A Latter-day Saint Perspective in the Environment-Religion Dialogue

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Paul Gorman, executive director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, authored a recent article in *The Nature Conservancy Magazine* in which several Nature Conservancy members expressed how their religious faith and conservation ethics merge. Self-described as Episcopalian, Muslim, Jewish, Quaker, Roman Catholic, United Methodist, Congregationalist, New Age, Lutheran, Agnostic, and formerly Amish, these members explain how their religious tradition helps them "minister" to the land, how God's "command to care for the natural world" or their "religious morals" motivate their environmental actions, or how their faith helped instill a respect for creation.[1] In response to Gorman's article, a letter to the editor took an opposing view: "The environmental crisis that we are now experiencing is a direct result of a thousand years of religious and spiritual thinking and is therefore the cause and not a solution. . . . Our best opportunity to solve the environmental crisis is through sound science, not spirituality."[2]

This exchange illustrates the recent movement toward greater understanding and cooperation between churches and environmental organizations and the negative attitudes that have separated them at least since the 1960s. Although environmental ideas have appeared periodically within the discourse of many religions, Gary Gardner of the Worldwatch Institute has observed that over the last ten to fifteen years there has been a marked increase in religious environmental

discourse: "The major faiths are issuing declarations, advocating new national policies, and designing educational activities in support of a sustainable world."[3] At the same time, conservation organizations have started to recognize that religious organizations could provide a means for helping environmental messages penetrate further into society. Although Paul Gorman has observed that "if you look at most environmental magazines and news magazines, you see a culture and civilization in which religion does not exist,"[4] the Sierra Club recently worked with the National Council of Churches on advertising that supported preservation of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.[5]

This paper examines several questions through my lens as an environmental professional and an adult convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Why has there been a schism between environmentalists and organized religion? What have churches and individuals done through statements, policies, and actions to link religion and the environment? What practices of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have an environmental benefit? What can Latter-day Saints contribute to this alliance between environmentalist and religionist? Might Latter-day Saint solutions be unique given our doctrines, and if so, how can we help others recognize those efforts as we collectively search for solutions to environmental concerns?

Environment-Religion Schism

Despite ample scriptural support regarding stewardship of the earth and a recent reemphasis of those doctrines, many modern environmentalists turn away from religion, especially Christianity, as they seek to articulate the ethical and moral underpinnings of their environmental beliefs and actions. A prevalence of biblical interpretation emphasizing dominion rather than stewardship as necessary for salvation may have led Christians to believe that the earth is "a kind of halfway house of trial and testing from which one was released at death" and that "nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians."[6] Such long-standing attitudes combined with statements by some modern religious leaders that nature was something to be subjected to man's will[7] provided ample opportunity for environmentalists to look elsewhere for inspiration.

Lynn White's landmark 1967 article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" pointed to modern science and technology as the proximate causes of the environmental crisis but placed the ultimate blame on Christianity. White argues, "Since both our technology and our scientific movements got their start, acquired their character, and achieved world dominance in the Middle Ages, it would seem that we cannot understand the nature of their present impact upon ecology without examining fundamental medieval assumptions and developments."[8] White specifically identified the creation teachings of Tertullian and Saint Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century, and the repression of the environmentally friendly teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi around 1200 as events that started science and technology on the track towards environmental degradation.[9] Eco-theologian and Catholic monk Thomas Berry believes that the secular and the spiritual worlds split as the Black Death decimated Europe in the fourteenth century: "Survivors concluded that God was punishing the world and they had best seek redemption outside of the natural world. This disengagement of secular and spiritual concerns . . . 'allowed industry and commerce, with the assistance of science and technology . . . to seize control of the natural world and to exploit it.'"[10]

Carl Pope, Executive Director of the Sierra Club (1993–present), notes that many of the "Earth Day" generation were deeply influenced by White's article: "Everyone I have talked to of my generation remembers this text and remembers the same lesson" that "we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man." Pope notes that White's statement caused many environmentalists

to leave organized religion behind, both personally and as a potential ally in the environmental movement.[11]

While White's article can be singled out for its impact on an earlier generation, many contemporary nature writers still express an ambivalence toward or rejection of organized religion. Few make statements quite as clear and confronting as Edward Abbey: "An increasingly pagan and hedonistic people (thank God!), we are learning that the forests and mountains and desert canyons are holier than our churches. Therefore let us behave accordingly."[12] More often the ambivalence with organized religion is an undertone to an entire essay or work. In "The End of Nature," Bill McKibben reflected that "many people, including me, have overcome [a crisis of belief] to a greater or lesser degree by locating God in nature. Most of the glimpses of immortality, design, and benevolence that I see come from the natural world." McKibben continues, "I am a reasonably orthodox Methodist, and I go to church on Sunday because fellowship matters, because I find meaning in the history of the Israelites and in the Gospels, and because I love to sing hymns. But it is not in 'God's house' that I feel his presence most—it is in his outdoors, on some sun-warmed slope of pine needles or by the surf."[13]

Scott Russell Sanders, an essayist and children's book author, recalled that when his children were young he "felt I should have some creed to offer them, some list of tidy answers, as in a catechism, yet no written doctrine seemed to me worthy of the majesty or subtlety of the universe."[14] His family went on a search where they took their children "to churches and Quaker meetings, looking for a story that we all could embrace. But . . . the churches told stories about life and death and a capricious God that Ruth and I could not accept. All the while we kept leading our children outdoors. . . . And in this way, without ever planning to, we taught our children the oldest form of reverence, one that has no creed. Although we could not offer them neat answers to the old questions about paradise and pain, we taught them to honor the impulse in themselves that rises to meet the energy and glory in Creation."[15] Wendell Berry writes that:

> Such religion as has been openly practiced in this part of the world has promoted and fed upon a destructive schism between body and soul, Heaven and earth. It has encouraged people to believe that the world is of no importance, and that their only obligation in it is to submit to certain churchly formulas in order to get to heaven. And so the people who might have been expected to care more selflessly for the world have had their minds turned elsewhere—to a pursuit of 'salvation' that was really only another form of gluttony and self-love, the desire to perpetuate their own small lives beyond the life of the world. The heaven-bent have abused the earth thoughtlessly, by inattention, and their negligence has permitted and encouraged others to abuse it deliberately.[16]

Thus, both historic and current environmental writing reinforces the perception that organized religion, although it could be a positive factor in protecting the environment, has not met its obligation to promote stewardship of the earth.

Religion Responds

As religions have been implicated in the worsening environmental conditions, world religious leaders have made a number of pointed, positive statements about the need for increased environmental commitment. Pope John Paul II began his address to commemorate World Peace Day 1990 by saying, "In our day, there is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources and by a progressive decline in the quality of life. The sense of precariousness and insecurity that such a situation engenders is a seedbed for collective selfishness, disregard for others and dishonesty."[17] Orthodox Church Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

and Pope John Paul II issued a joint statement noting that "an awareness of the relationship between God and humankind brings a fuller sense of the importance of the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, which is God's creation and which God entrusted to us to guard with wisdom and love."[18] Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, vice president of the World Jewish Congress stated, "It is our Jewish responsibility to put the defense of the whole of nature at the very center of our concern."[19] Leaders in the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Native American communities have made similar statements.[20]

Beyond statements by world religious leaders, there have been a variety of efforts within the Christian community to develop stewardship ideas and formalize environmental programs in a religious context. For example, the Presbyterian Church (USA) formed an Environmental Justice Office in 1988 "in order to study past environmental policies" and "to create a combined report of current environmental concerns." In addition the Presbyterian General Assembly passed several policies that guide their environmental work including "Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice" (1990), "Hazardous Waste, Race and the Environment" (1995), and "Toward a Just and Sustainable Human Development" (1996).[21] The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops created the Environmental Justice Program (EJP) in the fall of 1993 "to educate and motivate Catholics to a deeper respect for God's creation, and to engage parishes in activities aimed at dealing with environmental problems, particularly as they affect the poor." The foundation for this effort comes from Pope John Paul II's World Day of Peace message and the 1991 U.S. Catholic bishops' "Renewing the Earth" statement.[22] Pope John Paul II had also taken earlier actions in 1979 when he proclaimed Saint Francis of Assisi as the heavenly patron of those who promote ecology,[23] a suggestion made by Lynn White in his 1967 article.[24] Less formal efforts, such as the Lutheran Earthkeeping Network[25] and Presbyterians for Restoring Creation,[26] have also arisen linking environmentally minded people of the same faith.

Multidenominational organizations such as the Evangelical Environmental Network, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, and the National Religious Partnership for the Environment increased the environment-religious dialogue over the last fifteen years by promoting church events such as "Conservation (or Creation) Sunday" and initiating media campaigns. One recent offering, the "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign, is organized around the belief that "obeying Jesus in our transportation choices is one of the great Christian obligations and opportunities of the twenty-first century."[27]

The academy has also noted this renewed interaction between religious and environmental organizations. Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions sponsored a conference series between 1996 and 1998 that examined ecology in relation to Buddhism, Confucianism, Shinto, Hinduism, Indigenous Traditions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, and Jainism. A review of the proceedings and biographical sketches during the Christianity and Ecology conference showed participants identified themselves as Catholic, Greek Orthodox, United Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopal, Evangelical, and United Church of Christ, or members of the Evangelical Environmental Network, Christian Environmental Council, Catholic Theological Society of America, and the National Religious Partnership for the Environment.[28]

Notably absent from this and other lists is any mention of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or anyone identified as a member of the Church. Although Latter-day Saint authors have written about the environmental teachings of early Church leaders,[29] historic environmental practices of Utah Mormons,[30] Mormon environmental ethics,[31] and Mormon thoughts on a land ethic and stewardship,[32] it is difficult to find any positive recognition of the Church or its members in any writing outside of the Latter-day Saint community. Non-LDS environmental

writers are typically critical of Latter-day Saints[33] or ignore or forget to find an LDS perspective.[34] Wallace Stegner[35] and a recent book by Ralph Tanner and Collin Mitchell[36] represent the few positive exceptions.

Latter-day Saint Actions

Although Church leaders have not made recent, pointed, public environmental declarations as have other religious leaders, environmental ideas are included within broader messages. For example, Elder Richard G. Scott of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles began his April 1996 general conference talk titled "Finding Joy in Life" by describing an early morning on the shore of a Pacific island: "As I watched this magnificent scene in reverence, a window formed in the clouds; the glistening rays of the rising sun broke through the overcast sky, transforming everything with its luminescence, its color, its life. It was as if the Lord wanted to share an additional blessing, a symbol of the light of His teachings that gives brilliance and hope to everyone it touches. Tears of gratitude formed for this wondrous world in which we live, for the extraordinary beauty our Heavenly Father so freely shares with all that are willing to see. Truly, life is beautiful."[37] Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles included the following ideas in his April 2000 general conference talk on the Creation: "I testify that the earth and all life upon it are of divine origin"; "the Creation itself testifies of a Creator. We cannot disregard the divine in the Creation"; and "as beneficiaries of the divine Creation, what shall we do? We should care for the earth, be wise stewards over it, and preserve it for future generations. And we are to love and care for one another."[38]

Although the Church has made no publicized effort to adopt specific environmental programs, we have several long-standing practices based on the principles of stewardship, self-reliance, and agency, which address the more systematic environmental concerns of affluence and poverty. Alan B. Durning, in "Poverty and the Environment: Reversing the Downward Spiral," notes that in industrialized countries many environmental problems "are byproducts of affluence" and conversely, that "poverty can drive ecological deterioration when desperate people over exploit their resource base, sacrificing the future to salvage the present."[39]

The most obvious Church practice that addresses these concerns is the individual payment of tithing and fast offerings. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles notes that one reason to pay tithing is "as a declaration that possession of material goods and the accumulation of worldly wealth are *not* the uppermost goals of your existence."[40] In regard to fast offerings, Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has said:

> One of the strongest admonitions the Lord has given to His children on earth is that we have the responsibility and obligation of caring for those in need. It was King Benjamin who said in his great address, "And now, for the sake of these things which I have spoken unto you that is, for the sake of retaining a remission of your sins from day to day, that ye may walk guiltless before God—I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants." (Mosiah 4:26)[41]

In addition to meeting the immediate needs of people in impoverished circumstances, the Church recently introduced the Perpetual Education Fund to assist members in gaining the education necessary to relieve their poverty. President Gordon B. Hinckley stated, "Where there is widespread poverty among our people, we must do all we can to help them to lift themselves, to establish their lives upon a foundation of self-reliance that can come of training. Education is the key to opportunity."[42]

However, the Perpetual Education Fund is only the most recent and widespread Church effort to address poverty in developing countries.

Since 1975 the Ezra Taft Benson Agriculture and Food Institute (Benson Institute) has sought to improve rural family life in developing nations by improving nutrition and agricultural practices. The Benson Institute notes that the economic and environmental reality is that "in rural communities families often produce foods of high nutritional value and sell them to buy inexpensive but less nutritious foods. Thus, in order to overcome hunger and malnutrition, it is necessary to address both food production and consumption practices. . . . Education is the primary focus of the Institute's activities because it allows people to become self-sufficient, thus making improvement efforts more sustainable."[43] An example is the Benson Institute's work in the villages of Chancó, Corral de Piedra, and Salitrón in the mountains of Guatemala. Residents typically had no choice but to clear steep mountainsides to grow crops. This practice led to increased erosion and decreased crop production. The Benson Institute helped establish a program of alley-cropping, in which rows of native, nitrogen-fixing trees were planted, alternating with rows of crops. This method increases food productivity by reducing erosion; adding nitrogen to the soil, which decreases the need for fertilization; and providing an additional wood source, which decreases the need to cut existing forest.

This type of small-scale work to improve living conditions in rural villages incorporates the principles environmentalists have long supported for appropriate development aid. For example, Max Oelschlaeger notes that E. F. Schumacher argued in *Small Is Beautiful* (1973) "that what the economically impoverished people of the Third World require is appropriate technology, that is, technology consistent with their human and economic resources, cultural traditions, and geographical location. Rather than Western-style hydro-electric dams providing electricity for cities and water for agribusiness, the rural people of Africa need wells and filtration equipment that provide clean drinking water and supplies for irrigating local gardens."[44] Latter-day Saint Charities, a charitable organization sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, refurbished drinking-water wells in Ghana during 2003.

Citing these examples is not merely an apologistic means of uncovering unintentional environmental benefits in a church that has no publicly announced environmental program. Rather it shows how a religious organization incorporates environmental principles while focusing on spiritual matters. This approach mirrors that of one of my mentors, Dan Willard, emeritus professor of Environmental Science at Indiana University's School of Public and Environmental Affairs. Dr. Willard, a wetland scientist, told me recently that he prefers to seek solutions to social issues that have an environmental component rather than getting mired in the politics surrounding "environmental" issues.[45]

Root Causes and Future Solutions

Philip Shabecoff, former environmental correspondent for the *New York Times*, in looking at the strengths and weaknesses of the environmental movement, noted that "the environmentalists are addressing an extraordinary broad array of threats to the natural environment and human health. They have well-thought-out goals for what must be done to give us clean air and water, to protect land and species, to rid us of the insidious dangers of hazardous substances in the environment. They are beginning to set priorities for use of their resources on these problems. But they rarely come to grips with the root political, economic, social, and cultural causes of the problems."[46] Shabecoff also notes, "If we can save the environment only by repairing our society and our communities, the environmentalists will fail because, at least until now, they have been focusing almost exclusively on the physical environment. . . . The underlying flaws in our social systems that cause or contribute to the environmental predicament are rarely addressed by environmental organizations or the environmental movement as a whole."[47]

Elder Neal Maxwell, while an assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, examined the distinction between an eternal and a secular approach to social concerns, which I think can help guide us as we seek solutions to social-environmental problems. Elder Maxwell noted that "eternalism focuses on the individual and on those processes in which the individual is taught correct principles and then is given the optimum opportunity to govern himself. . . . Secularism tends to want to deal . . . with adjustments in the things outside man, apparently hoping that, somehow, changing the external scenery will change the things inside man." Elder Maxwell further notes that "eternalism looks at long-range outcomes as well as temporary needs; it places great emphasis on the shaping influences at the front end of life—on love, correct principles, wise discipline, and on a nutritive home atmosphere. Good homes are still the best source of good humans."[48]

From these quotes we could well conclude that the main contribution of Church members to the environmental crisis will be through building strong homes, an effort unlikely to be recognized by those working directly on environmental issues. Elder Maxwell alluded to this in the April 2003 general conference when he said, "Within the swirling global events . . . is humanity's real and continuing struggle: whether or not, amid the cares of the world, we will really choose . . . to 'care . . . for the life of the soul' (D&C 101:37). Whatever our anxious involvements with outward events, this inner struggle proceeds in both tranquil and turbulent times. Whether understood or recognized, this is the unchanging moral agendum from generation to generation."[49]

Given the institutional example of Church programs such as fast offerings, the Perpetual Education Fund, the Benson Institute, and Latter-day Saint Charities, the scriptural admonition to be involved in a good cause (see D&C 58:27), and Elder Maxwell's teaching to take an eternal perspective, what can and should Church members do to fulfill their environmental stewardship? Do we need to do more than simply build good homes? Do we need to reshape or reframe the questions from simply environmental to social-environmental so our actions and answers will be understood by the rest of the environmental community? The recycling program at Brigham Young University provides a case study of what individuals and institutions can accomplish by combining the principles of stewardship, self-reliance, and agency.

Like many universities, Brigham Young University (BYU) started a recycling program in the early 1990s. Student, faculty, and staff requests, as well as the economics of rising disposal costs, played important roles in initiating campus recycling. Guided by the principle of agency, BYU established a voluntary program that allows individuals to participate based on their sense of stewardship. In addition, recycling was required to be financially self-reliant. Thus, based on an initial waste stream analysis and the principles of stewardship, agency, and financial self-reliance, BYU concentrated on paper recycling and green waste and food waste composting. Most universities recycle paper, but few have an extensive composting program, even though green waste is one of the larger components of garbage. Fewer still have innovated as BYU has by installing food pulpers in cafeterias that not only process food scraps into an easily compostable pulp but also improve kitchen operations and reduce water consumption.

BYU's unique approach has worked well. For example, BYU's results often exceed those of university recycling programs that have gained national recognition from the National Recycling Coalition and the Environmental Protection Agency, such as the University of Colorado–Boulder (UC–Boulder). While UC–Boulder has approximately the same student population as BYU, recycling is more extensive in that a wide range of products can be recycled, including floppy disks and overhead transparencies. In 2002 UC–Boulder reported a 27 percent waste diversion rate (tons recycled/tons total waste),

recycling 1,154 tons of paper, 122 tons of organic material, 22 tons of metal, and 157 tons of mixed containers (glass, aluminum, and plastic bottles). UC–Boulder reported a net recycling cost of $30 per ton ($52 per ton minus tipping fee avoidance of $22 per ton). An annual student fee of approximately $4.70 each is used to fund the recycling program.[50] In 2002 BYU reported a 50 percent diversion rate, recycling 1,177 tons of paper, 3,181 tons of organic material, and 268 tons of metal. While recycling fewer items than UC–Boulder (BYU does not recycle glass, plastic, floppy disks, or overhead transparencies), BYU reported a significantly higher diversion rate while saving the university approximately $22 per ton. BYU also does not charge a student recycling fee.[51] The University of Arizona–Tucson recycling program also provides an interesting comparison to BYU, as their recycling program was almost eliminated in 2002 due to budget cuts.[52] Since recycling saves BYU thousands of dollars each year, the recycling program is on firm footing and will likely continue to grow year after year.

Conclusion

Starting with a divergence centuries ago or promoted by recent environmental authors, organized religion, especially Christianity, and the environmental movement have seldom crossed paths. While many Christian churches have responded by issuing statements, position papers, or establishing environmental offices, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has followed a more subtle and often unrecognized approach. Instead of official statements, Church leaders use environmental analogies or stories within broader doctrinal statements to encourage members to "be anxiously engaged in a good cause" (D&C 58:27). Programmatically the Church supports several efforts that reduce both human poverty and environmental degradation. Through these quiet, long-term actions, the Church measures up well when evaluated using Lynn White's statement, "The understanding of a society's value structure must be based less on what that society says about itself than on what it actually does."[53] Similarly the BYU recycling program, established on the principles of stewardship, agency, and self-reliance, provides another good example.

Lynn White, in a follow-up essay defending some of his assertions in "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," stated that "historically Latin Christians have generally been arrogant toward nature, [but] this does not mean that Scripture read with twentieth-century eyes will breed the same attitude. Perhaps the Holy Ghost is whispering something to us."[54] In writing about Mormon pioneer settlements, Wallace Stegner noted that "institutions must have their art forms, their symbolic representations, and if the Heavenward aspirations of medieval Christianity found their expression in cathedrals and spires, the more mundane aspirations of the Latter-day Saints may just as readily be discovered in the widespread plantings of Mormon trees. They look Heavenward, but their roots are in earth. The Mormon looked toward Heaven, but his Heaven was a Heaven on earth and he would inherit bliss in the flesh."[55] We can retain this praise of being rooted in the earth while focused on heaven if we implement stewardship ideas based on gospel principles adapted to our place and time. If we do so, our success will eventually attract the gaze of the world as we strive to build up Zion.

Notes

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4. Philip Shabecoff, *Earth Rising: American Environmentalism in the 21st Century* (Washington DC: Island Press, 2000), 76.

5. Gardner, *Invoking the Spirit*, 18.

6. Roderick Nash, "The Greening of Religion," in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Routledge, 1996), 198.

7. Nash, "The Greening of Religion," 221.

8. Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (March 10, 1967): 1204–5.

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12. Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 60.

13. Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), 71.

14. Scott Russell Sanders, "A Private History of Awe," *Orion*, January–February 2003, 57.

15. Sanders, "A Private History of Awe," 58.

16. Wendell Berry, *Recollected Essays, 1965–1980* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 101–2.

17. Pope John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Routledge, 1996), 230.

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29. See Hugh Nibley, "Brigham Young on the Environment," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, ed. Don E. Norton and Shirley S. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 23–54.

30. See Thomas G. Alexander, "Stewardship and Enterprise: The LDS Church and the Wasatch Oasis Environment, 1847–1930," *Western Historical Quarterly* 25 (Autumn 1994): 340–64.

31. See Terry B. Ball and Jack D. Brotherson, "Environmental Lessons from Our Pioneer Heritage," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 63–88.

32. See George B. Handley, "The Environmental Ethics of Mormon Belief," *BYU Studies* 40, no. 2 (2001), 187–211.

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34. Gorman, "Awakenings/Portraits of Faith," 20–29.

35. See Wallace Stegner, *Mormon Country* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1942).

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