint, San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1967), s.v. "sorcery."

69. Ibid., s.v. "magic."

70. Ibid.
Tylor. E. B. Tylor, the father of anthropology, viewed "magic" as misapplied logic." Quinn rejects this approach and similar approaches "marred by (a) judgment-filled use of 'rational' as the alternative to 'magical'" (p. xvii).

Frazer. James Frazer saw religion and magic as opposites. "By religion," he understood

a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life... in so far as religion assumes the world to be directed by conscious agents who may be turned from their purpose by persuasion, it stands in fundamental antagonism to magic... which take[s] for granted that the course of nature is determined, not by the passions or caprice of personal beings, but by the operation of immutable laws acting mechanically... It is true that magic often deals with spirits, which are personal agents of the kind assumed by religion; but whenever it does so in its proper form, it treats them exactly in the same fashion as it treats inanimate agents—that is, it constrains or coerces instead of conciliating or propitiating them as religion would do. Quinn considers, but ultimately rejects, this definition (see pp. xxv-xxvi).

Durkheim. For Emile Durkheim, the only thing that kept him from saying that "magic is hardly distinguishable from religion... and consequently that it is impossible to separate them and to define the one without the other" was "the marked repugnance of religion for magic." The difference between "magic" and religion centered on the question of a church: "There is no Church of magic. Between the magician and the individuals who consult him, as between these individuals themselves, there are no lasting bonds which make them members of the same moral community... The magician has a

cliente and not a Church.” At times Quinn follows Durkheim, claiming that “They [i.e., the magic worldview and the practice of magic rituals] do manifest a personal religious focus, rather than institutional (Church) emphasis” (pp. xxi–xxii) and that Durkheim’s distinction was “more useful” than other approaches to “magic” (pp. xxvi, 344 n. 47), while on the same page decrying the “difficulty” that arises when individuals “tend to equate ‘religion’ with ‘church’” since “this excludes from religion any beliefs and practices that may be inherently religious but which occur outside the church or outside a religious ‘mainstream’” (p. xxvi). Durkheim dealt with this issue, but Quinn ignores his treatment and thus misses precisely Durkheim’s point: “by showing that the idea of religion is inseparable from that of the Church, it makes it clear that religion should be an eminently collective thing.” One is left to wonder if Quinn understood Durkheim.

Malinowski. Bronislaw Malinowski was an influential figure in anthropology. He gave what he considered to be “a prima facie distinction between magic and religion. While in the magical act the underlying idea and aim is always clear, straightforward, and definite, in the religious ceremony there is no purpose directed towards a subsequent event.” Malinowski’s is therefore a goal-oriented definition; practices with specific goals are magic, those without are religious.

Goode. William J. Goode noticed the various definitions of magic and tried to synthesize them into a continuum. In doing so, he proposed eleven different definitions, but refrained from establishing a mechanism for the continuum. His definitions follow:

1. Concrete specificity of goal relates most closely to the magical complex. . . . Religious goals do lean more heavily in the direction of “general welfare”, “health”, “good weather”, and eschatological occurrences.

74. Ibid., 60, deemphasis added.
75. Ibid., 61–62.
76. Ibid., 62–63.
2. The manipulative attitude is to be found most strongly at the magical pole, as against the supplicatory, propitiatory, or cajoling, at the religious pole.

3. The professional-client relationship is ideally-theoretically to be found in the magical complex. The shepherd-flock, or prophet-follower, is more likely in the religious.

4. Individual ends are more frequently to be found toward the magical end of this continuum, as against the groupal ends toward the other.

5. The magical practitioner or his “customer” goes through his activities as a private individual, or individuals, functioning much less as groups. At the religious extreme pole, groups carry them out, or representatives of groups.

6. With regard to the process of achieving the goal, in case of magical failure, there is more likely to be a substitution or introduction of other techniques. Stronger magic will be used, or magic to offset the countermagic of enemies, or even a different magician. . . .

7. Although the practitioner may feel cautious in handling such powerful forces, a lesser degree of emotion is expected at the magical end of this continuum. This may be described as impersonality. At the religious end, one expects a greater degree of emotion, possibly awe or worship.

8. The practitioner decides whether the process is to start at all, toward the magical pole. Toward the religious, the ritual must be carried out. . . .

9. Similarly, the practitioner decides when the process is to start, in the case of magic, more often than in the case of religion. . . .

10. Defined as instrumental by the society, magic is thought of as at least potentially directed against the society, or a major accepted group within it, or a respected individual in good repute with the gods. Religious rituals are not thought of as even potentially directed against the society or such respected people.
11. As a final, ideally distinguishing characteristic, magic is used only instrumentally, i.e., for goals. The religious complex at its ideal pole, may be used for goals, but beyond that the practices are ends in themselves.78

Some of Goode's criteria make no sense in certain contexts. Is prayer a professional-client or a shepherd-flock situation? Quinn is aware of Goode's work (see p. 344 n. 47) but mischaracterizes it as "centered on ethics and personal conduct" (p. xxvi).

Ritner. Ritner rejects the definition that Quinn employs as "the imprecision of modern parlance" and demonstrates that the definition is completely inadequate.79 He also rejects Frazer's theory because "by virtue of its reductionistic nature, it is incapable of distinguishing the difference in magical practices of one culture or era from another."80 Furthermore, it "fails to account for the remarkable persistence of the 'pathetic or ludicrous' activities which he finds so devoid of truth or value."81 Ritner also points out the deficiencies of the definitions of E. E. Evans-Pritchard as inappropriate for anything other than the Zande of the Sudan and laments that Evans-Pritchard's students and colleagues failed to follow his "'emic' approach 'whereby definitions, distinctions, and values are derived from the actors themselves rather than imposed on them by the observer.'"82 Ritner also rejects the theories of Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Jonathan Z. Smith, and David Aune, which "stigmatize magic as anti-social and illegal behavior" since "neither is correct" as far as Egypt is concerned.83 But then, neither are they satisfactory as far as Joseph Smith is concerned. Ritner notes that several anthropologists "would dispose of the category of 'magic' altogether."84 Ritner thinks that "if magic is to be retained as a category in the study of Egyptian thought, it is because the Egyptians themselves gave a name to a

80. Ibid., 10.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid., 11.
83. Ibid., 12-13.
84. Ibid., 13.
practice which they—not others—identified with the Western concept of magic: \( h\k \), and its earlier equivalent \( h\k_f \).\(^{85}\) Ritner adopted the working definition: "For the purpose of this study, any activity which seeks to obtain its goal by methods outside the simple laws of cause and effect will be considered 'magical' in the Western sense."\(^{86}\) Yet, Ritner notes that

The shift from pharaonic \( h\k_f \) to Coptic \( h\k \) represented far more than a linguistic development. If the Coptic pairing of \( h\k \) and \( naja \) opens the way for the legitimate use of the term "magic" in Egyptology, it must not be forgotten that this equation entailed the adaptation of native terminology to accommodate a Roman category further transformed by Christian belief. . . . one may thus speak of indigenous "Egyptian magic" only with explicit restrictions.\(^{87}\)

Thus even under Ritner's working definition, "the use of \( h\k_f \) could hardly be construed in Egyptian terms as 'activity outside the law of natural causality' since \( h\k_f \) is itself the ultimate source of causality, the generative force of nature. It is the notion of \( h\k_f \) which unites the tenets of Egyptian religion to the techniques of Egyptian religion."\(^{88}\)

Quinn. Responsible scholars who insist that "magic" can remain a viable category in discussions of any given culture assert that careful attention must be paid to the meaning of the term in both the specific culture studied and the specific culture for whom the scholar is writing. Brown cautions, "The historical circumstances that shaped the concept of magic in the West are by no means universal, suggesting that the term should be applied to practices in other social settings only with the greatest care."\(^{89}\) Stephen Ricks concludes that

"magic," "magician" and related terms describing practices mentioned in the Bible remain useful designations in discussions of the life of ancient Israel as long as one takes into consideration the internal categories of the writers of the

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86. Ibid., 69.
87. Ibid., 236, Coptic transliterated.
88. Ibid., 249.
Bible itself, retains a sensitivity to the subjective nature and potentially pejorative connotations of these terms, and remains aware of his or her own presuppositions in applying them.\textsuperscript{90}

Ritner, too, notes that

one may thus speak of indigenous "Egyptian magic" only with explicit restrictions. Unqualified use of the term necessarily indicates only the Roman, Christian, or modern concept superimposed on ancient practice. But while for both Romans and Christians it was meaningful to speak of "Egyptian magic," the significance and range of such "magic" will have been interpreted differently even by these groups who shared the same terminology but not the same ideology. For either group, even the "orthodox" practices of the other were dismissed as \textit{magia}. The modern discomfort with the category "magic" is the direct legacy of the inherent subjectivity of this Roman concept.\textsuperscript{91}

Thus, according to Ritner, "Egyptian 'magical' acts are best understood as the technique of religion."\textsuperscript{92} While I may not follow the guidelines of Brown, Ricks, and Ritner, these authors are at least careful, respectable, and responsible in their approach, unlike Quinn. Quinn's book lacks a careful analysis of what individual nineteenth-century writers meant by the use of the term \textit{magic} and fails to compare and contrast what they meant.

Instead of a careful analysis of what the term \textit{magic} meant in Joseph Smith's day, Quinn has made the unfortunate choice of Webster's \textit{Third New International Dictionary} as the source of his definition of \textit{magic} (see pp. xxiii, 341-42 n. 20).\textsuperscript{93} One can see why Quinn would prefer this definition since, while the academic defini-

\textsuperscript{90} Ricks, "The Magician as Outsider," 143.

\textsuperscript{91} Ritner, \textit{Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice}, 236.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 247.

\textsuperscript{93} I apologize to Quinn if he views my prior omission of the source of his definition as "dishonest" (p. 341 n. 20). I thought that his source for the definition was irrelevant; it is a lousy definition no matter what his source, and it was the definition he chose to use.
tions used in scholarly monographs usually try to be as specific and precise as possible in defining a term, a dictionary normally tries to derive a definition that will encompass all the ways in which a term might have been used. Since Quinn appears to want as broad and vague a definition as possible, he uses the dictionary. Still, the dictionary is a bit too broad in some respects and too narrow in others, and so Quinn eliminates any notion of trickery from this definition and quotes Professor Ritner to support this elimination (see p. xxiii). This is ironic not only because Ritner has published extensive critiques of the application of magic as a universal category,94 but also because on the very page Quinn cites, Ritner discusses how inappropriate the definition from Webster’s Third New International Dictionary for magic is in toto, not just in the part Quinn wants to eliminate.95 Quinn’s elimination of any notion of trickery is unfortunate in another way since that was an important part of the definition in Joseph Smith’s day.

Quinn’s exclusion of trickery from his definition of the term magic puts his definition and analysis directly at odds with what Joseph Smith’s neighbors meant by the term magic. (I cite these neighbors not for the veracity of their accusations but for their historical use of terminology.) For example, one early anti-Mormon whom Quinn cites,96 Pomeroy Tucker, used the term magician to refer to a “young imposter” who led “his dupes,” “a selected audience of ignorant and superstitious persons,” through “mystic ceremonies” with “some sort of a wand in his hand,”97 and who played “tricks” that were “sufficiently artful” that they “were not too absurd for the

94. See Ritner, Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practices, 4-13, 236-49; Ritner, “Egyptian Magic,” 189-200; Ritner, “Religious, Social, and Legal Parameters,” 43-60. Quinn mischaracterizes Ritner’s argument on pages xxvi and 345 n. 57. Ritner argues that what was “forbidden or disapproved” was not the “magic practices” but treason.

95. Ritner, Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practices, 8. By his own definition, Quinn is being dishonest with the evidence here. See above, p. 196.

96. For example, pp. 46, 58, 132, 183, 402. Although Quinn generally considers Tucker a reliable source, he maintains that Tucker is incorrect in his description of the seer stone (pp. 44, 392 n. 126).

credence of his fanatical followers”98 as part of a “long-continued and astonishingly successful career of vice and deception.”99 Tucker viewed Smith’s actions as mere “performance,” his followers as “victims of the imposture,”100 and concluded that “it certainly evidences extraordinary talent or subtlety, that for so long a period he could maintain the potency of his art over numbers of beings in the form of manhood, acknowledging their faith in his supernatural powers.”101 The one concrete example of a “magical” practice that Tucker deigns to give is a “scheme” to obtain “fresh meat.”102 In other words, when Pomeroy Tucker accused Joseph Smith of “magic,” he did so in precisely the sense that Quinn has deliberately excluded.

To take another example, when E. D. Howe talks about “the arts of necromancy, jugling [sic],”103 it is apparent that Howe means “necromancy” not in the sense of “the art of revealing future events by means of a pretended communication with the dead” but of “enchantment; conjuration.”104 He uses “jugling” in the sense of “to practice artifice or imposture,”105 for he refers to the individual as “the young impostor” and his followers as “sturdy dupes”106 and their way of life as “humbug.”107 So Howe too—although he does not use the term magic—is interested only in the sense of the word magic that Quinn disallows.

Use of the term magic and associated terms in Palmyra in Joseph Smith’s early days clearly shows that Tucker and Howe are not alone in their use of the term. “Magic” was not believed to exist as a genuine power. An 1812 quotation by Aaron Willey cited by Quinn also shows not—as Quinn would have it—that “magic” was widespread

98. Ibid., 22.
99. Ibid., 25.
100. Ibid., 23.
101. Ibid., 22-23.
102. Ibid., 24-25.
103. E. D. Howe, History of Mormonism: Or a Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, with Sketches of the Characters of Its Propagators (Painesville, Ohio: Howe, 1840), 12.
105. Ibid., s.v. “juggle.”
106. Howe, History of Mormonism, 12.
107. Ibid., 13.
in northeast America at the beginning of the nineteenth century but that it was believed to be mere illusion or pretence:

There are men, now and then to be met with in New-England, who profess a familiarity with magic. By the aid of this, they pretend to perform wonders; as raising and laying infernal spirits; disclosing the future events of a person's life; discovering of thieves, robbers, runaways, and lost property, with many others of a like nature.\(^{108}\)

In general, “magic” and associated terminology were synonymous with imposture, as the following quotations from the local newspaper show:

The good and bad signs foretold by conjurors & fortune tellers, and so alarming to old women, the prognostications of good & bad weather, by Almanac-makers, &c. are hardly worth the notice of our good common sense people.\(^{109}\)

The use of the term conjuror in this report is completely in harmony with Noah Webster's 1828 definition—found under the alternate spelling of conjurer—as "one who pretends to the secret art of performing things supernatural or extraordinary, by the aid of superior powers; an impostor who pretends, by unknown means, to discover stolen goods, &c. Hence ironically, a man of shrewd conjecture; a man of sagacity."\(^{110}\)

To see strange lights, is a sign that there is something to cause them, or that your head is disordered; and that somebody will surely die after it.

To see an apparition, or to be bewitched is an incontestible evidence that you are lacking in common sense.\(^{111}\)

\(^{108}\) Aaron C. Willey, "Observations on Magical Practices," Medical Repository 15 (1812): 378, cited in Quinn, Early Magic and the Mormon World View, 26, emphasis added. Neither I nor the source checkers have been able to view this source to ascertain if Quinn quoted it correctly.

\(^{109}\) Anonymous, "Good and Bad Signs," Palmyra Register 1/44 (22 September 1818): 2.

\(^{110}\) Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language, s.v. "conjurer."

The general sense of *apparition* in Joseph Smith’s day was “a ghost; a specter; a visible spirit.”\(^{112}\) The term *bewitch*, however, had two meanings: “to gain an ascendancy over by charms or incantation,” a sense ascribed to “ignorant people”; and “to deceive and mislead by juggling tricks or imposture.”\(^{113}\)

I must still endeavor to support, that fortune-telling is a useful art, and an art that may be very easily acquired. . . . By paying due attention many will be enabled to tell their own fortunes, by which means they will save the expense of buying it of knaves and conjurors.\(^{114}\)

Such statements indicate that Palmyra residents, following widespread belief, did not normally condone “magic” and equated it with trickery, the very thing that Quinn excludes by definition. Quinn posits that “anti-occult rhetoric by early American opinion-makers (clergy, legislators, jurists, newspaper editors, book authors) may have been the embattled effort of an elite minority to convert a vastly larger populace that was sympathetic to the occult” and then explicitly assumes this view to have been the case (p. xiv). But his assumption and a demonstration of the soundness of that assumption are two different things. The interlocking use of the terms by both the townsfolk and the learned does not bear him out. Significantly, although the supposed writers of the Hurlbut and Howe affidavits—such as Joseph Capron, Willard Chase, Isaac Hale, Henry Harris, Peter Ingersoll, Roswell Nichols, David Stafford, Joshua Stafford, William Stafford, and a host of others\(^{115}\)—accuse Joseph Smith of

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113. Ibid., s.v. “bewitch.”

114. Axioma, “Fortune Telling,” *Palmyra Register* 2/37 (4 August 1819): 1. The following provides an example of the sorts of fortune-telling advocated: “A young man, who loves a social glass and jolly companions, whose thoughts secretly incline after folly and shrink from application to study and business, will never be a useful member of society, but will be a sot, and sink into oblivion unnoticed, except for his misery.” Ibid.

115. See Joseph Capron, affidavit, 8 November 1833, in Howe, *History of Mormonism*, 258–60; Willard Chase, testimony, 1833, in ibid., 240–48; Isaac Hale, affidavit, 20 March 1834, in ibid., 262–66; Henry Harris, testimony, undated, in ibid., 251–52; Peter Ingersoll, affidavit, 2 December 1833, in ibid., 232–37; Roswell Nichols, affidavit, 1 December 1833, in ibid.,
“digging for money,” they do not accuse him of “magic,” just as earlier newspaper accounts do not describe money-digging as “magic” but as “an honorable and profitable employment” in Vermont. Joseph Smith admitted that he was involved in digging for money (see, for example, Joseph Smith—History 1:56), but he does not admit to being guilty of “magic.” The accusation of “magic” against Joseph Smith—in the sense that Quinn proposes—would seem to be an entirely modern contrivance, anachronistically imposed by Quinn and others upon Joseph Smith, since in Joseph Smith’s day the accusation of “magic” merely meant that they believed Joseph Smith was a fraud and not a prophet.

Quinn’s misunderstanding of the meaning of several related terms leads him to erroneous conclusions. For example, he notes that New York law included among “Disorderly Persons” “all jugglers [conjurors], and all persons pretending to have skill in physiognomy, palmistry, or like crafty science, or pretending to tell fortunes, or to discover lost goods” (pp. 26–27, brackets in Quinn). Although Quinn misquotes the law, two other sleights of hand are more damning. The first is that the “Act for apprehending and punishing disorderly Persons” is much broader; I quote larger extracts of it here, putting Quinn’s quotation in italics and the corrected version of the portion he misquotes in bold:

all persons who threaten to run away and leave their wives or children to the city or town, . . . and also all persons who not having wherewith to maintain themselves, live idle without employment, and also all persons who go about from door to door, or place themselves in the streets, highways or passages, to beg in the cities or towns where they respectively dwell, and all jugglers, and all persons pretending to have skill

257–58; David Stafford, testimony, 5 December 1833, in ibid., 249–50; Joshua Stafford, affidavit, 15 November 1833, in ibid., 258; William Stafford, testimony, 8 December 1833, in ibid., 237–40; and petition, 4 December 1833, in ibid., 261–62.

116. The phrase is used in Ingersoll, affidavit, 2 December 1883, in Howe, History of Mormonism, 232; Stafford, testimony, 8 December 1833, in Howe, History of Mormonism, 237.

in physiognomy, palmistry, or like crafty science, or pretending to tell fortunes, or to discover where lost goods may be found; and all persons who run away and leave their wives or children...; and all persons wandering abroad... and not giving a good account of themselves, and all persons wandering abroad and begging, and all idle persons not having visible means of livelihood, and all common prostitutes shall be deemed and adjudged disorderly persons.118

The meaning of the term jugglers in this act (passed in 1788) is probably identical to the meaning of the term in the 1819 “Act to suppress Common Showmen, Mountebanks, and Jugglers,” which act made it illegal in New York “for any person or persons, to exhibit or perform, for gain or profit, any puppet show, wire dance, or any other idle shows, acts or feats, which common showmen, mountebanks or jugglers, usually practise or perform.”119

The second sleight of hand is that Quinn glosses the term jugglers as conjurors when it is clear from nineteenth-century usage cited above that a “juggler” is one who “practice[s] artifice or imposture”;120 thus the current equivalent of “juggler” would be “con artist.” John S. Fullmer, in writing to Josiah Stowell Jr. in 1843, noted that “It is here stated and verily believed, that he, Smith, was a gambler, a Black leg, a notorious horse jockey, an adept at the slight [sic] of hand or juggling,”121 to which Josiah Stowell Jr. responded that Joseph Smith “never gambled to my knowledge; I do not believe he ever did. I well know he was no Hoars Jocky for he was no Judge of Hoarses; I sold him one, that is all I ever knowd he dealt in the kind. I never new him to git drunk; I believe he would now and then take a glass. he never Pretend=ed to Play the Sliect of hand nor Black leg.”122 Thus,

120. Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language, s.v. “juggle.”
122. Josiah Stowell Jr., letter to John S. Fullmer, 17 February 1843, in ibid., 113, punctuation added.
John Fullmer and Josiah Stowell Jr. both understood juggling as a form of deception. Significantly, Stowell, whose principal association with Joseph Smith was as an employee in his father's money-digging venture, denies Joseph's involvement in deception and thus in what was "magic" for the residents in Palmyra. Quinn has juggled the meaning of the term.

That some of his Palmyra neighbors might have thought Joseph was involved in deception should not be surprising since Quinn makes a good case that, in Joseph Smith's day, visions were considered to be of the devil or delusional (see pp. 8–9). This is confirmed in Webster's 1828 dictionary, in which a vision is "something imagined to be seen, though not real" or "something imaginary; the production of fancy." A vision was allowed to be "a revelation from God" only "in Scripture." But this is nothing new. Joseph Smith reports that a Methodist minister treated the report of his vision of God "not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles" (Joseph Smith—History 1:21).

The evidence shows that Joseph Smith's neighbors included in their understanding of the term magic only those senses of the word that Quinn has deliberately chosen to exclude. Quinn does not bring forth evidence to show that Palmyra residents would have expanded the meaning of the term to include what Quinn includes in his dictionary definition, much less expanded it further, as Quinn does, to include "the related disciplines of alchemy, astrology, and medicine based on alchemical/astrological principles" (p. xiii), except to the extent that they likewise considered these to be impostures. "Certain scholars," complains Ritner, "have tended to lump together all manner of 'superstitious' activities within the realm of 'magic.'" Quinn fits into this mold of scholarship, perhaps because he admits that he finds it "difficult to distinguish between manifestations of magic and

123. Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language, s.v. "vision."
124. Ibid., emphasis in original.
of religion” (pp. xxii; see xxiv–xxv). Thus Quinn also fails to distinguish between the “many variations” in his “magical world view” (p. xxi). But if manifestations of “magic” and religion are so difficult to distinguish and the former term conveys such a negative connotation, why bother distinguishing them at all? Why not simply drop the term and category of magic?

Most of the phenomena that fall under Quinn’s definition of magic he fails to discuss, and most of the phenomena that Quinn discusses do not fall under his definition of magic. For example, Quinn omits any discussion of prayer in early Mormonism, although prayer was certainly thought to have “supernatural power to cause a supernatural being to produce or prevent a particular result” (p. xxiii) and thus falls under Quinn’s definition of magic. And yet he has not shown that seer stones or astrology or divining rods were thought to fit this definition. Since these activities do fit under the category of divination, why not just call them divination? Why use the more polemical term?

Quinn is also fascinated by astrology and wishes to include it in his definition. Quinn relies heavily on astrology to demonstrate a nineteenth-century fascination with “magic” (see pp. 21–24). Unfortunately for Quinn, however, astrology is not “magic” under anyone else’s definition—certainly not under the nineteenth-century definition, in which astrology was “a science which teaches to judge of the effects and influences of the stars, and to foretell future events.” His long excursuses on the subject are therefore both irrelevant and misleading: irrelevant because they do not deal with the topic Quinn’s book is ostensibly about and misleading because they try to show that “magic” was widespread by showing that astrology was widespread.

126. To make astrology appealing to others as well, Quinn distorts historical facts. To substantiate his claim that Johannes Kepler was interested in astrology, he describes him as a “mathematician” instead of an astronomer (p. 11) and fails to note that in Kepler’s day there was no distinction between astrology and astronomy.
127. Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language, s.v. “astronomy.”
128. Note, however, the discussion in Hamblin’s review, pp. 278–82.
Quinn still argues that, "consistent with his [Joseph Smith's] astrologically recommended time to father children, most (and possibly all) of Emma's children were conceived in either February or September when their father's ruling planet of Jupiter governed sexual generation"—but this is true only if he assumes that certain children were born prematurely the exact number of months necessary to fit them into his Procrustean bed (p. 79). However, Quinn ignores other activities that Joseph was involved in and how they might influence the birth of his children. It does turn out that about nine months before his children were born, Joseph Smith was actually at home rather than on a mission or visiting Saints in Missouri or the East or Canada. In September 1835, Joseph Smith had just returned from visiting the Saints in Michigan, and about nine months later, on 20 June 1836, Frederick Granger Williams Smith was born. In September 1837, Joseph Smith returned from his mission to Canada, and about nine months later, on 2 June 1838, Alexander Hale Smith was born. As a father himself, Quinn surely should realize that Emma's menstrual cycles have more to do with the birth of Joseph Smith's children than any zodiacal cycles. Given Joseph's travel schedule and the fact that only a 15 percent chance of conception exists for any given menstrual cycle, does anyone seriously want to argue that the predominant factor in the birth of his children is astrology? If this were the case, we would expect Joseph and Emma to have had far fewer children than they did.

Is Magic a Useful Term?

Quinn's definition and use of the term magic demonstrate that his book is a large-scale exercise in the fallacy of equivocation. Of course, without the use of his equivocating term of opprobrium, Quinn has no subject to write about, and thus no book. For this reason, Quinn devotes some of his most hostile writing to those individuals who have pointed out that this emperor's "magic" clothes are not really there.

In his hostility, Quinn fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the arguments made against his muddled position. Quinn makes
the following claim: "Ricks and Peterson . . . suddenly decided that the amorphous term 'ritual' was the ideal substitution for 'magic' and 'occult.' Since then, they have been joined by fellow FARMS writer John Gee (an Egyptologist-in-training [sic]), who has made this proposal more emphatically. The three FARMS writers advocate that 'religion' and 'religious rituals' should substitute as terms for 'magic' and 'magic practices'" (p. xxvii). But Quinn is emphatically wrong. And since he seems not to have understood my argument and my point of view, let me lay it out here: I do not think nor have I proposed that "'ritual' [is or] was the ideal substitution for 'magic' and 'occult'" (contra Quinn's assertions; pp. xxvii–xxviii). Nor do I think that the meaningless euphemism "ritual power" proposed by Meyer and Mirecki is an acceptable substitute (as Quinn implies on p. xxvii). I find the term magic to be a Proteus-like pejorative appellation and a worthless, vacuous, meaningless classification for phenomena. There is no agreement on what magic means. The term magic is used as a club to beat one's religious opponents over the head. In practice, defining magic becomes a shell game; whenever the definition is shown to be defective, it is abruptly changed. Furthermore, the "magic" game is always rigged so that, no matter which definition is chosen, it is never allowed to apply across the board to any religion and belief. And, since the definition is allowed to shift freely, discussions of "magic" usually become textbook examples of exercises in equivocation and fertile breeding grounds for special pleading and poisoning the well. I have found that dropping the term completely without substituting anything in its place loses nothing—and usually gains considerably—both conceptually and practically.129 The term magic is generally about as informative as a swear word, displaying only the ignorance and displeasure of the person who uses it.

The first thing that Quinn should have done to improve his book would have been to drop the term magic from the title, the introduc-

129. In my own field, Egyptology (and, by the way, I had by most measures not been "in-training" for some time before Quinn's book was published), there is no difference between magic and religion. So-called "magical" texts are part of temple archives, composed by priests, copied by priests, and performed by priests as part of normal religious ritual. I therefore prefer to drop the pejorative term from my discussion; others do not.
tion, and the text. This action would have gone some way toward lessening the fallacious equivocation that runs through the entire marrow of this tome. Since “magic” in Joseph Smith’s day was synonymous with “deception” and “imposture” and was not thought really to exist—and this is true both of the educated and uneducated in Palmyra and elsewhere—there is no “magic world view” (Quinn admits that he cannot distinguish it from religion anyway, pp. xxi–xxii, xxiv–xxv), and Quinn has no topic about which to write a book. His entire approach to the subject is irreparably flawed.

Furthermore, since “magic” and “imposture” are synonymous in the view of Palmyra residents, Quinn, by pushing the connection between Joseph Smith and “magic,” informs his readers, starting with the title of his book, where he stands on the question of whether Joseph Smith was a prophet or a fraud. This is an odd position for a self-described “Mormon apologist” (p. xi) to take.

Quinn on the “Occult”

The term *occult* is another word on which Quinn equivocates. While in Joseph Smith’s day *occult* meant “hidden from the eye or understanding; invisible; secret; unknown; undiscovered; undetected,” its meaning has changed to be “of the nature of or pertaining to those ancient and medieval reputed sciences (or their modern representatives) held to involve the knowledge or use of agencies of a secret and mysterious nature (as magic, alchemy, astrology, theosophy, and the like).” In current usage, the term *occult* has a distinct quality of ill repute, and among large segments of English speakers it is used as a synonym for *satanic*. Current usage would dictate caution in employing the term since nineteenth-century usage may not resemble current usage and will thus possibly be misunderstood. Quinn ignores such considerations.

Whatever its definition, Quinn sees the “occult” everywhere. Even *Moby Dick*, which to most people is simply a long boring book

that is supposedly great literature, contains “a hidden sub-text of complex occult meaning,” according to Quinn (p. 10), although what that might be is a topic Quinn does not elaborate on.

Quinn redefines the term *occult* to include “using ceremonies or objects to summon or repel otherworldly beings, the belief in witches (humans capable of summoning evil forces) and in remedies against them, the wearing of medallions or other objects for their inherent powers to bring about protection or good luck, the performance of ceremonies to find treasures, and the use of objects such as special stones and sticks to obtain information from an otherworldly source” (p. xiii). How then does he justify classifying the Rosicrucians as “occult” according to his own definition (see pp. 10–12)? What in Isaac Newton's writings leads Quinn to believe “Isaac Newton was the most involved in the occult” (p. 12)? Nothing that Quinn quotes supports the view that Newton was involved in the “occult” either as Quinn has defined it or as current usage would construe the term. Only in the archaic sense of the term, and the one that Quinn by his definition rejects, can Newton be considered to be involved in the “occult.” This bait-and-switch tactic is classic equivocation and is repeated over and over again.

**Environmental Explanations**

How she could have been so deceived! . . . She looked back as well as she could; but it was all confusion. She had taken up the idea, she supposed, and made everything bend to it.

Jane Austen

Quinn employs environmental explanations throughout his book. In fact, he uses environmental explanations much the way that ancient historians use them. But while ancient historians are forced to employ loose environmental explanations because of lack of evidence, Quinn does not have that excuse. Some of his explanations are quite funny—and would be even more so if he were more candid.

Quinn implies that Joseph Smith received his first vision from his environment. After all, “in 1808 Swedenborg’s testimony of his theophany was on the front page of the newspaper at Canandaigua, thirteen miles from Palmyra and nine miles from Joseph Smith’s home in Manchester” (p. 15)—and eight years before the Smiths moved in. So fifteen-year-old Joseph obviously read twelve-year-old newspapers whenever he visited Canandaigua. And how often was that? (By comparison, as a missionary in 1835, Wilford Woodruff traveled 3,248 miles or 8.9 miles a day.\textsuperscript{133} The year before, as a farmer, he traveled only 1,238 miles or 3.4 miles per day, almost all of which was as part of Zion’s Camp.\textsuperscript{134} It seems unlikely that Joseph often made the nine-mile journey to read those twelve-year-old newspapers.) Richard Brothers’s “publications reached such hinterland towns as Hanover, New Hampshire, where early Mormon leader Hyrum Smith attended school” (p. 14) for, according to Quinn, one of them was advertised for sale in a bookstore there (see p. 371 n. 130). It was advertised for sale before Hyrum was born and we have no way of knowing if anyone even purchased the book, but Quinn implies that eleven-year-old Hyrum must have learned about it in school and told the family about it. Quinn mentions visions by Billy Hibbard just 120 miles east of Palmyra, published in 1825 (see p. 15), but this is actually after Joseph Smith’s first vision (1820), as are the preaching of Benjamin Putnam in Palmyra (1825) and reports of Asa Wild’s visions (1825), which Quinn relates (see p. 14). What is the point of bringing these into the narrative? Quinn asserts that “in the early nineteenth century, New Yorkers obviously liked reading about youthful visions of the Father and Son” (p. 15). If this were so, how does Quinn explain the persecution that Joseph Smith received for reporting his vision? He doesn’t.

Actually, in some cases Quinn simply fails to provide the environmental explanation that some think he does. For example, despite

\textsuperscript{133} See Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, ed. Scott G. Kenney (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 1:52–53.
\textsuperscript{134} See ibid., 1:14–15.
a lengthy discussion of the use of seer stones (see pp. 30–65), he fails to provide any evidence that anyone in nineteenth-century New York (or even New England) besides Joseph Smith claimed to use a seer stone to translate a document from a foreign language. Yet Joseph Smith’s use of a seer stone to translate the Book of Mormon is generally the only use of a seer stone, under whatever name, that Latter-day Saints care about.

An Alternative Environmental Explanation

Based on the best of circumstantial evidence, Quinn concludes that since there were books on “magic” for sale in Joseph Smith’s vicinity, Joseph Smith must have been involved in “magic.” This is not good enough. He must demonstrate that Joseph Smith actually read specific books and that they influenced him. On the other hand, several works do connect Joseph Smith to “magic,” whatever that may be, on the basis of Hofmann forgeries. Quinn read these books. Quinn studied the Hofmann documents. Quinn even unwittingly helped in the production of the Hofmann forgeries.135 Given that some of the Hofmann forgeries were tailor-made for Quinn’s theories, it is not surprising that although the Hofmann documents were forgeries Quinn concludes that they ought to have been authentic.

Quinn insists that his work, while prompted by the Salamander Letter (see pp. xi, xx), is not influenced by Hofmann forgeries (see pp. 330–31 n. 15). However, his claim rings false if for no other reason than that he still spends seven pages on salamanders (see pp. 151–57), even though Mark Hofmann claimed, “That was all from my head. White Salamander was from my head. I saw the reference to a toad and thought that a salamander was more appropriate insofar as its relationship to magic in the time period from my readings of magic.”136 Thus statements like “Joseph Sr. and Jr. undoubtedly used

135. See Mark Hofmann Interviews, 1:139, 165.
136. Ibid., 2:438; cf. 440: "The idea for the White Salamander derived from the toad in A. D. Howe’s [sic] book. Salamander, from my reading of folk magic, seemed more appropriate than a toad." "At the time I chose it only because it was commonly used in folk magic. I didn't realize until later all the implications other people would associate with it as far as being able to dwell in fire. I wasn't smart enough at the time to understand all that, but it just happened to be important, or at least some people thought it was important, the same way some people thought
the word 'salamander' or one of its equivalent descriptions from the occult traditions" (pp. 152–53) have no legitimate basis in any authentic historical documents.

Quinn’s argument developed at a time when the Hofmann documents had not yet been exposed as forgeries and needed explanation. He repeated his argument in several interviews before the publication of his book as well as in his book, and he has only added his grudges to the second edition. But the argument that Quinn advances is identical to the arguments that Jerald and Sandra Tanner put forth before the publication of the so-called Salamander Letter, arguments that were also based on Hofmann forgeries. The environmental explanation for Quinn’s book being based on Hofmann forgeries is stronger than the environmental explanation Quinn puts forth for Joseph Smith being involved in “magic.” I may be wrong about Quinn, but he is much more likely to be wrong about Joseph Smith.

Caveat Lector

Brigham Young told the Saints, “I would advise you to read books that are worth reading; read reliable history, and search wisdom out of the best books you can procure.”137 Brother Brigham is echoing the words of scripture, to “seek . . . out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). Quinn’s book is not one of these. And it is the obligation of a book reviewer to point out whether a book is good or bad and to provide some reasons why. If the reader wants “an outlandish distortion of the historical facts”138 and “an obstacle to deeper understanding,”139 then the reader is welcome to this book.

139. The phrase is from Brown, “Thinking about Magic,” 130.
Quinn and his supporters will probably dismiss any of the criticisms raised in this review with the wave of a hand, saying that the reviewer is “polemical” (read “disagrees with Quinn”) or associated with the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies or Brigham Young University. This will not do. I have the same degree (Ph.D.) from the same institution as Quinn (Yale), but, unlike Quinn, I actually took coursework on “magic” and have given papers at international conferences on “magic.” Quinn and any supporters must deal with the fact that his understanding of “magic,” whatever that may be, is completely opposed to the understanding of “magic” held by the residents of Palmyra in Joseph Smith’s day. Quinn’s examination of the phenomena, rather than placing the phenomena in historical context, disregards the relevant historical context.

A far more prominent and more widely read writer of books on “magic” closed one of her novels with an appropriate thought. “It is our choices,” wrote J. K. Rowling, “that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” Quinn has made several choices: He chose his arcane subject. He chose to pursue the connection of Joseph Smith with “magic” even after the major evidence for such, the Hofmann documents, was shown to be forged. He chose to give preference to idle gossip rather than solid, firsthand sources. He chose to distort his sources on the Procrustean bed of his thesis. He chose to use an anachronistic and misleading definition of the term magic that would allow him to equivocate in his use of the term. He chose to equivocate in his use of that term and other terms. He chose to construct a “magical world view” that would have been unintelligible to the nineteenth-century farmers of Palmyra. He chose to ignore the advice of his friends and his publisher and produce the first edition. He chose to resign his professorship. He chose to publish a second edition. He chose to castigate those who pointed out the flaws in his work rather than correcting those flaws. Quinn is where he is because of his choices. I only hope the reader chooses more wisely.

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