All of these myths (some of them mutually incompatible) have been propounded by either apologists or antagonists or both. It is hard to sustain any of them in the face of the evidence provided in this fine study. In particular, the fundamentally religious basis for polygamy becomes undeniable in the context of the extraordinarily unfavorable cost-benefit ratio that accompanied it for almost all participants, at least in St. George. Those people knew what "the law of sacrifice" really meant!

DAN VOGEL. *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism.* Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988. xiii; 237 pp. $9.95 paperback.

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Several years ago, Dan Vogel published an article in *The Journal of Pastoral Practice* expressing his view that the Book of Mormon "is a nineteenth-century religious fictional book" filled with anachronisms and other "blunders." "There can be no other explanation," he wrote, than that the Book of Mormon is "a modern composition" rather than an ancient text.[1] With *Religious Seekers,* Vogel has produced a book-length monograph viewing Mormonism in toto as modern religious syncretism. While he has learned to package his argument so as to make it more palatable to Latter-day Saints, *Religious Seekers* is actually one more in a long line of books attempting to show that Mormonism was more derivative than divine. Through a methodology comparable to a game of definitional "Twister," Vogel is able to turn almost anyone into a "Seeker," and then to read Mormonism as nothing less than Seekerism redivivus.

From the outset, Vogel is headed down the wrong path. In order to make his case for "the enormous influence of Seekerism" (217), he first has to reify it. Vogel is not content with the traditional scholarly designation as lowercase "seekers" of those spiritual nomads in any age for whom institutional Christianity was effete and who awaited a recrudescence of genuine religion. The observation that such individuals were attracted to the Mormon church is as old as John Greenleaf Whittier and has been made with regularity ever since. But Vogel insists on portraying them as a coherent "sect" or "movement" with a definite set of beliefs. Hence his use of "Seeker" rather than "seeker."

Yet the latest scholarship sees "little objective evidence" that "Seekers" or "Seekerism" existed even in mid seventeenth-century England, where heresy hunters first popularized the term as an epithet. Led by British historians Frank McGregor and J. C. Davis, the past decade has witnessed a careful reassessment, which Vogel overlooks, of radicalism and religion in the era of the English Revolution.[2] Under attack is "the appropriateness of attaching sectarian labels (often of hostile origin) to people or groups with little or no visible sectarian organization."[3] According to McGregor, "there survive no Seeker confessions of faith," and there exist "no unambiguous statements of the Seeker position as a guide to religious life." Beyond "a common inability to find [spiritual] comfort in allegiance to a particular church and to some degree a millenarian belief that an age of greater religious understanding was at hand," such people "are characterized by doctrinal diversity." Simply put, "There was no sect of Seekers in revolutionary England."[4]

The problems with Vogel's conceptualization only increase as the book progresses. Inexplicably, after some discussion of the seventeenth century the reader is suddenly jolted into the nineteenth century as if there were no interim history to be negotiated or continuity to be established. Once there, nineteenth-century "Seekers" are described in plurality and abundance, yet time and again it is only Asa Wild or occasionally Erastus Hanchett who is being quoted. Where are all the others? Two unassociated and, at times, doctrinally unrelated individuals do not constitute a sect, let alone a movement. Above all, the fact that they had no documented contact with Joseph Smith or other Latter-day Saints places discussion of their influence on Mormonism in the realm of counterfactual speculation.

Once the objective reality of "Seekerism" as either sect or ideology is denied, Vogel's basic thesis collapses, and his constant use of the term as a baseline referent with which to compare Mormonism becomes an exercise in artificiality. The most that can be said is that Vogel has found certain individuals who at some point in their lives seem to have held some views similar to those of some early LDS converts. While this may be interesting in and of itself, it certainly does not prove derivation. Admittedly, Asa Wild expressed views that would have been acceptable to most Mormons, but then so have a host of other individuals. Early Saints had a good deal in common with various Christian groups in antebellum America, but that does not make them intellectually dependent nor does it establish influence. Richard Bushman has wisely noted that "the actual complexities of identifying the

sources of Mormon belief and experience" make the "attempt to trace all the images, ideas, language, and emotional structure of a movement as elaborate as Mormonism" manifestly "elusive and futile."[5]

While in and of itself *Religious Seekers* does not warrant a long review, the methodological mistakes it contains crop up again and again in such literature and need to be identified. Many years ago, Perry Miller declared that what one finds in seventeenth-century New England is one-tenth Puritanism and nine-tenths a culture common to all English people. "Their attitudes towards all sorts of things," wrote Miller, "are pounced upon and exhibited as peculiarities of their sect, when as a matter of fact they were normal attitudes of the time."[6] This is especially true of Vogel's treatment of Seekers. Much of what he implies is uniquely "Seeker" has actually been widespread in Christian history. Prime examples include an emphasis on spiritual gifts or millenarianism. Even together, such ideas have been present in diverse sectors of Christianity from the second-century Montanists to the nineteenth-century Irvingites. Or consider Asael Smith. Vogel labels his perfectly routine expressions of rational Christianity as "Seeker" perspectives (26-27). Even the later family recollection, undocumented in Asael Smith's own writings, of a vaguely "seeker" hope that something would "turn up" to "make known the true gospel" is hardly sufficient to set him apart from others. Christendom has always harbored dissatisfied souls who yearned for a restoration of pristine purity and who had given up on human efforts to achieve it.

Another procedural problem is Vogel's procrustean efforts to manipulate the past so that it always fits his thesis. This is apparent, for instance, when he strains to distinguish Seekers from Primitivists. Since Primitivists, especially of the "Campbellite" kind, have long been recognized as forerunners to Mormonism, in order to have something new to say Vogel has to contrive a separate category for his subjects rather than allow them to remain where other scholars have placed them. On the other hand, Lucy Mack Smith, whose explicit and extended search for genuine religion led both Marvin Hill and Richard Bushman to label her a "seeker," is excluded from the "Seekers" by Vogel because she sought baptism. For him, only those sufficiently anticlerical to forego the ordinances qualify. If one expressed intense desire to see true religion restored, but tarried with a church nonetheless, he would be a "conservative Primitivist." Yet if he had little more than a general hope for an improved religious scene but was unaffiliated, he could be a radical "Seeker" by Vogel's typology. A more satisfying

classification, however, is Richard Hughes's distinction "between *ecclesiastical primitivism,* wherein the forms and structures of the apostolic church are of paramount concern; *ethical primitivism,* wherein the lifestyle of the ancient Christians is the chief concern; and *experiential primitivism,* wherein the apostolic gifts of the Spirit are of ultimate concern."[7]

For a work pretending to be history, there is also a profound ahistoricalism about *Religious Seekers*. Vogel feels quite comfortable bouncing the reader back and forth between the centuries as if "Seekerism" were some kind of static unity, a Platonic archetype, entirely untouched by history. A quote from the seventeenth century is used just as readily as, and often in juxtaposition to, one from the nineteenth century when attempting to make connections with Mormonism. Historians of thought and doctrine, however, have long since abandoned such timeless linkages, preferring to see meaning as something inextricably bound up in history and language rather than something that moves unchanged in and out of minds across the decades. Speaking of seventeenth-century "Seekers," Scott reminds us that the "particular and rapid sequence of political and military events" in Civil War England was the very "backbone upon which radicalism was made flesh and in isolation from which it cannot be understood."[8] Theology is inescapably, if at times imperceptibly, related to social, economic, and political situations. Though words may remain the same across the span of years, they can mask significant ideological differences, and intellectual historians constantly warn us to place them within their proper "community of discourse."

Yet Vogel seems oblivious to the fact that when Lucy Mack Smith used the term "Seeker" to refer to her brother Jason Mack, she had something different in mind than did Puritan heresiographer Thomas Edwards. Or Vogel repeatedly links Erastus Hanchett with seventeenth-century "Seekers" even though the full title of his tract discloses a very specific setting that would need to be fully explored in order to understand him in context: *A Serious Call in Christian Love, to All People; in the form of a Letter to Henry Colman, Minister of the Unitarian Independent Congregational Church Society, in Salem, Mass. Being an answer in part to a Book which he read to his people on the 7th December, 1824, at the opening of a New Meeting House*. Nineteenth-century figures simply are not ideologically indistinguishable from individuals who lived two centuries earlier in a different religious world. Text must never be severed from context, for the full meaning of a tract or treatise can only be captured by recreating the religious idiom of the day. It is this very critical methodological flaw that allows

polemicists—antagonist or apologist—of every religious stripe to rewrite history as if it were the systematic unfolding of their own peculiar emphases.

Vogel's inattentiveness to context not only allows him to exaggerate the "Seeker" phenomenon, but mars his approach to Mormonism as well. Here a different kind of ahistoricalism prevails. Vogel falls into the common trap of assuming that Mormon scriptures can be used ipso facto as evidence of early Mormon belief. While this is true in some respects, it fails to properly account for that crucial mediating link between the written text and the actual life and teaching of the Church—interpretation. Just as the Declaration of Independence was understood very differently in the eighteenth century from the way modern Americans view it,[9] so too it cannot merely be assumed that what a modern reader sees in a given passage from early Mormon scripture is what a Latter-day Saint in the 1830s would have understood by that same passage. Nor can it be assumed that both individuals would have found the same passage noteworthy to begin with. Perhaps it is a lingering nineteenth-century belief in the perspicuity of scripture that leads writers such as Vogel to assume an identity of understanding between themselves and their subjects. Or perhaps he is simply unaware of the numerous primary source "interpretations" from that period that do exist, ranging from passing comment to lengthy exegesis. Whatever the case, *Religious Seekers* is seriously marred by the fact that far too often what is depicted in the book is *Vogel's* eisegetical reading of the revelations rather than the views of those he purports to be describing.

There are also other reasons why *Religious Seekers* presents a view of Mormonism that many readers will find unpersuasive. Former Mormon Vogel romanticizes the late 1820s and early 1830s much as former Mormon David Whitmer did a hundred years earlier in *An Address to All Believers in Christ*. Vogel does not believe that Joseph Smith initially had any idea that a church would be organized, despite the fact that earlier in the book Vogel identifies concern for a restoration of authentic church forms as the touchstone of Seekerism. In fact, he cites Doctrine and Covenants, section 5 (March 1829), as "the first hint that God would establish a church" (34). In any case, before Sidney Rigdon came on the scene, structure was minimal, inspiration was general, and Joseph was just one among peers. Then the bogeyman of institutionalization set in. Gone were the halcyon days of popular charismata. Gone was the personal nature of Joseph Smith's first vision or encounter with Moroni. Priesthood was invented as ecclesiology

was elaborated, and soon a full-blown hierarchy, with Joseph at the top of the pyramid, was in place. As the Church grew and as Joseph took power to himself, the early history had to be rewritten to reflect the new state of affairs. Hence the unreliability of the Prophet's 1838 and 1842 accounts.

These ideas, however, are not profound new historical truths but old anti-Mormon chestnuts. It is by no means settled, as Vogel wishes to have it, that only the 1832 and possibly the 1835 account of Joseph's early experiences are historically accurate. But even if they were, such apparent source scrupulosity is compromised by inconsistency. While repudiating the historical legitimacy of Joseph's 1838 and 1842 narratives, Vogel uncritically accepts numerous later recollections of other individuals as if they were authentic historical accounts. For instance, he takes at face value Martin Harris's 1870 recollections of an encounter with the Spirit in 1818 (40) yet questions the Prophet's later descriptions of his 1820 encounter with God. Similarly, David Whitmer's memory of men and motives at a remove of more than fifty years is given unchallenged credence without so much as a nod at potential problems, not the least of which might be the "sour grapes" syndrome. Yet other Mormons who remember the early years in more traditional ways are dismissed. On the other hand, when Vogel wants to stress the millenarian interests of Joseph Smith he lets the 1838 account that the angel Moroni "quoted biblical prophecies concerning the Second Coming and the destruction of the wicked" (185) stand as evidence, despite the fact that the scriptural recitation is never mentioned in the 1832 text or that he elsewhere argues for a decline of millenarianism after Zion's Camp in 1834!

In the final analysis, *Religious Seekers* is not a volume that can be recommended. Despite a veneer of learning—and here it must be noted that Vogel has a tendency to create long footnotes on the most trivial or noncontroversial points, while letting crucial claims go unsupported by evidence—the book distorts Mormon and Christian history alike. Flawed in conceptualization and forced in exposition, Vogel's thesis is a house of cards that ultimately collapses under scholarly scrutiny. The author, and others working in the same genre, would do well to take a lesson from the history of New Testament studies. For a time, earlier in this century, it seemed that the sources of Christianity had been located in the Hellenistic environment in which it developed. Scholars such as Wilhelm Bousset and Kirsopp Lake popularized the startling find that Christianity was heavily influenced both liturgically and conceptually by the mystery religions. Today that claim draws

little attention and less support. Identifying parallels is not the same as establishing provenance. In the end, Mormonism, like Christianity, must be accounted for in ways that neither deny the earthen vessel nor reject the heavenly treasure placed therein.

NOTES

[1]Dan Vogel, "Is the Book of Mormon a Translation?: A Response to Edward H. Ashment," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 5 (1982): 90-91.

[2]J. F. McGregor and B. Reay, *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Jonathan Scott, "Radicalism and Restoration: The Shape of the Stuart Experience," *Historical Journal* 31 (1988): 453-67.

[3]Scott, "Radicalism and Restoration," 454.

[4]J. F. McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters," in McGregor and Reay, *Radical Religion*, 123, 127, 129.

[5]Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 3.

[6]Perry Miller and Thomas J. Johnson, eds., *The Puritans*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 1:7.

[7]Richard Hughes, "Christian Primitivism as Perfectionism: From Anabaptists to Pentecostals," in *Reaching Beyond: Chapters in the History of Perfectionism*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986), 213-55.

[8]Scott, "Radicalism and Restoration," 455.

[9]See Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York: Doubleday, 1978).