

Quackery and Mormons; A Latter-day Dilemma

L. KAY GILLESPIE

THE FOLLOWING INTERVIEW is with a man tried by the state of Utah as a "quack."¹ His practice is based on massage, herbs, health foods and in reading the iris of the eyes. The trial resulted in a hung jury and thereafter the state dropped the case. The rationale supporting this man's approach to health care was his Mormon beliefs and his interpretation of Church teachings. His views are representative of those expressed by other similar practitioners interviewed in Utah.

Question: How do you explain your practice as being in harmony with your Mormon religion?

Answer: God gave to us a body that will heal itself, given the proper food, etc. The only problem is that we have lost it through the ages. Man himself has polluted himself. Let's start at the first, Genesis 2:29:

And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.

[This scripture, along with D&C 89: 10-13, was used to indicate that meat should not be eaten, or if so, only sparingly.]

Meat makes me sluggish. We are also told not to eat fat or blood. (Leviticus and Deuteronomy)

Question: All of this is included in the Law of Moses, is it not?

L. KAY GILLESPIE is Associate Professor of Sociology, Weber State College. His *Cancer Quackery: The Label of Quack and Its Relation to Deviant Behavior* is shortly to be published.

Answer: Yes, but the Law of Moses is still to be obeyed. I asked Elder _____ [one of the Twelve] about this the other day. I asked if we were not to obey the Ten Commandments and he said, yes; then I asked why we also weren't expected to obey the health laws contained in the Law of Moses. He said, "I'll have to think about that."

Isaiah 1:19–20: If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land; But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

[This scripture was interpreted by him to mean that the scalpel will be used against those who do not eat well.]

Ezekiel 47:12: And by the river upon the bank thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow all trees for meat, whose leaf shall bring forth new fruit according to his months, because they issued out of the sanctuary; and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the leaf thereof for medicine.

Throughout the scriptures they talk about herbs as meat. I draw a distinction between herbs and drugs. Herbs are in their natural state and drugs have been altered by man. For this same reason, I also draw a distinction between whole wheat flour and white flour.

Question: What about auras and other such phenomena?

Answer: Widtsoe talks about an ether around the earth.² The way I interpret this is that it is a spiritual realm around the earth. I don't really agree with some of the techniques (pendulum, etc.). I believe the power through which things operate on this earth is the priesthood. There is a magnetic energy around each person, an aura, that Joseph Smith and some of the other brethren talk about. There are negative and positive poles around each individual. These auras have different colors and different intensities. If you have two people, these auras will actually transfer from the strong to the weak. Anytime a person has a blemish on their skin or elsewhere, and a strong aura touches that, it drains from them, from this aura. Cancer cells are the worst for draining energy from this aura. There are so many things in this field that don't meet the eye, and most of them we're afraid to even talk about. It is very frustrating because not the AMA or any other organization has all the answers, only the priesthood, and the AMA doesn't have the priesthood. People need to be able to make their own choice. Being LDS there is no other alternative.

Question: What about out-and-out fraud? Shouldn't there be some provision or punishment for fraud?

Answer: Yes, that becomes a matter for the courts. To my knowledge there has never been a complaint against me, only the undercover agents for the

government. If a carpenter or someone else does a bad job, it doesn't take people long to complain.

Question: Have you ever received any problem from the Church? Any indication that your membership might be in jeopardy?

Answer: I heard that through the ward once, and I called Elder _____ (one of the Twelve) and he said 'God bless you, this is truth.' So that is the reason I still do this. If he had said no, I would have stopped.

[Talking about various forms of diseases]

Question: Doctors would have to do a blood test or urine analysis of some sort to detect such a problem, how would you detect it, through the feet or eyes or something?

Answer: It would show up in the eyes, and would be taken care of through a diet, a cleansing diet. Not as strong as a purging diet. It's not just a bunch of us quacks that recognize this but there are an awfully lot of medical authorities who do, but it just goes in one ear and out the other.

Question: People really seem to support you and even become stronger in their support as time goes by, do they not? Even if the doctors and government are calling you quacks?

Answer: I've tried to look at both sides of the issue. [Reading from the dictionary] Quack—A boastful pretender to medical skill, a charlatan. In that respect I don't like it.

Question: How would you answer that? You, I assume would say that you are not a pretender to medical skill, right? You don't deal with the medical aspect at all.

Answer: I'm not a medical man, I don't like drugs. In fact, we haven't used drugs for twenty years in my family.

Question: I have heard from several people the statement that "The beliefs of the LDS Church foster quackery." In essence you would agree with that. If what you are doing is called quackery, then you would say that the beliefs of the Church support you, is that right?

Answer: Yes, the whole thing ties together. Section 42 of the D&C as well as the Word of Wisdom.

Question: What would you say about Utah being fertile ground for those who would take advantage of the members of the Church. Say, those coming from back East or elsewhere and using the Word of Wisdom to make a pitch?

Answer: Well, they better understand the Word of Wisdom. I can tell in five minutes if they are working for the Word of Wisdom, or if they are working for themselves.

Question: Do you think the people could pick that up?

Answer: They could if they understood the Word of Wisdom, but most of them don't. There are only three aspects of the Word of Wisdom that they understand, smoking, drinking, and tea and coffee.

Question: Are there some techniques that you wouldn't approve of?

Answer: There are some that I don't understand, but I wouldn't stop anyone from using them, that is their free agency.

Question: How do you decide if something is true or not as it relates to health?

Answer: The Word of Wisdom says everything you need to know if you'll read it and study it. Whenever I read a book if it does not coincide with what the prophets have told us, with what the Word of Wisdom says, and what the Bible says, and so forth, then I don't want it. That is my guiding principle.

This interview highlights some of the difficulties involved in the Church taking a specific official stand on the issues of health care and treatment. Recently the leadership of the Church has become concerned that the names of some church leaders are being associated with nonmedical treatments and practices. Nutrition and health lessons in the Relief Society have also become objects of controversy, and agencies such as the American Cancer Society and various medical associations have made attempts to get the Church to make a statement relating to medical care, health care and quackery. Perhaps in response, on 19 February 1977 an editorial appeared in the *Church News*, from which the following is excerpted:

The Church . . . deplores the patronage of health or medical practices which might be considered ethically or legally questionable.

People with serious illness should consult competent physicians, licensed under the laws of the land to practice medicine.

There are times when we should pray for the sick, and through the priesthood lay hands upon the head of the ill and bless them . . . Certainly, through divine intervention, the sick continue to be made well.

But our belief in the divine power of healing should in no way preclude seeking competent medical assistance.

This was the first article to appear in an official Church organ specifically addressing the question of quackery in nearly seventy-five years. In 1902 President Joseph F. Smith had advised in the *Improvement Era*:

Instead of flocking out to hear smooth-tongued imposters, people should leave them severely alone. Instead of dosing themselves with patent medicines, they should learn to keep their bodies healthy by right living (see Doctrine and Covenants, Sec. 89), by inhaling pure air, taking plenty of exercise and bathing not only often in fresh water, but also in the sunshine with which our merciful Father has so abundantly provided us. If there are cases of sickness, as there will be notwithstanding any precaution we may take, which common sense and good nursing, or simple home remedies do not suffice to cure, let us follow the advice of the scriptures (James 5:14–16), but if we do not believe in the Elders, or in the prayer of faith saving the sick, let a reputable and faithful physician be consulted. By all means, let the quack, the traveling fakir, the cure-all nostrum, and the indiscriminate dosing with patent medicine be abolished like so much trash.³

While scarcely a ringing endorsement of the medical profession, quacks—of the snake oil salesman variety—were clearly condemned.

The February 1977 editorial was shortly followed by another, dated 18 June 1977. This statement was similar to the first, but much more detailed.

From the beginning of time the prophets have taught us how best to live in this wicked and confusing world, and have assured us, as did Lehi of old, that “man is that he might have joy.”

They have likewise taught us to avoid extremes and “be temperate in all things” (D&C 6:19; Alma 38:10). This advice applies to our health habits as well.

But sick people should be cautious about the kind of care they accept as treatment for their illnesses. Some unprincipled practitioners make extreme claims in offering cures to the sick. They take money from their patients, give them no help, and in some cases seriously harm them.

Frequently, fads are advocated under the guise of the Word of Wisdom by unauthorized persons with unwarranted claims respecting health. Some questionable practitioners use other phases of religion, too, like the raising of the right hand to the square as a part of a health ritual. At times, they assume to speak in the name of the Church and even give “official” interpretation related to health.

They have displayed pictures of presidents of the Church or of the Temple to give an “authoritative” backdrop to their teachings. Their exhibits of foods and remedies are enhanced by copies of the scriptures obviously placed there to give further appearance of credibility to their projects.

The Church officially disclaims all such pretensions. Also, it completely disclaims any sponsorship or endorsement of such teachers, remedies, foods or fads. It does not and cannot promote remedies of any kind. It deplors the use of ritualistic practices in connection with supposed cures as bordering on the sacreligious.

The use of health practices which are questionable either legally or ethically is likewise deplored. People who have health problems are

advised to counsel with competent professional practitioners who are properly licensed under the law of the land. . . .

Strong as these comments may be, they still leave unanswered questions and issues for the future, particularly as Mormonism becomes an increasingly international church. To encourage the members to seek "competent medical help" can mean different things in different cultures. Even among "western" practitioners of scientific medicine, one finds surprising variability. Perhaps more to the point, what status is to be accorded such locally revered practitioners as the Indian medicine man and the Spanish curandero, or their counterparts in other cultures?

The claim of many unconventional practitioners, particularly in Utah, that they are treating general authorities and others in leadership positions is another facet, albeit a delicate one, of this issue needing further attention. Whether true or not, such claims are powerful advertisements for many members of the Church who are unable to distinguish between the inspired and human words and practice of Church leaders. Additionally, the ecclesiastical good standing of practitioners who are Mormon is often considered proof that there is nothing wrong with either the practitioner *or* the practice. What then of the family who is told by their stake patriarch to visit a good LDS practitioner who cures by using quaking aspen bark and black salve?

Quackery and the use of unconventional practices and techniques have existed for a long time. The definitions and attitudes towards such practice and techniques have differed in various historical contexts. Many of the medical practices in use today were at one time considered unconventional and unproven. Conversely, what is considered conventional medical practice today may be considered unconventional tomorrow.

In sharp contrast to this record stand the absolute claims of a revealed religion—"true, unchanging evermore." For those faithful members who perceive Mormon leaders as almost always speaking beyond their own historical context, the use and acceptance of any health care practice will continue to involve a conscious consideration of a difficult latter-day dilemma. Statements from Church leaders confidently and unequivocally endorsed medical concepts which if put into practice in 1979 would be (and are) considered quackery. More recent statements—less officially set forth—⁴ from present Church leaders as well as the increasingly influential LDS medical community, argue strongly that early opinions have long since been overtaken by the advances of modern science. The "quacks" of Mormondom and those who follow them have opted to cling to the former position; those who patronize the medical establishment accept the latter.

NOTES

¹The definition of quack used to label this man is limited entirely to a legal context in which a practitioner has been taken to court to be prosecuted for "practicing medicine without a

license." Using this definition leaves unaddressed those questions pertaining to the status of chiropractors, osteopaths, naturopaths and other practitioners of marginal (to medicine) acceptance. There are other definitions of "quack" that could have been used including one by Brigham Young (JD 15:226) "Who is the real doctor? That man who knows by the spirit of revelation what ails an individual, and by that same spirit knows what medicine to administer. That is the real doctor, the others are quacks." The definitional problem is further explored in other works by the author:

"Cancer Quackery in the State of Utah." Comprehensive Health Planning, State of Utah, 1976.

Cancer Quackery: The Label of Quack and Its Relationship to Deviant Behavior. Palo Alto, CA: R & E Research Associates, Inc., 1979.

"Quackery: Definitional Contexts and Comparisons." *Encyclia: The Journal of the Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters*, 54(1977):79-89.

²"The doctrine of the ether explains how, may be, all the happenings of the universe are indelibly inscribed upon the record of nature. A word is spoken. The air movements that it causes disturbs the ether. The ether waves radiate into space and can never die. Anywhere, with the proper instrument, one of the waves may be captured, and the spoken word read. That is the simple method of wireless telegraphy. It is thus that our actions shall be known on the last great day. By the holy spirit God holds all things in his keeping. His intelligence will radiate into space, to touch whomsoever it desires. He who is tuned aright can read the message, flashed across space by the Almighty. Thus, also, God, who is a person, filling only a portion of space, is everywhere present." John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith as Scientist: A Contribution to Mormon Philosophy*, (Salt Lake City: The General Board of Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association, 1920) p. 24.

³*Improvement Era*, 5:624 (June 1902).

⁴Lee Smith, "Herbal Remedies: God's Medicine," *Dialogue* XII (Autumn 1979): 37-60.