

# Whither Mormon Environmental Theology?

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Ecological theologian and cultural historian Thomas Berry has suggested that we are entering the “Ecozoic” age, which he defines as “that period when humans would be present on the earth in a mutually enhancing manner.”<sup>1</sup> Here Berry is expressing a hope that human creativity can transcend the destructive and short-sighted culture of the modern age, which has precipitated the greatest environmental crisis in human existence—a crisis that recently featured the largest oil spill in U.S. history. By mutually enhancing, Berry means not simply a benign human presence on the earth, but the emergence of an ecological consciousness that nests the human economy into the larger earth system, a sort of human-earth symbiosis. As Berry and many others suggest, the problems associated with the environmental crisis—pollution, species extinction, climate change—are but symptoms of a much deeper failure on the part of our civilization to relate to the earth and its creatures in moral terms. Berry and others have focused blame for the crisis on Western, specifically industrial, civilization whose historical development emerged from the mechanistic cosmology of enlightenment science and a pervasive subject-object oriented ontology (way of being/perceiving the world)—an ontology in which human subjects seek mastery over the objective (material) world.

Lynn White, in his now infamous essay “The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis,” singled out medieval Christianity for planting the seeds from which our present industrial society grew.<sup>2</sup> White particularly blames Christianity for despiritualizing the natural world by emphasizing the transcendent nature of God and the instrumental purpose of the earth. White writes: “To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole

concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West. For nearly two millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature.”<sup>3</sup>

Since White leveled these claims in 1967, there has been a flurry of responses from those who would defend Western Christianity and religion in general from this blame. Among recent responses has been that of Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, scholars of religion and ecology, who write: “As key repositories of enduring civilizational values and as indispensable motivators in moral transformation, religions have an important role to play in projecting persuasive visions of a more sustainable future.”<sup>4</sup> While admitting religions’ role in the current crisis, they, among many others, are more optimistic about world religions’ potential contribution to solving the crises we face, precisely because of their moral dimensions.

From 1996 to 1998, Tucker and Grim organized a series of ten forums, “Religious Traditions of the World and Ecology,” which included Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Shinto, and indigenous religions. These forums brought together religious scholars, environmental ethicists, and practitioners from around the world who explored both the promising and problematic aspects of the world’s major religious traditions with respect to the environment. Through these forums, scholars and activists from many of the world’s religious traditions are reexamining and redefining the human-earth relationship, which has been eclipsed—especially in Western Christianity—by the primacy of the human-God and human-human relationships as the domains of religious moral concern.

As Tucker and Grim point out, this reflective process includes three basic methods of inquiry: retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction. Retrieval comprises the scholarly mapping of a tradition’s earth-teachings and, in many cases, the excavation of neglected ones. Retrieval reflects on the positive and negative environmental consequences these teachings may have. Reevaluation involves rethinking a given tradition’s earth-teachings in light of contemporary ecological issues and scientific knowledge and proposing new interpretations of these traditional teachings. Reconstruction aims at the creative adaptation of a tradition’s teachings

and practices to specific environmental ideas, problems, or circumstances with an emphasis on religious orthopraxy (or, right religious action).

In his book *Ecologies of Grace*, environmental ethicist Willis Jenkins masterfully outlines several “lived environmental theologies” within global Christianity in response to the current crisis.<sup>5</sup> Many traditions within Christianity have taken up the call to formulate a moral response to the ecological crisis, doing so on their own terms and in their own language. For example, the World Council of Churches has formally incorporated responsibility for creation into its programs.<sup>6</sup> On January 1, 1990, speaking at the Catholic World Day of Peace, Pope John Paul II, called the ecological crisis as “our common responsibility.” Many Catholic dioceses have also published “pastoral letters” addressing local and international environmental issues.<sup>7</sup> The Evangelical Environmental Network has rallied behind “creation care” as a sacred moral duty.<sup>8</sup> Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew, who has been referred to as the Green Pope, has been a fierce advocate for rectifying our “ecological sins.” Each strategy is unique to its theological tradition, but each emphasizes our moral duty to care for the earth.

Mormonism, as a non-traditional Christian tradition, has nevertheless paralleled mainstream Christianity’s more ambivalent reaction to environmental issues. While founding and early Mormon leaders spoke passionately on a wide array of issues related to our moral duty to the earth (mostly focused on prudent use of resources and kindness to animals), contemporary Mormonism has largely remained silent on environmental problems and excluded the earth from our sphere of core moral concerns.

The absence of a robust contemporary Mormon environmental ethic stems largely from a deep polarization of environmental issues on the American political landscape during the last fifty years. An excellent example is juxtaposing tree-hugger environmentalist hippies against hard-working middle-class folk, as was the case in the jobs versus owls debate during the 1990s in the Pacific Northwest. And when those who would advocate for environmental issues become stereotyped with free love, drug culture, and secularism, conservative Mormons tend to stop listening. In such a volatile political atmosphere, the Church has increasingly

shied away from declarations or sermons on our duty to care for the earth.

However, as a student of Mormon environmental theology, I have been pleased to note a dramatic increase in grassroots environmentally focused Mormon activism, art, symposia, scholarship, blogs, and listservs.<sup>9</sup> Mormons, along with the rest of Western civilization, are beginning to engage in serious reflection on what our tradition has to say about the earth and our moral responsibilities toward it and its creatures. In my observation however, much of this Mormon scholarship and activism has been focused on the *retrieval* of earth-affirming doctrines with the hope that highlighting these lesser-known teachings will foster more environmentally minded orthopraxis among the Mormon faithful.

I propose that these retrieved Mormon earth-teachings can be divided into two broad traditions. Abstracting Mormon earth-teachings into these traditions becomes helpful when attempting to understand Mormon moral ontology—how we perceive our duty to the rest of creation. By “tradition,” I mean the body of scripture, teachings, official declarations, relevant ecclesiastical duties (such as callings), and Mormon orthopraxy that relate to our moral duties to the earth and its creatures.

The first of these traditions I will call the “stewardship tradition.” While Thomas G. Alexander uses this label in his 1994 article “Stewardship and Enterprise: The LDS Church and the Wasatch Oasis Environment, 1847–1930,”<sup>10</sup> I am using the term, not as a broad Christian ecological theme, but rather as a specific sub-set of Mormon earth-teachings and practices. The stewardship tradition is supported by a robust mixture of the above criteria (scriptures, teachings, declarations, orthopraxy) especially reflected in nineteenth-century Mormon agrarianism. The stewardship tradition holds an instrumental moral ontology regarding our relationship to the earth—that the earth and its creatures are God-given materials whose existences are means to human ends, both utilitarian and aesthetic. This view has also been labeled as anthropocentric, or human-centered.

The second of these traditions I will call the “vitalistic tradition.” While both scriptures and teachings support this tradition, it has not, to my knowledge, been meaningfully reflected in the orthopraxy of the Mormon faithful. Thus, the vitalistic tradition

consists of those Mormon teachings that hold in common the implication of an intrinsic moral ontology regarding our relationship to the earth. By “intrinsic,” I mean simply that the earth and its creatures have value as ends in themselves outside of their usefulness to human wants and needs—again, both utilitarian and aesthetic. This tradition implies but does not explicitly state a biocentric, or life-centered ontology.

While I praise and have learned much from the retrieval of the unique earth-teachings and practices of Mormonism from both traditions because environmental issues have become so polarizing, simply reemphasizing these lesser-known teachings has been insufficient to reconnect the earth and its creatures with Mormon moral concern and orthopraxy, especially in a post-agrarian society. In this article, I will flesh out the two categories of retrieved Mormon earth-teachings, commenting on their implied moral ontologies. I will end by reevaluating and reconstructing several aspects of the vitalistic tradition.

### **The Stewardship Tradition**

As a popular strategy of Evangelical Protestantism, stewardship encourages “responsible habitation” of the earth. As Jenkins points out, “The stewardship strategy thus makes environmental issues significant in light of God’s attitude toward human agents, situating environmental practices wholly within the exchange between God and humanity.”<sup>11</sup> Stewardship thus maintains an anthropocentric view of creation, with the earth and its creatures ordained for prudent and respectful human use.<sup>12</sup>

While Genesis 1:28 speaks of “subduing” the earth and exercising “dominion” over its creatures (1:26), Genesis 2:15 speaks of “dressing” and “keeping” the Lord’s garden. Many ecological theologians have argued about the proper interpretation of these texts outside of their original ancient Near Eastern contexts.<sup>13</sup> However, within the broad Christian stewardship tradition, exploitation and dominion give way to keeping the Lord’s garden, a moral charge that has resonated with many contemporary Christians.<sup>14</sup>

Environmental ethicist Clare Palmer proposes that the contemporary widespread use of stewardship in relation to the environment emerged from Christian usage in the 1950s and 1960s

with respect to *financial* resources and was later incorporated into the language of the ecological awakening of the 1960s.<sup>15</sup> John Passmore's *Man's Responsibility for Nature* was also a milestone in articulating a twentieth-century approach to environmental stewardship as a human moral duty to care for creation.<sup>16</sup>

Stewardship emphasizes God's goodness in creating the world. Because human beings benefit from that goodness, we are obliged to make prudent and wise use of its bounty and to safeguard human health.<sup>17</sup> The Church of England 1986 report, *Our Responsibility for the Living Environment*, represents a typical articulation of Christian environmental stewardship: "The Bible pictures mankind in relation to nature as a shepherd, a farm manager, or a household steward—a role which allows us to make use of resources for our needs, but does not permit us to destroy them, since they are entrusted to us for only a limited period."<sup>18</sup> The earth's resources are a gift to human beings for which we are accountable to God.

Scripture and teachings within the Mormon stewardship tradition share these assumptions. The writings of Joseph Smith frame the earth as a divinely created gift to its human dwellers, an essential platform upon which the mortal phase of the plan of salvation is carried out. The classic formulation of the Mormon stewardship tradition as taught by Smith appears in Doctrine and Covenants 59:18–20:

Yea, all things which come of the earth, in the season thereof, are made for the benefit and the use of man, both to please the eye and to gladden the heart;

Yea, for food and for raiment, for taste and for smell, to strengthen the body and to enliven the soul.

And it pleaseth God that he hath given all these things unto man; for unto this end were they made to be used, with judgment, not to excess, neither by extortion.

The earth was made as a means to human ends—an anthropocentric view typical of the rest of Christian stewardship discourse—both to gladden the heart and eye (aesthetic concern) and for food and raiment (utilitarian concerns).

Early Mormon settlers of Utah did not easily separate the aesthetic and the utilitarian, the sacred and the temporal.<sup>19</sup> These settlers, though accustomed to the climates in the eastern United

States and Europe, were determined to make the desert “blossom as a rose.” The first communities in the Salt Lake Valley set to work building gridded cities with wide avenues. They made gardens, farms, and orchards. They cooperatively built hundreds of miles of irrigation canals.<sup>20</sup> An agrarian aesthetic permeated not only their livelihoods but their religious metaphors and practices.

Brigham Young stated, “You are here commencing anew. . . . [T]he soil, the air, the water are all pure and healthy. Do not suffer them to become polluted with wickedness. Strive to preserve the elements from being contaminated by the filthy, wicked conduct and sayings of those who pervert the intelligence God has bestowed upon the human family.”<sup>21</sup> Here Young does not distinguish between physical and spiritual pollution. Again he states: “our work is to beautify the whole face of the earth, until it shall become like the Garden of Eden.”<sup>22</sup> Stewardship for Young was framed in an eschatological vision that assumed goodness in creation and a moral duty to work toward our mutual exaltation.

Apostle George Q. Cannon, counselor in the First Presidency of Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Lorenzo Snow, is well known for his passion for promoting animal welfare among Church members. He made frequent contributions to the *Juvenile Instructor* and in 1889 wrote: “The Lord has given animals, fowls and fish to man for his use. They are placed under man’s control, to be used for food with prudence and thanksgiving and not wastefully. But we have heard of animal life being very much wasted to gratify the hunting propensity of some men. This is wrong. When people can use game of any kind for food, and they stand in need of it, the Lord is not displeased if they kill it. When, however, they hunt it for the mere pleasure of killing, then sin is committed.”<sup>23</sup> Here Cannon encourages the use of animals for human needs but frowns on killing for killing’s sake. Waste and cruelty are considered a sin. Cannon was so effective in his advocacy for kindness to animals that the Church held an annual Humane Day, beginning in 1897 and lasting until 1918, to emphasize care for animals as a moral obligation.<sup>24</sup> Joseph F. Smith was also a passionate advocate for animal welfare and frequently recited the folk saying: “Take not the life you cannot give, for all things have an equal right to live.”<sup>25</sup>

In addition to a scriptural and teaching basis, the stewardship

tradition was also perceptible in early Mormon orthopraxis. Joseph F. Smith tells of crossing the plains when an ox collapsed from exhaustion. He relates: "The brethren poured oil on the head of the ox and then laid their hands upon it."<sup>26</sup> The fact that these men would perform a priesthood ordinance on an animal proves the strong connection between their spiritual and temporal lives.

The responsibility of individual members to accept and magnify their ward calling however small is a critical part of Mormon orthopraxy and a frequent theme in lessons and general conference discourses. As political scientist Ronald Smith shows, in early Utah wards bishops also frequently served as "water masters" to maintain decentralized control over a community's irrigation water. The bishop resolved disputes and made sure that the water was distributed equitably.<sup>27</sup>

While early Mormon agrarian communities did not separate utility from aesthetics or the temporal from the spiritual, it was not long before overgrazing and deforestation led to acute environmental problems such as sand storms, flooding, and drought.<sup>28</sup> Despite the admonition of early Church leaders, the spirit of capitalism was too strong to resist and soon utility became the domain of the market, aesthetics the domain of the parks and wilderness, and spirituality the domain of personal morality. Today the vast tracts of manicured farms have all grown houses, and Doctrine and Covenants 104:17 ("For the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare") invokes images of supermarket shelves rather than brimming root cellars or granaries bulging with wheat.

Since the 1960s, the rise of environmentalism has radically shifted the political implications of moral discourse regarding the earth. In a contemporary American context, this movement has resulted in the decline of the stewardship tradition to such an extent that stewardship for the earth is no longer a recognizable imperative of Mormon moral discourse.

One of the last recognizable contributors to the stewardship tradition is Ezra Taft Benson. Benson frequently repeated the themes of George Q. Cannon and Joseph F. Smith regarding kindness to animals, avoiding waste, and alleviating suffering. Benson's environmental theology fit squarely within the stewardship tradi-



tion when he taught: “It is terribly important that we preserve and improve the great natural resources with which the God of heaven has so richly blessed us, that we may not follow the experience of some other nations that have come and gone because of the mismanagement of their natural and God-given resources.”<sup>29</sup> Ironically, despite the fact that, as Church president Benson was well known for his enthusiasm for gardening, though perhaps less so than President Spencer W. Kimball, as Secretary of Agriculture under U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Benson oversaw the expansion of industrial farming and the demise of the family farm, part of the “get big or get out” philosophy.<sup>30</sup>

Hugh Nibley, a legendary scholar of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University but never a General Authority, has been a lone voice in the wilderness (sometimes quite literally) in defense of the Mormon stewardship tradition. Nibley went to great lengths to defend the benevolent exegesis of Genesis 1 by framing stewardship as a choice between God and Satan’s dominion. He was quite comfortable within the stewardship tradition and saw plenty of moral implications for our relation to the earth with its teachings. By focusing on the Latin root *dominus*, rather than the harsher Hebrew *Radah*, Nibley points to the apocryphal writings of early Judaism and Christianity to show humankind’s proper role as caretakers. Nibley famously wrote, “Man’s dominion is a call to service, not a license to exterminate.”<sup>31</sup>

The stewardship tradition makes a significant contribution to a potential Mormon environmental ethic. However, for me it remains problematic because it is marked by an instrumental valuation of the earth and its creatures by giving human subjects mastery over material objects. The earth is always framed in reference to human needs and wants. Moral duty is concerned with metering waste, not causing unnecessary suffering, and beautifying the earth. Another potentially problematic aspect of stewardship is that the scriptures define the earth’s productivity as an incentive that will reward obedience to other moral and ritual commandments—a sort of conditional ethic of the land, rather than an authentic land ethic. Caring for the land is never a commandment in itself. Leviticus 25:18 is an example: “Wherefore ye shall do my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them; and ye shall dwell in the land in safety.” The Book of Mormon is full of “if, then”

promises regarding obedience to God's laws: "And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper" (1 Ne. 2:20). Both the ancient Hebrews and early Mormons were keenly aware of the fragility of the land, and perhaps obedience to God was simply insurance against crop failure; but caring for the land was never a moral imperative in itself.

Despite these problems, contemporary Mormon moral discourse is marked by the conspicuous absence of earth stewardship as a moral focus. As evidence, there are no stand-alone environmentally themed Sunday School lessons on caring for the earth in any of the Church's manuals. The Church's official website {LDS.org} and its social networking site {Mormon.org} include no introductory doctrinal positions. Neither one includes caring for the earth as part of the Church's core "principles" or "values." While stewardship does appear on {LDS.org}, it refers exclusively to the responsibility to fulfill one's callings and to complete one's monthly home teaching duties.

### The Vitalistic Tradition

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines vitalism as "the theory that the origin and phenomena of life are due to or produced by a vital principle, as distinct from a purely chemical or physical force."<sup>32</sup> Vitalism is common among the world's spiritual traditions. In Chinese culture this energy-force is *ch'i*. In the Hindu Vedas, this vital principle is most closely associated with *prana*. In Pacific Islander philosophy, this impersonal force that dwells in all life is called *mana*. Although the concept was quickly rejected by Western science, the idea made an appearance as *ether*. In his 1907 *Creative Evolution*, French philosopher Henri Bergson coined the term *élan vital*, which he postulated as similar to electricity, as the animating principle of life. Within Mormonism, this vital primordial force is *intelligence*. Thus, the vitalistic tradition contains scriptures and teachings that elaborate on the nature of intelligence. It also includes teachings such as the eternal nature of matter and expands traditional Christian notions of spirit to nonhumans, including the earth itself, both of which join humans in possessing an eternal existence. Many of these teachings have already been retrieved by Mormon environmental theologians to bolster Mormonism's moral obligation to the earth,<sup>33</sup> but unlike

the stewardship tradition, these seeds have fallen on hard ground, and precious little orthopraxis reflects the radical implications of the vitalistic tradition.

The vitalistic tradition begins with a unique Mormon teaching that originated with Joseph Smith—namely the eternal nature of matter and the material nature of spirit. Mormon creation theology asserts that there was no *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) creation by a self-existing, transcendent God. While the idea of eternal matter was common among pagan and indigenous traditions of the ancient Near East and Greece including Plato, after approximately 200 C.E., it was universally accepted in the Christian Church that God was the ultimate cause of everything and that He created all things out of nothing.<sup>34</sup> In Smith's view, "the elements are eternal" and creation as traditionally read in Genesis 1 is read as "formed or organized."

By 1843 Joseph Smith was teaching that not only is matter in its basic elements uncreated, but that there was no such thing as immaterial matter:

There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; We cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter. (D&C 131:7–8)

According to Smith, all matter (including spirit) is imbued with intelligence. "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made neither indeed can be" (D&C 93:29). Abraham 3:22 provides a slightly different concept of intelligences—less a quality of matter than a premortal characteristic: "Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones." Intelligence in both cases clearly point to the basic units of the pre-mortal soul.

Apostle Orson Pratt took this idea a step further: "All the organizations of worlds, of minerals, of vegetables, of animals, of men, of angels, of spirits, and of the spiritual personages of the Father, of the Son, and the Holy Ghost, must, if organized at all, have been the result of the self combinations and unions of the preexistent, intelligent, powerful, and eternal particles of sub-

stance. These eternal Forces and Powers are the Great First Causes of all things and events that have had a beginning.”<sup>35</sup> Pratt takes Smith’s intelligences in the direction of self-organizing intelligence-matter as the basic unit of cosmological creativity, out of which the myriad forms of the organized universe emerge.

Brigham Young, while he certainly taught from the stewardship tradition, also taught a kind of vitalism: “There is not one particle of element, which is not filled with life. . . . There is life in all matter, throughout the vast extent of all the eternities; it is in the rock, the sand, the dust, in water, and gasses, and in short, in every description and organization of matter whether it be solid, liquid, or gaseous, particle operating within particle.”<sup>36</sup> Like Pratt, Young sees all matter as alive. The eternal nature and self-organizing properties of intelligence-matter make it the building blocks of a Mormon theology of subjectivity and agency.

The Book of Moses, dictated and published by Smith between 1830 and 1831 alters the King James Version (KJV) creation narratives making room for Smith’s expanding unified cosmology. One important addition to these narratives includes the elaboration of a spiritual creation which includes plants and animals. In Moses, dominion is still the operative word, and Moses 3:7 echoes the KJV almost word for word: “And I, the Lord God, formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a *living soul*” (emphasis mine). However, Moses 3:9 adds an important and unique idea to the creation story: “And out of the ground made I, the Lord God, to grow every tree, naturally, that is pleasant to the sight of man; and man could behold it. And it became also a *living soul*” (emphasis mine). Moses 3:19 repeats this concept: “And out of the ground I, the Lord God, formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and commanded that they should come unto Adam, to see what he would call them; and they were also *living souls*” (emphasis mine). It is interesting that the Hebrew for “living creature” (*Nepesh Chayy*), was used for both humans and non-humans.<sup>37</sup> However, the KJV translators translated this term as “living soul” in the case of humans and as “living creature” in the case of animals (Gen. 2:7, 19). Joseph Smith used “living soul” for both humans and nonhumans (Moses 3:7, 9, 19), providing a curious synthesis between the ancient Hebrew and the Western concept of

the soul and making explicit the Mormon doctrine of plant and animals souls.

Another aspect of the living souls doctrine are the teachings that expand salvation and eternal destiny to plants and animals. This 1909 statement from the First Presidency, then consisting of Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, and Anthon H. Lund, sums up both the sentiment and the seriousness with which this doctrine, originating with Smith, is taken: “[God] made the tadpole and the ape, the lion and the elephant. . . . The whole animal creation will be perfected and perpetuated in the Hereafter, each class in its ‘distinct order or sphere,’ and will enjoy ‘eternal felicity.’”<sup>38</sup>

Related to the living souls doctrines, Moses 7:48 presents a profound scene: “And it came to pass that Enoch looked upon the earth; and he heard a voice from the bowels thereof saying: Wo, wo is me, the mother of men; I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which is gone forth out of me? When will my Creator sanctify me, that I may rest, and righteousness for a season abide upon my face?” First, the portrayal of the earth as our mother is one of the oldest metaphors human beings possess. This passage gives voice to our Mother Earth through Enoch. Nowhere else in the Christian canon is the earth heard in such touching expressiveness. Second, this passage invokes a spiritual dimension to the work of climatologist James Lovelock’s increasingly popular Gaia Theory. Lovelock has shown that the dynamic interaction of the geology, biology, and atmosphere of our planet literally behaves like an organism in self-regulating the earth’s temperature within the narrow range suitable for life, despite the fact that the sun’s temperature has increased over the last several million years. Lovelock boldly proposes that “the entire surface of the earth including life is a superorganism.”<sup>39</sup> Joseph Smith’s Book of Moses provides the spiritual Elias of this increasingly accepted scientific proposal.

Smith and early Church leaders also taught that the earth itself would participate in the eternal progress of human kind. Doctrine and Covenants 77:1 asks: “Question: What is the sea of glass spoken of by John, 4th chapter, and 6th verse of the Revelation? Answer: It is the earth, in its sanctified, immortal, and eternal state.” In addition to the eternal destiny of the earth, Doctrine

and Covenants 88:18–20 teaches that the earth will be the eternal dwelling place of exalted human beings:

Therefore, it [the earth] must needs be sanctified from all unrighteousness, that it may be prepared for the celestial glory;  
For after it hath filled the measure of its creation, it shall be crowned with glory, even with the presence of God the Father;  
That bodies who are of the celestial kingdom may possess it forever and ever.

The earth is not only a living soul with a past, present, and future but is also inextricably connected to the fate of its inhabitants, an idea that I find particularly powerful.

The vitalistic tradition contains a complex array of earth-teachings within a unified cosmology: eternal intelligence-matter, the doctrine of living souls (plants, animals, and the earth itself), the eternal nature of these living souls along with humans, and the proposition that there will be an eternal relationship between human beings and the earth. These teachings imply an intrinsic moral ontology. The fact that matter is eternal and inherently alive strongly implies that, in addition to its instrumental uses, the earth and its creatures have intrinsic worth as ends in themselves. This implication contrasts with the instrumental valuation of matter in the stewardship tradition as material means to human spiritual ends.

However, despite this doctrinal richness, many of the above teachings are obscure and seldom dwelt upon in contemporary Mormon discourse. In Sunday School, we seldom talk about any of these teachings or their implications for environmental issues. When we do talk about the earth, we do so in strictly anthropocentric terms for its role in the plan of salvation. When talking about the millennium and the eternities (which we seem to love doing), we dwell on the more violent aspects of the eschaton.

### **Reevaluation, Reconstruction, and Restoration**

In this article, I have presented a brief overview of retrieved Mormon earth-teachings and practices within two traditions—the stewardship and vitalistic traditions. Neither tradition finds adequate emphasis in contemporary Mormon moral teachings or practices due to the increasingly polarized nature of environmental issues. While retrieval of both traditions contains a rich canon

of ethically compelling scriptures, teachings, and orthopraxy, the vitalistic tradition provides the most compelling moral ontology for a Mormon contribution to the Ecozoic Age.

First, because the vitalistic tradition frames the cosmos as made up of self-organizing intelligence-matter, the primacy of the human subject as the basic unit of cosmic subjectivity is rendered problematic. Agency and subjectivity are expanded, thus subverting the strict Western dualism between subjects and objects which has been identified as a key ontological feature of the current crisis. As stated in the introduction, Thomas Berry has been a leading voice for both a moral response to the environmental crisis and an ontological shift in Christian theology. In order to overcome the current polarization surrounding the environment, Berry, among many others, proposes an ontological shift away from the dominion-based subject-object relationship to the earth that has precipitated the current crisis, toward an inter-subjective ontology that views the cosmos as an emerging process of interacting and vital particularities. Rather than acting out our wills on an external and passive “nature,” humanity could take a humbler yet empowering position in the cosmos. Berry and physicist Brian Swimme suggest that “the universe is a communion of subjects, rather than a collection of objects.”<sup>40</sup> The vitalistic tradition certainly supports this radical shift in ontology. By democratizing humanity’s place in the cosmos as subjects among subjects Berry believes (and I would agree) that our moral response to the earth should focus on creating a “mutually enhancing” relationship with the earth. This ontological shift combined with its guiding ethic of mutually enhancing relations transcends the polarization of utilitarian and aesthetic concerns characteristic of modern environmental discourse which divides the earth into sacred, untouchable spaces (e.g., national parks) and exploitable resources (Kennecott copper mines).

In addition to subverting Western and Christian ontology, Mormon vitalism makes matter the essential stuff of which the eternities are composed. The classical image of the soul as a ghost in the machine is a persistent metaphor, one that fits well with Mormon dramatizations of the preexistence. The doctrine of intelligence-matter infusing all matter with life challenges the pervasive dualism between body and spirit and denies any supernatu-

ral numinous quality to spirit. This doctrine has important implications for environmental ethics. If matter is the essence of our eternal identity and experience, truisms like “we are spiritual beings having a human experience” fall apart. A theology of matter as sacred rather than as fallen, flawed mortal substance becomes plausible. How might our perception of the cosmos shift if the “eternal felicity” we were waiting for was the continual emergence of the cosmos taking place all around us?

The doctrine of animals and plants as living souls also throws a wrench into notions of the earth and its creatures as means to human ends. It would be much more ethically problematic to cram chickens, pigs, and cows into small cages and feedlots if they were actively understood as possessing a pre-, mortal, and post-mortal existence to which our treatment of them was as morally based as our relation to our fellow humans. This is not to argue that we should become vegans; plants have souls, too. But once we have made the ontological shift toward inter-subjectivity, the discourse of the prudent use of natural resources is replaced by *participation* in the earth’s systems with all the rights and responsibilities that implies. All creatures must eat to live; thus the simple act of eating is sacramental of this basic principle of life. The Word of Wisdom found in Doctrine and Covenants 89 gives a firm scriptural foundation for an expansion of the dietary prohibitions of alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea to prescriptive methods for raising crops and livestock that allow animals and plants to fill the measure of their creations and avoid toxic chemicals that destroy life. Perhaps we could develop a Word of Wisdom Certification system for agricultural and food processing.

Further, planetary biodiversity and ecological integrity become a sacrament to the ever-evolving creative energy of intelligence-matter, the sacred substance we share with minerals, plants, animals, and Gods, all of which are promised to continue throughout eternity. Protecting and maintaining biodiversity as the spectrum of sacred creativity thus takes on a moral imperative. Through Enoch, Mother Earth mourns, not because we forget to read our scriptures or break the law of chastity, but for the continual desecration of its body by greedy, extractive, and polluting industries and the lifestyles they support.

The vitalistic tradition accomplishes an ontological shift to-



ward inter-subjectivity with its guiding ethic of creating mutually enhancing relationships with the earth and its creatures. It opens the imagination to an eternal ecology. In addition, Mormon environmental theologians could consider adding a fourth method: restoration. Many of the current ecological issues form part of what I would call an *ecological* apostasy, the great falling away by Western civilization from sacred truths about the spirituality of the earth and its creatures which Joseph Smith began to restore in his vitalistic theology. And despite Lynn White's accusation that Christianity is anathema to the sacred grove, Mormons hold a grove in upstate New York to be particularly sacred indeed! Our response to the ecological apostasy thus requires both spiritual and ecological restoration.

Restoration provides an essential grammar that can guide us through acts of retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction so that we are not simply adapting our teachings to outside pressures but fulfilling a sacred task that began with Joseph Smith but is carried on by the Mormon faithful. Restoration provides the key connection between the vitalistic tradition and Mormon orthopraxy by engaging Mormon belief in acting out the implications of these sacred doctrines and repenting of our ecological sins by restoring the ecosystems we have destroyed. We must restore the earth-teachings and orthopraxy that morally connect us to the earth and its creatures, in addition to repairing and healing the damage we have done to Enoch's Mother Earth so that her pain will be assuaged and we can move through the eternities together in mutually enhancing symbiotic exaltation.

#### Notes

1. Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth Spirituality and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 93.
2. Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis," *Science*, March 10, 1967, 1203-7.
3. *Ibid.*, 1206.
4. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, "Introduction: The Emerging Alliance of World Religions and Ecology," *Daedalus*, Fall 2001, <http://www.amacad.org/publications/fall2001/fall2001.aspx> (accessed January 2010).

5. Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2008).

6. The World Council of Churches website includes such programs as “Climate Change and Water” and “Poverty, Wealth and Ecology,” <http://www.oikoumene.org/programmes.html> (accessed January 2, 2011).

7. John Hart, *What Are People Saying about Environmental Theology?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 23–38.

8. The Evangelical Environmental Network <http://www.creationcare.org> (accessed January 2, 2011).

9. Both Brigham Young University and Utah Valley University have recently held symposia on Mormonism and the environment. While this article cites several examples of Mormon environmental theological scholarship, two additional anthologies are George B. Handley, Terry B. Ball, and Steven L. Peck, eds., *Stewardship and the Creation: LDS Perspectives on the Environment* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2006); and Terry Tempest Williams, William B. Smart, and Gibbs M. Smith, eds., *New Genesis: A Mormon Reader on Land and Community* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1998). For two examples of blogs, see <http://greenmormonarchitect.blogspot.com/>; <http://www.LDSustainability.blogspot.com> (accessed January 2, 2011). *LDS Earth Stewardship* is the name of a recently formed Google Group: <http://groups.google.com/group/lds-earth-stewardship?hl=en> (accessed January 2, 2011).

10. Thomas G. Alexander, “Stewardship and Enterprise: The LDS Church and the Wasatch Oasis Environment, 1847–1930,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 341–64.

11. Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 81.

12. *Ibid.*, 80.

13. Robin Attfield, “Christian Attitudes to Nature,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 3 (July–September 1983): 369–86; Peter Harrison, “Subduing the Earth: Genesis 1, Early Modern Science, and the Exploitation of Nature,” *Journal of Religion* 79, no. 1 (January 1999): 86–109; Jeanne Kay, “Human Dominion over Nature in the Hebrew Bible,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 79, no. 2 (June 1989): 214–32; Clare Palmer, “Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics,” in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, edited by R. J. Berry (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006).

14. Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 80.

15. Palmer, “Stewardship,” 66.

16. Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, 78.

17. Clare Palmer “Stewardship: a Case Study,” 67.

18. Quoted in *ibid.*, 67.

19. Alexander, "Stewardship and Enterprise," 350.
20. For detailed examples of good and bad impacts of Mormon pioneers, see Alexander, "Stewardship and Enterprise"; Dan L. Flores, "Zion in Eden: Phases of the Environmental History of Utah," *Environmental Review* 7, no. 4 (1983): 325-44; Terry B. Ball and Jack D. Brotherson, "Environmental Lessons from Our Pioneers," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 62-83; Richard C. Foltz, "Mormon Values and the Utah Environment," *Worldviews* 4 (2000): 1-19.
21. Brigham Young, quoted in Hugh Nibley, *To the Glory of God: Mormon Essays on Great Issues—Environment, Commitment, Love, Peace, Youth, Man*, edited by Truman Madsen and Charles D. Tate (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 3-29.
22. Brigham Young, quoted in *ibid.*
23. George Q. Cannon, quoted in Richard D. Stratton, ed., *Kindness to Animals and Caring for the Earth: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Latter-day Saint Church Leaders* (Portland, Ore.: Inkwater Press, 2004), 31.
24. Aaron R. Kelson, "'A Plea for the Horse': George Q. Cannon's Concern for Animal Welfare in Nineteenth-Century America" *BYU Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 49.
25. Joseph F. Smith, quoted in Stratton, *Kindness to Animals and Caring for the Earth*, 84.
26. Joseph F. Smith, quoted in *ibid.*, 58.
27. Ronald Smith, "Institutional Innovations among the Mormons: Collective Action in Irrigation," 2000, *Working Paper*, Department of Political Science, University of Indiana, <http://www.indiana.edu/~workshop/papers/smith112700.pdf> (accessed January 21, 2011).
28. Alexander, "Stewardship and Enterprise," 350.
29. Ezra Taft Benson, quoted in Stratton, *Kindness to Animals and Caring for the Earth*, 19.
30. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, rev. ed. (Washington D.C.: Sierra Club Books, 1996), 152.
31. Hugh Nibley, "Subduing the Earth: Man's Dominion," in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh W. Nibley*, (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center), 106; <http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/nibley-timely-and-timeless-classic-essays-hugh-w-nibley-2nd-edition> (accessed on February 17, 2011).
32. [http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m\\_en\\_us1304485#m\\_en\\_us1304485](http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_us1304485#m_en_us1304485) (accessed February 17, 2011).
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36. Brigham Young, March 28, 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1855–86), 3:279.

37. Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 63.

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