

Response to Grant Wacker

Richard Lyman Bushman

As so often happens when Latter-day Saint historians discuss Joseph Smith with their non-LDS compatriots, Grant Wacker wants to welcome Joseph Smith into the company of American prophets, while I insist that Smith is bizarre, strange, and other. Wacker sees Smith as a recognizable figure on the American religious landscape; I see him as an outlander notably because he presented himself initially as a translator. I admit it had never occurred to me to think of Pentecostal speakers in tongues as translators, but of course they were. It seemed a natural connection to Wacker, who is deeply conversant in Pentecostal culture. I stress the differences: Joseph Smith had an actual text he was translating (so he said); he told the history of an ancient people who wrote on the plates; his translation became a book of scripture equal with the Bible. Does that set him apart or not?

The irony is that the moral of my story is that we should seek commonalities with other religions. We should look for similarities, overlaps, and harmonies as a step toward establishing a compatible world order—exactly what Grant Wacker seeks. So how can I do anything but welcome Wacker’s insightful comments linking Smith and the Pentecostal translators as a generous act of inclusion?