Ex Materia and the Image of God: Imagining a Mormon Environmental Ethic

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of Religious Studies

University of Virginia
May 2014

Arguing for a new attitude toward the environment is rarely easy, and this is especially true when speaking to members of faith communities that generally have a conservative political affiliation. However, as the destructive impact that human beings have had—and often continue to have—on the environment becomes ever clearer, dialogue between religious communities and environmental groups must strengthen and continue, regardless of how difficult that dialogue may be. This thesis represents an effort to examine the theology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in light of environmental ethics and to construct an ethic that is both substantive and complementary to unique LDS theology.

This thesis will demonstrate, in fact, that the LDS doctrine of *creatio ex materia* calls for the establishment of an exacting environmental ethic, one that accounts for and respects the material origins of the earth, the natures of both God and mankind, and the potential of mankind for eternal progression. The teaching of *creatio ex materia* stands in stark contrast to the more traditional understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*, and *ex materia* origins are very much a strength of LDS theology in terms of establishing sustainable attitudes toward the environment. The *ex nihilo* creation account has established a God of transcendence and power over creation, a tenet that the *ex materia* account does not demand and is thus not constrained by. LDS *ex materia* foundations underlie the unique principles within Mormon theology of premortal existence, the closeness of God, and eternal progression; and these three principles, when brought into dialogue with bearing the image of God in creation, work well to establish an ethic of respect for a sustainable ecological community. I've chosen to call the ethic that these unique Mormon principles call for "continuous cooperative creation," and it is an ethic that is based around holistic moral non-anthropocentrism, or a high value on the sustainable functioning of ecological communities with individual moral duties bestowed upon human beings.

In order to explain and illustrate this ethic, this thesis follows a strategy that often brings LDS theology into dialogue with other Christian theologies and other modes of thought. Because of its structural complexity, I will provide here an outline of the structure of this thesis. By way of introduction, it begins with a comparison of the stewardship ethic in some Christian denominations to the emerging writings on the stewardship ethic within the LDS Church (part one), using LDS scripture and teachings from LDS leaders to indicate the similarities. Part II examines the LDS doctrine of *creatio ex materia*, contrasting it with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Part III echoes the arguments of scholars that the *ex nihilo* account can establish an environmentally problematic God of transcendence, violence, and raw power, and then briefly discusses another category of creation myth, known as *chaoskampf*, to bring both creation accounts into sharper focus. Part IV discusses the "image of God" within humanity and cites philosophers and ethicists who establish these verses in scripture as a call to echo God's attitude toward creation in our own behavior. After establishing these foundations to discuss environmental ethics, part V of the thesis dives back into unique LDS theology. It discusses the implications of *ex materia* creation, those aspects of LDS thought that rely upon the doctrine: namely, premortal existence, the material nature of God and His closeness to humanity, and eternal progression. Part VI brings these unique LDS principles into brief dialogue with process theology. All of this leads finally to part VII, in which I describe the environmental ethic of "continuous cooperative creation," and argue for its essential accessibility within LDS thought, using Aldo Leopold's land ethic as a guiding principle of sorts. Moving forward, I bear in mind that this unique doctrine of *creatio ex materia*—and the other unique segments of Mormon theology that go along with it—can bring a new, exciting perspective to the dialogue about environmental ethics, the nature of the earth itself, and our obligation to it. Emphasizing these

unique teachings can truly allow LDS theology to have a unique voice within discussions of eco-theology.

I. Latter-day Saints and stewardship

The Mormon Church is not known, at least not in contemporary times, for particularly progressive political stances. In fact, the behavior of the average member of the LDS Church toward the environment is not informed by theology primarily; rather, behavior is informed by politics, and Mormons are a largely politically conservative group.[1] As one LDS environmental ethicist has noted, "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."[2]

As within any faith tradition, dissenting voices have arisen, and these dissenting voices are loud and quite well informed. They call for a more responsible environmental ethic, one that shows respect for creation and for living beings, some even calling for LDS action on climate change, and their cries have not been unheard or unanswered. Like many mainstream Christian denominations in recent years, the LDS Church establishment has opened a dialogue regarding environmental care. In fact, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, a peer-reviewed, independent quarterly focusing on LDS topics, dedicated an entire issue in 2011 to writings about the environment. The issue included articles from Mormon scholars on climate change, the history of the LDS Church in regards to environmental thought, several articles calling for a

[1] A 2012 Pew Forum study found that 66 percent of Mormons in America self-identify as politically "quite conservative," compared to 37 percent of the general population who identified as such. Additionally, the same study found that 74 percent of Mormons support the Republican party, compared to 45 percent in the general population. For the full survey, see "Mormons in America — Certain in Their Beliefs, Uncertain of Their Place in Society," *Pew Research: Religion and Public Life Project,* last modified January 12, 2012, http://www.pewforum.org/2012/01/12/mormons-in-america-executive-summary/.

[2] Jason Brown, "Whither Mormon Environmental Theology?" *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 69.

practical environmental ethic that respects LDS beliefs, and even an article on the spiritual status of animals and the environmental benefits of a semi-vegetarian diet. In recent years, several volumes have been published focusing on environmental issues from a Mormon perspective, most notably 2006's *Stewardship and the Creation: LDS Perspectives on the Environment*, 2004's *Kindness to Animals and Caring for the Earth*, and 1998's *New Genesis: A Mormon Reader on Land and Community*. In short, LDS writers and scholars are not far out-of-step with other Christians in terms of slowly turning toward a theological interest in (or at least discussion of) environmental care.

Much of what has been written on this topic in LDS circles echoes the mainstream Christian move toward an emphasis on stewardship. To summarize very briefly, the stewardship movement seeks to define the person of faith's relationship to the environment as one of a steward, set apart to care for creation, as creation is provided by God and meant to be used wisely and with moderation. Interestingly, there is a plethora of writings from LDS leaders—going as far back as the founding prophet Joseph Smith himself—that emphasize these same stewardship themes. An entire volume has been published that chronicles these teachings and quotations, indicating clearly that the LDS move toward stewardship is certainly not a contemporary affectation or a desire to merely repeat stewardship language that other denominations have begun emphasizing. Instead, there is certainly an argument to be made for an LDS environmental ethic of stewardship since the beginnings of the faith.

This stewardship, however, does not differ notably in theme or content from the stewardship ethic of other Christian denominations. This is not intended as a criticism; it is merely striking how similarly Mormons and Protestants speak about their obligation to care for creation (when they do choose to speak about it). Certain scriptural passages from the LDS

canon make explicit use of the term and explicit normative claims about how to treat the earth. *The Doctrine and Covenants* has two such explicit verses that are cited often. The first is from a revelation given to Joseph Smith in August, 1831:

> 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; Yes, 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. (D&C 59:18-20)

The second such oft-cited explicit stewardship verse comes later in *The Doctrine and Covenants*, in a revelation received by Smith in April of 1834:

> It is wisdom in me; therefore, a commandment I give unto you, that ye shall organize yourselves and appoint every man his stewardship; That every man may give an account unto me of the stewardship which is appointed unto him. For it is expedient that I, the Lord, should make every man accountable, as a steward over earthly blessings, which I have made and prepared for my creatures. (D&C 104:11-13)

The explicit pronouncements toward stewardship are not found only in scriptural texts. Rather, LDS presidents and leaders have made such pronouncements themselves, explicitly and often. Such sentiments were commonplace in the early development of the Church. Brigham Young was perhaps the greatest unheralded champion of this attitude of stewardship toward the earth. His teachings, chronicled in *Journal of Discourses*, overflow with reverence for the earth and our moral obligation to care for it. Reverence is not too strong a word here, although it does admittedly reflect a more contemporary attitude. Brigham Young, nonetheless, possessed immense reverence for the earth, teaching that "field and mountains, trees and flowers, and all that fly, swim, or move upon the ground are lessons for study in the great school of our Heavenly Father, in what is before us in good books and in the greater laboratory of nature."[3] There is

[3] Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854-86), 9:320, http://jod.mrm.org/9/318.

certainly an anthropocentric mentality in Young's words about the earth, but this does not diminish his commandment to treat it gently and with stewardship. "It is our privilege and our duty to search for all things upon the face of the earth, and learn what there is for man to enjoy, what God has ordained for the benefit and happiness of mankind, and then make use of it *without sinning against him*."[4] The "sinning against him" that Young refers to is treating the earth with an attitude of greed and recklessness. "The earth and its fulness belong to the Lord, and he has promised all to his faithful Saints," Young noted, "But it must be enjoyed without spirit of covetousness and selfishness."[5] Brigham Young's pronouncements on caring for the environment were frequent enough for eminent LDS scholar Hugh Nibley to devote a lengthy essay to the matter, entitled "Brigham Young on the Environment," in 1972.

Thus, there is clearly a strong argument to be made for an environmental stewardship ethic for Latter-day Saints. However, contemporary Mormons have not been the champions of environmental stewardship that it seems parts of their scripture dictate. In this way, the actions of Latter-day Saints are directly analogous to the actions of some groups of more mainstream Christians toward the environment. Part of this tendency to ignore calls for stewardship in the Christian religion generally stems from a disagreement about what exactly it *means* to be a steward of the earth. However, part of it also stems from a historical attitude rooted more in environmental domination and depletion than in environmental stewardship—an attitude that Lynn White famously revealed, and that is characteristic of virtually *all* Western religion, certainly not only the Latter-day Saints. Part of this attitude also stems from political affiliations and environmental policies that arise as a result of politics or economics rather than theology.

Just as in Protestant writings, there has been a move among Mormon environmentalists to

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[4] Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 9:243, http://jod.mrm.org/9/242. Emphasis mine.
[5] Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 8:82, http://jod.mrm.org/8/80.

republish, reemphasize, and reclaim these old teachings on stewardship in an attempt to change attitudes and behavior. While I consider this strategy honorable and well-intentioned, it is my contention that such a move toward reclamation and reemphasis ultimately comes at the expense of a much more audacious strategy, one that embraces the uniquely Mormon aspects of the nature of the earth's creation and of God Himself. Rather than follow the relatively tame path of drawing attention to scriptures and the writings of leaders that demonstrate a stewardship ethic, an emphasis on Mormon cosmology and ontology *could* allow the LDS Church to make its own unique contribution to the Christian environmental movement.

Jason Brown, an emerging scholar in the field of LDS environmental ethics, wrote an article on environmental ethics featured in the 2011 environmentally themed issue of *Dialogue*. In his work, he contrasted the LDS stewardship strategy with another strategy, which he called "the vitalistic tradition," a term borrowed from Hugh Nibley. He argued that the stewardship strategy, while significant, remains problematic because of its anthropocentric lean; he argues instead for the vitalistic strategy, which capitalizes on aspects of LDS theology that point toward a *non*-anthropocentric ethic. While I disagree with Brown's argument that a practical theology can be built that revolves around individualistic non-anthropocentrism, I agree entirely with his assertion that a better argument can be made utilizing unique aspects of Mormon theology, rather than retrieving scriptures about stewardship. He wrote, "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."[6] While I will not use his term, this paper largely agrees with his defense of the potential of his so-called vitalistic tradition. LDS theology does stand to make a real contribution to religiously based environmental ethics, if only it will take seriously its cosmology and its

[6] Brown, "Whither Mormon Environmental Theology?" 81.

implications in regards to environmental ethics. This cosmology, beginning with an *ex materia* account of God's creation, is vital to the LDS worldview and can become vital to LDS environmental ethics.

Before beginning with an examination of *ex materia* creation accounts in LDS theology, a brief note on the terminology used in this paper: When referring to God, I use gendered language and gendered pronouns. This is not only useful for the sake of clarity, but is necessarily called for when discussing the LDS conception of God, as He is both embodied and male. (An examination of this embodied characteristic of God will serve as a point of discussion in several sections of this paper). Likewise, I capitalize the word "God" when referring to the creator in LDS thought; anytime "God" is not capitalized occurs when I discuss god as a concept or gods in the plural.

Also worth noting in regards to terminology, I consistently use the phrase "mainstream Christian" or "more mainstream Christian" when noting differences between Mormons and other branches of Christianity. This is not a criticism of any LDS theology, nor is it an implication that the LDS Church is somehow *not* Christian or *not* Christian *enough*. Instead, it is merely a helpful phrase for noting differences between LDS doctrine and the doctrines of other Christian denominations.

II. The Mormon doctrine of creatio ex materia

The LDS view of *creatio ex materia* is fundamentally different than the traditional Christian understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*. At its most basic level, the distinction is simple: Mormons believe that God created the earth from preexisting materials, rather than calling the earth (and all matter) into being from nothingness. The effect of this theological difference can

hardly be overstated, although its effects are not easily visible in everyday Mormon life or everyday Mormon thought. However, at a foundational level, this doctrine of *ex materia* creation underlies LDS conceptions of the nature of God, mankind, the universe, and even the ultimate destiny of mankind. Much has been written and continues to be written about the nature of God in Mormon thought; the fundamental differences in thinking about God between Mormons and other branches of Christianity proves a fascinating topic for theologians and laypeople alike. Within LDS thought, God's being—and I use that word consciously, with an understanding of the material implication it carries with it—proves to be a venue through which Mormons understand themselves and their destinies. A discussion and dissection of this *ex materia* creation is necessary here, beginning with scriptural texts specific to the LDS faith that make this doctrine explicit.

In Mormon thought, both matter and spirits are eternal. (This is, in fact, because spirits are also made of matter, but this idea will be demonstrated later in this discussion). In certain passages of LDS scripture, there is much discussion of the eternal nature of matter and souls. Statements on this topic appear in LDS creation accounts, as well as through revelation recorded in *The Doctrine and Covenants*.

The Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham, both published in *The Pearl of Great Price*, one of four canonical texts for Mormons, contain creation accounts. The accounts in both of these books parallel the Genesis account closely, with only a few notable differences.[7] Before

[7] It is worth noting that speaking of "the" Genesis creation account can be problematic, as Biblical scholars generally agree that there are two creation accounts found within Genesis written at different times by different authors. Genesis 1, often referred to as the Priestly narrative, is the more recent of the two and contains the phraseology most familiar to believers when discussing God's creation. The Priestly account ends directly after God finishes creation. Genesis 2 and 3, called the Yahwist narrative, spends less time on the actual order of creation and is more focused on God's creation of man and mankind's original sin. It can thus be problematic to speak of Genesis as if it contains one uniform creation story. However, most Christian denominations attempt to harmonize these two stories, often by seeing parts of the Yahwist account as an elaboration of the events of the sixth day of

we begin comparing LDS accounts of creation with the Genesis account, it is important to note that the accounts in the Abraham and Moses are *not* intended to be outright replacements of the Genesis account. Latter-day Saints consider the Bible one of their canonical texts, and believe that it is the authoritative word of God, insofar as it is correctly translated. Thus, the unique LDS creation accounts are not *replacement* cosmologies, but are supplemental to the Genesis account. In some ways they improve upon the Genesis account, as they supply information that had been mistranslated, removed, or lost, according to LDS thought.

Much of the Book of Moses is an inspired translation (or restored translation) by Joseph Smith of the Book of Genesis, thus accounting for its extreme similarity to the Genesis account. The Book of Abraham, on the other hand, is Joseph Smith's inspired translation of an entirely new text, outside of the traditional Biblical canon. The source text in question was ancient Egyptian papyri that Smith acquired in 1835. Smith claimed that the papyrus was a text written by the patriarch Abraham, detailing Abraham's life and his visions from God, one of which was a vision of the formation of the earth. The text was canonized in *The Pearl of Great Price* in 1880, taking its place between the Book of Moses and Joseph Smith's translation of a small excerpt from the Book of Matthew. Because its source material is so different, the Abraham creation account thus contains the most differing and supplemental information from the Genesis account.

One particularly pertinent passage comes in the book of Abraham preceding the story of the creation of the earth: "And God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers… And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: *We will go down, for there is*

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creation that occurs in the Priestly account. It is this harmonization of the two accounts in Christian discourse that allows me to speak of "the" Genesis story, in the same way that Latter-day Saints speak of "the" Genesis story.

space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell" (Abraham 3:23-24, emphasis mine). After these extremely important preceding verses, the creation story begins in the next chapter of Abraham, and begins to look familiar because of its close correspondence with the Genesis account. God begins with the command, "Let there be light," (Abraham 4:3) and ends with the formation of man (Abraham 4:27), with the accounts of the formation of day and night, the waters, the expanse, dry land, and plants and animals divided into six time periods. The verse directly heralding this echoing of the order of the Genesis account does, however, again reemphasize this process of organization rather than creation: "And the Lord said: Let us go down. And they went down at the beginning, and they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the earth" (Abraham 4:1).

For the sake of clarity, a parallel comparison of the creation accounts in Genesis and Abraham will prove illustrative. The table that follows on the next page is this side-by-side comparison of the two accounts from each respective chapter, using the King James Version[8] of the Bible, although the table is not complete because of space limitations. It continues through the first eight verses, and then ends with the concluding verses of both chapters, providing a representative sample.

[8] I use the King James version in the following chart because it is the translation most commonly used within the LDS Church and offers the most striking parallel to the Abraham creation account. For the rest of the quotations from the Bible in this paper, I will use the more academically friendly New Revised Standard Version.

GENESIS		ABRAHAM	
		3:24	"And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell…
1:1	In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.	4:1	And then the Lord said: Let us go down. And they went down at the beginning, and they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the earth.
1:2	And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.	4:2	And the earth, after it was formed, was empty and desolate, because they had not formed anything but the earth; and darkness reigned upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of the Gods was brooding upon the face of the waters.
1:3	And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.	4:3	And they (the Gods) said: Let there be light; and there was light.
1:4	And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.	4:4	And they (the Gods) comprehended the light, for it was bright; and they divided the light, or caused it to be divided, from the darkness.
1:5	And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.	4:5	And the Gods called the light Day, and the darkness they called Night. And it came to pass that from the evening until morning they called night; and from the morning until the evening they called day; and this was the first, or the beginning, of that which they called day and night.
1:6	And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.	4:6	And the Gods also said: Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and it shall divide the waters from the waters.
1:7	And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.	4:7	And the Gods ordered the expanse, so that it divided the waters which were under the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so, even as they ordered.
1:8 …	And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day. …	4:8 …	And the Gods called the expanse, Heaven. And it came to pass that it was from evening until morning that they called night; and it came to pass that it was from morning until evening that they called day; and this was the second time that they called night and day. …
1:26	And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.	4:26	And the Gods took counsel among themselves and said: Let us go down and form man in our image, after our likeness; and we will give them dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.
1:27	[27] So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.	4:27	So the Gods went down to organize man in their own image, in the image of the Gods to form they him, male and female to form they them.
1:28	And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.	4:28	And the Gods said: We will bless them. And the Gods said: We will cause them to be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it, and to have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.
1:29	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 the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.	4:29	And the Gods said: Behold, we will give them every herb bearing seed that shall come upon the face of all the earth, and every tree which shall have fruit upon it; yea, the fruit of the tree yielding seed to them we will give it; it shall be for their meat.
1:30	And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.	4:30	And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, behold, we will give them life, and also we will give to them every green herb for meat, and all these things shall be thus organized.
1:31	And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.	4:31	And the Gods said: We will do everything that we have said, and organize them; and behold, they shall be very obedient. And it came to pass that it was from evening until morning they called night; and it came to pass that it was from morning until evening that they called day; and they numbered the sixth time.

As is obvious, the order of creation is the same in either account. There are several major differences, however, that are equally obvious: The Book of Abraham account makes reference to Gods in the plural throughout. An analysis of this apparent plurality of gods in LDS thought is far outside the scope of this paper, but it is worth noting that this plural form is much more closely related to the Mormon doctrine of the eternity of matter and premortal existence (both of which will be discussed in this paper) than it is to any kind of functional polytheism. Although the order of creation remains the same for both books, the Book of Abraham does not call these time periods *days* as Genesis does, but rather *times*. In both accounts, they number one through six, with the creator resting on the seventh. There is more here that is similar than is drastically different, one crucial principle aside: The Genesis account presumes (or at least allows for) an *ex nihilo* creation, while the Book of Abraham account explicitly proclaims an *ex materia* creation.

This *ex materia* creation is fundamentally important to many Mormon doctrines, up to and including the nature of God Himself, but is a source of criticism from mainstream Christian apologetics. In defending this doctrine of creation from pre-existing materials, Mormon apologists argue that *ex nihilo* creation is a post-Biblical invention, and that a careful reading of Genesis does not privilege one method of creation over the other. Scholars of early Church history largely support this position, noting that the opening verses of Genesis have long been dogged by debates regarding proper translation, and that Genesis 1:2 itself can present a interpretative problem, as it makes mention of water on the earth—water that the previous verse does not explicitly describe God as creating. According to Notre Dame philosopher Ernan McMullin in *Creation and the God of Abraham,* "It seems fair to say that the evidence for creation *ex nihilo* in these chapters is at best ambiguous."[9] Several early Church Fathers—

[9] Ernan McMullin, "Creation *ex nihilo*: early history," in *Creation and the God of Abraham*, ed. David Burrell et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 14.

including Justin Martyr, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nyssa—allowed for a *creatio ex materia* reading of Genesis, while some of their contemporaries—notably Theophilius, Tertullian, and Irenaeus—argued vehemently for an *ex nihilo* reading. Most scholars of the early church agree that the Biblical account itself does not *demand* an interpretation hinging on *creatio ex nihilo*; if scripture were entirely clear on this ontological matter, it would not have taken centuries for the doctrine to develop and gain acceptance.[10] For this reason, LDS apologists often trace their doctrine of *ex materia* creation back to early Church fathers, noting that the teaching was not considered a heresy until later, and arguing on that basis that *ex nihilo* creation is truly the un-Biblical doctrine. LDS scholars and apologists alike affirm the legitimacy of the doctrine of creation out of pre-existing matter.

Again and again in LDS sacred texts and the teachings of church leaders, the eternal nature of matter is emphasized. *The Doctrine and Covenants* speaks occasionally of the nature of creation and the eternal nature of element and intelligence. It reads: "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can it be… For man is spirit. The elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy" (D&C 93:29-33). Scripture is clear on the matter, as are the teachings of LDS leaders themselves. In his influential 1844 King Follett Discourse, Joseph Smith articulated this belief clearly. He said,

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[10] For a thorough analysis of the emergence of the doctrine of creation our of nothing, see Gerhard May's *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of Creation Out of Nothing in Early Christian Thought,* or for a more recent analysis: *Creation and the God of Abraham*, edited by David Burrell et al. Of course, there are scholars who take the opposite approach and argue that the Biblical text does demand an *ex nihilo* creation. These scholars are in the minority, but nonetheless deserve to have their voices heard. A good argument for this position can be found in Paul Copan's writings on creation, and an article published in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* provides a digestible summary. Lastly, for an LDS response to those Christians who claim that *ex nihilo* creation is clearly a Biblical doctrine, see Blake Ostler's many writings on the matter. Probably the most concise and digestible of his writing on the problems of reading *ex nihilo* into scripture is 2005's "Out of Nothing: A History of Creation ex Nihilo in Early Christian Thought."

> We infer that God had materials to organize the world out of chaos—chaotic matter, which is element, and in which dwells all the glory. Element had an existence from the time He had. The pure principles of element are principles which can never be destroyed: they may be organized and reorganized, but not destroyed. They had no beginning and can have no end.[11]

The prophet's words are clear and unequivocal on this matter. Although he died not long after delivering this sermon, the teaching about the eternal nature of matter does not end with him. In fact, some Church leaders who came after him emphasized it even more heavily than Smith himself did. Joseph Smith's immediate successor, Brigham Young, spoke and wrote much on ever-present matter. He taught:

> To assert that the Lord made this earth out of nothing is preposterous and impossible. God never made something out of nothing; it is not in the economy or law by which the worlds were, are, or will exist. There is an eternity before us, and it is full of matter; and if we but understand enough of the Lord and His ways; we would say that he took of this matter and organized this earth from it.[12]

This is not to give the impression that only Church presidents spoke on eternal matter and *ex materia.* John Widtsoe, a Mormon author, scientist, scholar, and member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles during the mid-twentieth century, summarized the doctrine of eternal matter in his widely-read *A Rational Theology as Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint*s: "Matter is eternal, that is everlasting… God, the Supreme Power, cannot conceivably originate matter; he can only organize matter. Neither can He destroy matter… The doctrine that God made the earth or man from nothing becomes, therefore, an absurdity."[13] Clearly, Mormon doctrine on pre-existing matter as *creatio ex materia* is established. The question remains as to *why* there is this insistence within LDS doctrine on the matter. Even Widtsoe noted the rather

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[11] Joseph Smith Jr., "The King Follett Sermon," *Ensign*, April 1971, https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/04/the-king-follett-sermon?lang=eng.
[12] Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 14:116, http://jod.mrm.org/14/114.
[13] John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology As Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Mormon Texts Project: 2011), chapter 3, http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/35562/pg35562.html.

esoteric nature of this doctrine: "The nature of matter is not, in and of itself, a subject of deep concern in practical religion." However, although it may not be practical, it is undeniably important, as Widtsoe noted himself in the very same paragraph: "That matter, whatever it is, is eternal, is, however, a principle of highest theological value, for it furnishes a foundation for correct reasoning."[14]

This foundation for correct reasoning leads, inexorably, to quintessentially Mormon doctrines like pre-mortal existence and eternal progression. Moreover, within the LDS conception of the everlasting existence and nature of matter, there is no profound ontological gap between God and everything else. Indeed, the ontological gap between God and the created world is heavily conflated with the thinking behind *ex nihilo* creation. Respected scholars of the formation of early Church theology have argued that it is for precisely this reason that *ex nihilo* emerged as an unassailable doctrine: to place God as unquestionably transcendent, as above and entirely apart from the created world. In mainstream Christian theology, God is the only thing *without* a beginning and *without* any materiality.

If God's uniqueness and supremacy is in question, an *ex nihilo* creation is the answer. Mainstream Christian thought maintains that God is free and omnipotent; thus nothing can exist that would put constraints upon His creative ability. If God created merely by ordering pre-existing matter, the limits of the pre-existing matter would have to limit God's creative ability. This debate over how to define and understand God's transcendence played out during the second and third centuries as fringe groups were labeled heretical and Church fathers sought to establish orthodoxy. For second-century Irenaeus, the conclusion is simple: "While men, indeed, cannot make anything out of nothing, but only out of matter already existing, yet God is in this point pre-eminently superior to men, that He Himself called into being the substance of His

[14] Ibid.

creation, when previously it had no existence."[15] To appropriate an apt metaphor: A potter needs clay before he can begin his creation. God, by contrast, demonstrates His greatness and power by creating the pot from nothing, with no need for clay as a pre-existing material. This is the essential difference between *ex nihilo* and *ex materia* creation accounts, but there are so many foundational and fundamental differences in theology that arise as a result of these differing beginnings that it is astounding.

III. Ex nihilo *and domination*

The question to be examined is how the widely accepted *ex nihilo* creation informs mainstream Christian attitudes toward the environment, and this is a question that is difficult to address directly. So much of what underlies *ex nihilo* creation also underlies mainstream Christian theology as a whole; thus it becomes difficult to disentangle related topics so that *ex nihilo* can be addressed directly.

Nonetheless, several thinkers have tackled this question and answered it in similar ways. Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* is a marvelously complex—even poetic—work, and attempting to summarize its aims and methods here would be misplaced and reductionistic. She moves effortlessly from topics of creation, historical theology, feminist theory, and Biblical hermeneutics to constructive theology and literary analysis. Her work defies neat categorization as any single thing. Nonetheless, one of the foundational points of this work is her deconstruction of the first few verses of Genesis, to argue against the necessity of an *ex nihilo* reading. She turns to Genesis (specifically and repeatedly to Genesis 1:2) to emphasize the deep, arguing that its presence is outside of and before God's creation, and that analysis and

[15] Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Vol I of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, translated by Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), revised for New Advent by Kevin Knight, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103534.htm.

attention to this preexisting deep allows an entirely new doctrine of chaos and creation to emerge, a doctrine which has the potential to change how we define God and God's role. There is much that is problematic, in Keller's reckoning, about the *ex nihilo* interpretation; she argues that it establishes a dominating, masculine, colonialist attitude toward creation, and that it constructs a fear of the chaos (that is, the chaos of the deep) that inspires violent destruction or suppression of anything unknown or mysterious. Not least among her criticism of the *ex nihilo* doctrine is her contention that it constructs a God of domination, doing violence to chaos rather than allowing its inherent creativity to emerge. The immensely powerful God, who needs only His own logos to create, creates a cycle of annihilation of chaos. She writes:

> Christianity established as unquestionable the truth that everything is created *not* from some formless and bottomless something but from nothing: an omnipotent God could have created the world only *ex nihilo*. This dogma of origin has exercised immense productive force. It became common sense. Gradually it took modern and then secular form, generating every kind of western originality, every logos creating the new as if from nothing, cutting violently, ecstatically free of the abysms of the past. But Christian theology, I argue, created this *ex nihilo* at the cost of its own depth. It systematically and symbolically sought to erase the chaos of creation. Such a maneuver… was always doomed to a vicious circle: the nothingness invariably returns with the face of the feared chaos—to be nihilated all the more violently."[16]

This cycle of continuous annihilation is the basis for much of what Keller finds objectionable in Christian theology. Indeed, by insisting on an *ex nihilo* creation, Keller argues, Christian theology has developed an "imagery of mastery—what we may call its *dominology*, its logos of lordship."[17] Certainly *ex nihilo* creation speaks most clearly of power, as the creator needs only the force of his own word—and certainly no preexisting material—to create. Keller finds this insistence on utter power problematic. She writes, "This is a rhetoric of sheer power… Thus Christian orthodoxy originates in a symbolic misogyny in which it cashes in the complex

[16] Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), xvi.
[17] Ibid., xvii.

mediations of cosmogony for the property right of the dominus."[18] Indeed, sheer power is a defining—if not *the* defining—characteristic of the God of the *ex nihilo* creation account.

At the core of Keller's *Face of the Deep* is the rejection of a God who is completely transcendent, who refuses to acknowledge the creative chaos of the deep in Genesis 1:2. *Creatio ex nihilo*, according to Keller, constructs an impermeable boundary between God and creation, and this boundary establishes domination over creation as the *de facto* rule for both God and man. Keller laments over and over again that the chaos of Genesis 1:2 is not allowed to exercise any creative, productive force in traditional interpretations of the creation account. Rather, because its very existence implies a mystery, something outside of God's control (or at least outside of His defined creation) traditional interpretations of the creation account have had to crush its significance, smother its influence, until it becomes unrecognizable as existing outside of God. Thus, Keller's critique of the *ex nihilo* account also speaks of a deep insecurity within Christian hermeneutics, perhaps subconscious misgivings about God's ultimate control.

Keller coins the term "tehomophobia" to describe the impulse to ignore the deep (*tehom*) of Genesis 1:2 in favor of the logically simpler *ex nihilo* interpretation. Keller is not describing only a fear of the undefined, uncreated chaos; she also extends this tehomophobia to include deep-seated fears of the feminine as well, as the *tehom* is connected to the feminine, especially Tiamat of ancient Mesopotamian mythos.[19] In an interesting argument, Keller asserts that the *tehom*—as the primordial goddess who personified the chaotic ocean—must be sterile in order for God to create *ex nihilo*, and this method of creation is *against* the *tehom* instead of together with it, in an attempt to mute the feminine discourse that a theology of creation from the *tehom* might engender. It is this systemic repression of the *tehom* of Genesis 1:2 that Keller calls

[18] Ibid., 53-54.
[19] Ibid., 18.

"tehomophobia." Clearly, Keller's hermeneutical and philosophical strategies are weighty and complex, and they absolutely cannot be justified with summaries. That being said, Keller's tehomophobia is far from counter-intuitive. Accepting mystery (i.e., chaos) at face value and allowing its continued existence is certainly not a hallmark of conquering and colonialism. The fear of the unknown, of mystery, of chaos, of *tehom* does echo throughout human history, and does often make itself manifest often through violence. As Keller writes, "It is the tehomophobic imaginary that has energized western civilization and its heroic subjects: to master the chaos, perchance to destroy it, to flush it from the universe."[20]

Keller's idea that *ex nihilo* leads inexorably to treating creation with dominance, as property, as something to be mastered, is not her idea alone. Whitney Bauman, a scholar of religion and ecology, echoes this sentiment in his published works, making use of the phrase "logic of domination" frequently, and using the *ex nihilo* creation as his starting point, his explanation for the development and prevalence of this logic. "This God, creator *ex nihilo*," he writes, "provides a *foundation* (out of this world) for our humanity and also justifies the logic of dominion over the rest of nature, even if conceived as 'stewardship.'"[21] In his works, Bauman is especially focused on the transcendent nature of God, as evidenced through God's *ex nihilo* creation. Bauman argues that *ex nihilic* thinking is, in fact, directly responsible for the gap of transcendence between God and His creation, and thus between man and man's ideas about his own place within (or, more appropriately, *above*) creation. A God who is transcendent, Bauman argues, completely apart from the world, provides a model for man to see himself as transcendent and separate as well. Bauman writes, "*Ex nihilo* creates the space that separates God and the world, spirit and matter, history and nature, mind and body, culture and nature in a

[20] Ibid., 31.
[21] Whitney Bauman, "The Problem of a Transcendent God for the Well-Being of Continuous Creation," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 121.

way that pits these two poles over and against one another into a 'logic of domination.' The *nihil* obstructs our ability to see interconnectedness and change as part of what being-human-in-the-earth means."[22] Bauman's space of separation is not a productive place where cooperation or growth can occur, but an unbridgeable divide that prevents human beings from feeling connected to the natural world.

Bauman also notes another problem with the ramifications of *ex nihilo* creation. In a brilliant essay, he connects the *ex nihilo* understanding of creation to *terra nullius*, an eighteenth century legal concept that was used to invade and colonize land that was already inhabited by indigenous peoples. (He acknowledges that the term itself is used to refer to the colonization of Australian lands from Aboriginal peoples, but notes that both the concept and the presumption behind the term certainly apply to the whole period of European colonization). In this behavior of western colonizers, Bauman sees a reenactment of creation *ex nihilo* on the part of human beings, assuming that the land on which they arrive is empty, available for dominion, and ripe for domination. This argument is important for two reasons: first, it acknowledges that humans attempt to mimic God, perhaps unconsciously, in our attitudes toward the created world. Second, it sees *ex nihilo* creation as a source of our attempts to dominate the created world. "If, as I am suggesting," he concludes, "questions about creation are ultimately about the world we humans are co-creating in the present—that is, ultimately about our acts in the world—then I think it can at least be argued that the logic of *ex nihilo*… and the concept of *terra nullius* have been the source of much destruction of creation."[23]

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[22] Whitney Bauman, *Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics: from* creatio ex nihilo *to* terra nullius, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.
[23] Whitney Bauman, "Creatio Ex Nihilo, Terra Nullius, and the Erasure of Presence," in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 372.

Each writer finds much objectionable in *creatio ex nihilo*. Two especially pertinent issues that Keller finds objectionable in the *ex nihilo* are 1) its tendency to create a gap between humankind and God and 2) its inherent fear of chaos, inciting a pattern of violence whenever chaos arises. Bauman echoes this argument of Keller's about the gap of transcendence between man and God, and he also connects *ex nihilo* with violent colonialism and an assumption of owning the earth. What is interesting about these two scholars who have written on the link between *ex nihilo* creation and environmental domination is that neither explore the implications and potential foundations of *creatio ex materia*. There is some room for dialogue between Keller's notion of the personified deep and Mormonism's notion of *ex materia* creation, but there are more differences than similarities. Primarily, Keller's *tehom* is personified and is clearly imbued with will of her own, whereas the LDS conception of the eternal nature of matter does not personify all of it, instead personifying only the premortal spirits. The material organized into the earth and its fleshy inhabitants in LDS thought is not characterized as having any will of its own, making this material quite dissimilar to Keller's personified tehom.

The failure of either Keller or Bauman to explore the implications of *creatio ex materia* is not a criticism of the work of these scholars; *ex materia* can easily be ignored because it has not been the dominant cosmological understanding for centuries, as *ex nihilo* has. It would certainly be difficult—if not entirely wrong-headed—to argue that *ex materia* creation has had foundational influence on man's attitude toward the environment one way or another. The doctrine is simply not widespread or influential enough to have produced the kind of foundational thinking that *ex nihilo* has, because the only western Christian denomination of note that has adopted it are the Mormons.

In tandem with the criticism that these scholars have raised in regards to *ex nihilo* creation inspiring problematic behavior toward the environment, I would emphasize that the ontology *itself* implied behind *ex nihilo* proves problematic in relation to environmental ethics. *Ex nihilo* creation necessitates beliefs about ontology—about what it *is* to be human, and about the very nature and being of God. In the previous discussion of how *ex nihilo* creates a "logic of domination," a reasonable objection may have arisen: Perhaps *ex nihilo* does create an unbridgeable gap of transcendence between God and man or God and creation. But why *must* this gap necessitate Bauman's logic of domination? Why is this ontological gap not merely incidental to the human relationship with the earth?

The answer, of course, lies in how closely cosmology guides ontology, and how closely ontology guides theology. A brief discussion of this idea can hardly find a better starting point than in Lynn White's thought. His ultimate influence on the field of eco-theology, as we know it today, cannot be overstated. In his tremendously influential 1967 article, White noted, "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion."[24] White, of course, was not writing directly of *ex nihilo* creation; instead, his criticism of Christianity was based in its anthropocentrism and its clear distinction between mankind and the rest of creation. Nonetheless, his article is important to mention here because it so explicitly draws the connection between our theology and our behavior toward the environment. Most environmental ethicists, eco-theologians, philosophers, and interested laypeople alike have acknowledged the essential truth behind White's claims, and this sense of what we believe about nature informing how we behave toward nature underlies virtually all of eco-theology. Bauman, for example, explicitly acknowledges that he works from the assumption

[24] Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1205.

that "theology is also theo-anthropology, and that our ideas about God and 'nature' reflect and shape our ideas about what it means to be human."[25] Naturally, what we believe about creation of the earth—the process, how it came to be, God's role in it, and its essential nature—is pivotal in how we define God and ourselves in relation to Him. The nature of our being, the nature of the being of the earth, and the nature of God all affect the development of our theologies, and eventually the development of our attitudes toward the earth.

LDS writers have also echoed this sense of the connection between cosmology and theology. Bryan Wallis, in his article featured in the 2011 environmental issue of *Dialogue*, summarized the connection between cosmology and theology thusly:

> In these constellations of ideas, creation mythologies are central nodes in the unconscious bedrock of thought, being, and action. All cultures have a story or stories by which they explain their origins and thereby set the stage for their own sense of 'being-in-the-world.' The manner in which individuals and communities perceive themselves in the world vis-à-vis creation mythologies—their cosmic context as it were—influences how they perceive and treat the world and entities in it.[26]

Wallis is correct in his argument that creation mythologies influence behavior. However, before addressing the differences in behavior that are called for between *ex nihilo* and *ex materia* creation accounts, a general outline of the mainstream Christian attitude regarding the gulf between the material and the spiritual—that same gulf that Keller and especially Bauman decry—is needed here. This, of course, runs the unfortunate risk of reductionism, as the ideas and theologies are complex, but a brief discussion is necessary nonetheless. There is a notable ambivalence in Christian thought toward the created world and physical bodies. Although a human's physical body is the dwelling place for the soul, there is no question in mainstream Christian thought that the physical body itself is flawed and finite, while the soul is eternal and

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[25] Bauman, "The Problem of a Transcendent God," 121.
[26] Bryan V. Wallis, "Flexibility in the Ecology of Ideas," *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 57-8.

transcendent in some way. Modern mainstream Christianity is certainly not Gnostic in nature, defining the flesh as simply *evil* and the spirit as simply *good*. There is, nonetheless, some tension between the body and the spirit. Of New Testament writers, Paul perhaps captures this tension best: "We are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:12-13).

University of Florida religious scholar Anna Peterson summarizes this "ambivalent embodiment" in her essay "In and of the World: Christian Theological Anthropology and Environmental Ethics." She concludes ultimately that, in Christian thought, "creation serves essentially as a background for the drama of redemption. While the old earth is not evil, neither is it of permanent importance for human salvation, which alone gives meaning to human life."[27] She analyzes writing and teachings from Paul, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas to conclude that Protestantism particularly struggles with the tension between body and spirit. Sharon Betcher, a theologian of the environment and of disabilities, describes it well: "Spirit psychically metabolizes, especially in the Pauline trajectory taken up in Protestantism, the eradication of the 'futile' and 'corruptible' body."[28] This tension between body and spirit, I argue, emerges from deep within the *ex nihilo* account of creation, from an initial separation in the beginning of God from everything else. Catherine Keller's terminology is particularly pertinent here. She writes, "[Christianity] has intensified human 'dominion' over the other creatures by way of a naturalized dualism of spirit over flesh, of a supernatural heaven over a material earth."[29]

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[27] Anna Peterson, "In and of the World: Christian Theological Anthropology and Environmental Ethics," in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Routledge, 2004), 118.
[28] Sharon Betcher, "Grounding the Spirit: An Ecofeminist Pneumatology," in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 325.
[29] Catherine Keller and Laurel Kearns, "Grounding Theory—Earth in Religion and Philosophy," in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 4-5.

As Lynn White and countless numbers of other scholars have argued, Christians have long been treating the environment roughly. Exactly what it is in Christian (and especially Protestant) theology that engenders such rough handling of the natural world has been debated since the publication of White's essay. I argue, along with Catherine Keller, Whitney Bauman, and other scholars, that much of it stems from the problem of an absolutely transcendent God as evidenced by His *ex nihilo* creation.

I have thus far neglected to discuss another category of creation mythology, one that on its face relates to *creatio ex materia*. A brief detour into a discussion of this category now will hopefully illuminate and clarify the important distinctions between *ex nihilo* and *ex materia*, and will clarify my later arguments about the sort of environmental attitude that the LDS creation account can engender. This important category of creation mythology is known as the *Chaoskampf*, (German for "struggle against chaos"), a term coined by Hermann Gunkel in his 1895 work *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (*Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Times and Eschaton*). This discussion will not be entirely unfamiliar, as it relates to some of the arguments Catherine Keller makes in her *Face of the Deep*, regarding the potential existence of chaos in the Genesis account.

These creation mythologies—known as combat myths—posit the creation of the earth as the result of an epic struggle between opposing forces, usually opposing personified gods. Gunkel was the first major scholar to note the similarities between Genesis 1 and these much older creation mythologies. The force (or forces) moving against the demiurge in these mythologies of combat are often represented or personified by primordial water, oceans, or a sea monster or dragon associated with water. Gunkel argued that several ancient myths underlie the creation account in Genesis, most notably the ancient Babylonian poetic composition known as

Enuma Elish.[30] It is this poetic composition that narrates the cosmic battle between the chief Babylonian God, Marduk, and personified chaos, Tiamat, portrayed as a dragon from the sea. Marduk wins this battle and creates the universe out of Tiamat's corpse.[31] (Recall, of course, our earlier discussion of Keller's deep being associated with Tiamat). The *Enuma Elish* is not the only ancient creation myth that depicts a combat between the forces of good and the forces of chaotic evil ultimately leading to the creation of the world. Rather, this was a relatively common construction of the story of beginnings in the ancient world.

These combat myths warrant some discussion in this paper, as they may seem to present a parallel to the LDS *ex materia* theology. Naturally, within the worlds constructed by this mythology, the creation is explicitly not *ex nihilo*; creation arises only as a result of combat and victory over personified chaos, a coexisting and apparently formidable opponent to the demiurge. As alluded to earlier in this paper, scholars have given convincing arguments that the *ex nihilo* doctrine emerged post-Biblically as a means of affirming the absolute transcendence and uniqueness of God. Thus, some scholars note that the emergence of the prevailing *ex nihilo* interpretation owes some debt to these combat mythologies, as the need to affirm a transcendent God also arises from the need to deny the existence of some opposing god in the beginning. Comparing the LDS understanding of *ex materia* creation with the ancient combat myths will prove illustrative in two ways: first, it will further demonstrate that what we believe about cosmology informs our behavior toward the environment; and second, that LDS *ex materia* creation has no more in common with combat mythology than *ex nihilo* does, and should thus not be rejected out of hand by mainstream Christians as a result of this dubious comparison.

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[30] Gunkel's argument is not based only on Genesis; it also draws on Revelation, specifically chapter twelve, to indicate the continuing motif of God versus personified chaos—in the case of Revelation 12, an actual dragon.
[31] Hermann Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton,* trans. William Whitney, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 31.

The demiurge in these combat mythologies is necessarily a God of violence. Within the *Enuma Elish*, it is not the demiurge that is the aggressor—the aggressor is, of course, chaos personified, Tiamat, and those who serve underneath her. The epic is extremely complex, with a large variety of gods making appearances and choosing sides between Tiamat and Marduk. One description of Tiamat makes her status as aggressor clear:

> "Her commands were mighty, none could resist them;
> After this fashion, huge of stature, she made eleven monsters.
> Among the gods who were her sons, inasmuch as he had given her support,
> She exalted Kingu; in their midst she raised him to power.
> To march before the forces, to lead the host,
> To give the battle-signal, to advance to the attack,
> To direct the battle, to control the fight."[32]

Tiamat is leading her group of gods and demigods (most of whom dwell in the waters of the deep—that is to say, her belly) to kill Marduk and the gods aligned with him. Marduk, the eventual demiurge, responds to Tiamat with unrestrained violence:

> "To the fight they came on, to the battle they drew night.
> The lord spread out his net and caught her…
> He drove in the evil wind, while as yet she had not shut her lips.
> The terrible winds filled her belly,
> And her courage was taken from her, and her mouth she opened wide.
> He seized the spear and burst her belly,
> He severed her inward parts, he pierced her heart.
> He overcame her and cut off her life;
> He cast down her body and stood upon it."[33]

Upon this victory, Marduk rips Tiamat's corpse in two and uses these two pieces of her corpse to fashion the earth and the sky, respectively. He continues creating, using Tiamat's ribs to create east and west and her liver to form the North Star. He uses her spittle to create clouds,

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[32] Leonard William King, *The Seven Tablets of Creation* (1902, Sacred Texts Project), the first tablet, http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/enuma.htm.
[33] Leonard William King, *The Seven Tablets of Creation* (1902, Sacred Texts Project), the fourth tablet, http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/enuma.htm.

rain, and fog; and then pierces her eyes so that two rivers flow forever from them. Once he has created the rudiments of the earth, he slaughters Kingu (effectively Tiamat's second-in-command) and creates mankind from his flowing blood.[34]

For someone familiar only with the *ex nihilo* creation tradition, this particular myth may seem outright barbaric. However, many such ancient combat myths survive, especially from the Ancient Near East. These creation mythologies simply fit into a category vastly different from the *ex nihilo* tradition. What is there to be learned from bringing a wildly divergent myth like this into dialogue with the *ex nihilo* account and the LDS *ex materia* account?

First, it reinforces the assertion that beliefs about cosmology, and about the god or gods behind the creative act, guide our attitude toward everything outside ourselves. In his evaluation of combat myths, Northeastern University Old Testament scholar J. Richard Middleton notes how ethically problematic such accounts become, as they link violent suppression of chaos to creation itself. "Creation-by-combat… ontologizes evil, and assumes it is equally primordial with God and goodness," he argues. "The conquest of this evil/chaos to found the world order enshrines violence as the divinely chosen method for establishing goodness."[35] Middleton goes on to note how a reading of these combat myths can easily establish an us-versus-them mentality, one in which violence towards other human groups is normalized and even commended, in imitation of the demiurge during the creation of the world itself. He notes that if evil lives in chaos, if the world itself is created from the corpse of chaos personified, an attitude of violence toward the environment is at least condoned, if not sanctioned. He concludes, "In the contemporary world, where human agency is more widely diffused, a democratized *imago Dei* combined with the us/them framework of the chaos/cosmos scheme may harbor significant

[34] Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos,* 16-18.
[35] J. Richard Middleton, "Created in the Image of a Violent God? The Ethical Problem of the Conquest of Chaos in Biblical Creation Texts," *Interpretation* 58, no. 4 (October 2004): 350.

potential for the legitimization of human violence at many levels."[36] Interestingly, Middleton's argument here is quite reminiscent of Whitney Bauman's argument about the nature of the *ex nihilo* creator and the kind of behavior that creator inspires.

Secondly, discussing the combat myth in dialogue with *ex materia* creation allows the real differences between the two to come to light, and thus highlights the notable and unique aspects of the LDS doctrine. Certainly, combat mythologies are by definition a form of *ex materia* creation; the demiurge in question is clearly creating the world out of pre-existing materials—in the case of the *Enuma Elish*, the literal corpse of oceanic chaos personified. By this simple fact, combat myths have more in common with *ex materia* creation than with *ex nihilo* creation.

However, the similarities end very quickly. There is no violence in any of the creation accounts in LDS scripture; in fact, the account in Abraham speaks clearly of *cooperation* rather than any form of violence. God and the premortal spirits along with Him create the earth, following a council in heaven, all the while using preexisting materials that are never characterized as in opposition to being organized.[37] God does not stand in opposition to His creation, needed to enact no violence against it in order to begin creating, and in fact invites those who exist alongside him to participate in it. This is a cooperative account, not a violent one, and not a transcendent, utterly omnipotent one.

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[36] Ibid., 351.

[37] The so-called "war in heaven" in LDS thought deserves mention here. During the council in heaven of premortal existence, Lucifer stood in opposition to God's plan to send Jesus as redeemer, as Lucifer himself wished to be sent as redeemer instead. The resulting conflict caused Lucifer (along with one-third of the hosts of heaven, who sided with him) to be cast out of heaven. We thus see a sense here of combat mythology, but key elements are missing: the victorious God did not use Lucifer's corpse to create the earth, and the plan of creation continued unchanged, in that the remaining spirits observed and cooperated in God's *ex materia* creation as planned before Lucifer's rebellion. In no way was creation *dependent* upon Lucifer's rebellion and defeat. Importantly, nowhere in the LDS creation accounts alluding to this conflict is there any mention of actual warfare or violence. The strongest language used in regard to this rebellion of Lucifer is found in Abraham 3:28, which reads, "And the second [i.e. Lucifer] was angry, and kept not his first estate; and at that day, many followed after him." This is far from language of violence; the term "war in heaven" comes from Revelation, not from any unique LDS creation accounts.

Too much time need not be spent here in dialogue with combat mythologies, however fascinating and multivalent they may be. What remains important is the observation that the LDS account of *ex materia* creation should absolutely not be conflated with combat myths, as their similarities are few. Further, combat myths demonstrate that a violent demiurge can serve to inspire human violence toward creation. In much the same way, an *ex nihilo* creator can serve to inspire an attitude of transcendence of and power over creation. In the same vein, as I will argue later, an *ex materia* creator can inspire an attitude of continuing, cooperative care with creation.

IV. The image of God

The fact of an *ex nihilo,* transcendent, immaterial, immensely powerful God thus informs both our beliefs about our relationship to God and our relationship to creation. Of special note along these lines, as it relates to eco-theology and religiously based environmental ethics, is the idea of the image of God within mankind.

Much has been written theologically about what it means to be made in God's image, and much of these writings within the field of Christian environmental ethics insist that such a constitution imparts upon us unique responsibilities toward the environment. The verse in which God plans to grant His image to mankind reads: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26). The following verse describes the enactment of this creation: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27).

Within the years of interpretations and theologies behind the verse, two interpretative categories emerge: a reading of the verse as describing man's *substance* (that is, how his substance is like God's), and a reading of the verse as *relational* (that is, how this defines man's relationship with God and everything else). The first category is an ontological one; the second, more functional. Karl Barth's thought represents well this second category. He challenges the ideas of earlier theologians that to be created in the image of God means to be gifted with reason, or for that matter, to be gifted with *any* characteristic. Rather, to be created in the image of God means to have the ability to enter into a confrontational relationship with God.[38] Here, Barth uses Martin Buber's I-Thou mode of existence to clarify what he means by this confrontational relationship with God. Since Barth's contribution to the dialogue about what *imago Dei* functionally means, scholars have been more eager to characterize what rights, duties, and obligations *imago Dei* calls for, rather than just what ontological claims it makes. As theologian Anthony Hoekema summarizes, "We should not think of the image of God only as a noun but also as a verb: we are to *image* God by the way we live, and the heart of the image of God is love for God and others. Barth's dynamic understanding of the image ties in with this important emphasis."[39] Environmental writers equating the image of God with a responsibility toward stewardship owe much to Barth's dynamic understanding of what God's image means functionally and practically.

In summarizing writings on this relational understanding of the image of God, Yale Divinity School's Richard Fern concludes, "We are called, accordingly, not to bear the image of

[38] Obviously any kind of in-depth discussion of Barth's thought would be misplaced in this paper. His writings on the *imago Dei* deserve mention because they represent a sort of reaction against the overemphasis on man's substance as being the only indicator of *imago Dei.* For a brief but very good summary of Barth's thought on the issue, see Anthony Hoekema's *Created in God's Image*, to which I am indebted for my understanding of the topic.
[39] Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 52.

God—which we cannot avoid—but rather, bear it faithfully, mirror God in creation."[40] This mirroring is to behave toward creation with love, as Fern concludes, echoing Kierkegaard. In a recent and highly regarded study, Northeastern Old Testament scholar J. Richard Middleton argues for an interpretation of Genesis 1 as the story of a good creator who invites those created in His image to participate in creation along with Him, based around notions of responsibility and stewardship. As Middleton writes, *imago Dei* provides a democratized access to God—that is to say, all humans are privileged with access to God because all are made in His image—and this access comes along with it responsibility to act on His behalf. "Humans are the only *legitimate* or *authorized* earthly representations of God," he writes.[41]

So, as earthly representatives of God—indeed, as the *only* representatives of God in all of creation—it is our duty to approximate His actions as closely as we can. As Middleton notes, "It is not enough to claim an analogy or likeness between human power and God's own power. What is urgently needed is an investigation into the content or substance of the power humans in the divine image are expected to exercise."[42] Old Testament scholar Bernhard Anderson, in his earlier study of the image of God and domination, also notes how the image calls us to imitate God, and thus how important God's actions are in determining how we act. He wrote,

> It is clear from the context of Genesis 1 that God's elevation of human beings does not entitle us to exercise power in an unlimited and autonomous manner by exploiting and subjugating nature. True, the verbs used of human dominion in Gen. 1:26-28 may have a violent meaning in other contexts. But violence does not appear in this context, where, according to the Priestly story, human dominion is to be exercised in a situation of paradisiacal peace and harmony in which there was to be *no killing*… Thus the special status of humankind as the image of God is a call to responsibility, not only in relation to other humans but also in relation to nature."[43]

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[40] Richard L. Fern, *Nature, God, and Humanity*: *Envisioning an Ethics of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 171.
[41] J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The* Imago Dei *in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 207.
[42] Middleton, "Created in the Image," 341-42.
[43] Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 130-131.

In answering this call to responsibility, what we believe about God and creation is paramount. Anderson's interpretation, here, of the dominion verses in Genesis as not carrying a violent meaning is important. The fact that he does not read violence into the verse causes him to not read violence as the human obligation toward creation. (I should note that his interpretation of the Genesis verses as fundamentally non-violent does not address the assertion in this paper that *ex nihilo* creation is an inherently dominant, dominating act). Anderson's reading is not an unfamiliar one to Christian environmental ethicists.

One foundational principle of many Christian environmental organizations, such as the Evangelical Environmental Network, is that it is our call to care for creation, to exercise dominion over it in a way that reflects God's claim in Genesis that His creation is good. Because we are made in God's image, our role is to treat creation with the same care that He did during the creation account. On the website of the Evangelical Environmental Network, they note in their mission statement this obligation: "Our relationship to the rest of creation is to be based on God's relationship to it and how God wants us to behave towards it… Human beings have a special role and a special responsibility in God's creation since they are created in God's image."[44] Strict readings of Genesis 1:28—in which God's says to newly-created man, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth"—have long been used to justify doing damage to the environment, incidentally or not. Christian environmental organizations push back against the idea that this terminology—to fill the earth and subdue it—necessitates a violent, unqualified, exploitative act. Rather, these organizations argue for a

[44] "Why Creation Care Matters," *Evangelical Environmental Network*, accessed April 1, 2014, http://creationcare.org/blank.php?id=41.

practical environmental ethic that calls us to take our created status as in the image of God seriously, propelling us toward an ethic of respect and care for an earth divinely created.

This view, and the work that Christian environmental organizations do, is commendable, important, and influential. But I argue that it misses something. Founded on an implicit assumption of *ex nihilo* creation, there is an unavoidable underlying emphasis on God's power—His dominance over creation, His frankly astounding absolute power of calling something into being using only the *logos*, His raw unadulterated omnipotence. If we are made in His image, and thus called to imitate His attitude toward creation, our role is as much about exercising power as it is exercising care. This view is not popular with the creation care movement, nor should it be. Nonetheless, arguing that we are called to care for the earth *like* God without acknowledging that the God of Genesis is a fundamentally powerful force based on *ex nihilic* thinking, leaves something to be desired.

Again, we are drawn back to questions of ontology. If we are called to be like God (at least as closely as any human can approximate a divine being), the questions of *what* God is and *what* we are come to the fore. In logic based on *ex nihilo* creation, God's most defining qualities are power and transcendence. Arguing that we should do our best to imitate Him while emphasizing His love or the atonement—at the expense of acknowledging His power and transcendence over creation—paints an incomplete picture of our obligation toward the environment within the *ex nihilo* understanding of creation. Catherine Keller and Whitney Bauman would interpret the call to imitate God very differently than Christian environmental organizations do, because Keller and Bauman have fully probed what *creatio ex nihilo* necessarily says about God. Both would agree that an environmental ethic based around imitation of the *ex nihilo* creator would be defined by power and distance, attitudes that lead to

subjugation, forceful domination, and even direct violence. LDS theology, however, is not constrained by this *ex nihilic* God and can thus propose a different and robust environmental ethic based on its own unique idea of *ex materia* creation and God.

V. Implications of ex materia: premortal existence, material God, and eternal progression

Belief in an *ex materia* creation gives LDS theology opportunity for profoundly different conceptions of ontology, the eternal life of mankind, the nature of God Himself, and ultimate destinies. So much of what is unique about LDS theology finds its roots in the *ex materia* creation accounts. Three of these unique teachings are of special importance to questions of ontology, and could prove important to the establishment of a uniquely Mormon environmental ethic: premortal existence, the material nature of God, and eternal progression. These three key LDS principles will be discussed in this section and it will be demonstrated how *ex materia* creation is a necessary backdrop for these beliefs.

First, the LDS *ex materia* creation account allows for the premortal and eternal existence of man in a way that *ex nihilo* simply cannot. If God created *ex nihilo* in the beginning, then necessarily everything that exists is dependent upon Him and did not exist alongside him. Within *ex nihillic* thinking, the human body and soul are fundamentally dependent on God. That is to say, our very existence hinges entirely on God's creative power; we and all that exist are entirely contingent upon God. Langdon Gilkey, in his *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, a 1959 philosophical work that still retains its relevance, writes extensively on the nature of man that finds its foundations in *ex nihilo* creation.

> The fundamental structure of creaturehood is, as we have seen, that it is dependent yet real. Man is a creature who shares fully in this basic character. He too is "made out of nothing," and thus he is not the source of his own existence but is dependent on things beyond himself, and especially on God, for his being… The dependence of man's being

> is, as in all creatures, total and unconditioned: his whole existence in space and time comes to him immediately from beyond himself and other creatures, and ultimately from God. Thus the total structure of man's being as a creature made out of nothing roots his life beyond himself in the transcendent source of his existence, in God his Creator and preserver.[45]

Gilkey, a student of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, emphasizes the power of the *ex nihilo* creator over and over again, consistently noting the inherent contingency of man's existence on this creator. "The creative act of God was the source of more than the form, which was shared by the other members of the species," he writes. "God's act was understood to be the direct source of the total being of the unique individual… The whole man, and therefore the unique man, had been created by God in all his wholeness and uniqueness."[46] This idea of man's continuing ontological dependence on God is a common one in philosophy.

Thus, it is a direct and unavoidable consequence of *ex nihilic* thinking of man as completely dependant on God. Put simply, without God's creative act, we would not exist, and that includes every part of us: body, mind, and spirit. This fact is so obvious to the average Catholic or Protestant that it hardly bears mentioning. However, precisely because the Mormon conception of man's existence is so radically different, a reminder of this commonplace fundamental assertion is needed.

LDS thought stands in contrast to more mainstream Christian thought on this issue. Because there was preexisting matter during God's creation of the earth, the possibility that human spirits existed in this matter and thus were not necessarily created by God becomes real. Indeed, within Mormon theology, this preexistence of human spirits is not only a theoretical possibility, but is explicitly taught. Human spirits are not dependent on God for their very

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[45] Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: A Study of the Christian Doctrine of Creation* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 193.
[46] Ibid., 169.

existence. They exist co-eternal with God and even participated alongside Him in the creation of the earth. God is not responsible for having created the spirits;[47] rather He is responsible for placing each spirit from pre-mortal existence into a physical body on the earth.

The Abraham creation account makes this clear. Chapter three of that text speaks of God standing with spirits before the creation of the earth. These spirits are not the immaterial spirits of some conceptual humans; rather they are individual intelligences, fully developed. Abraham, for example, is one of them: "And God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham, thou are one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born" (Abraham 3:23). In fact, the creation account in the following chapter indicates a council of spirits observing the creative act along with God. Another comparison with Genesis will be instructive here.

Genesis		**Abraham**	
2:7	then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.	5:7	And the Gods formed man from the dust of the ground, and took his spirit (that is, the man's spirit), and put it into him; and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.

The Abraham account is clear that God did not *create* the man's spirit, either directly or indirectly (i.e., by breathing the "breath of life" into him). Rather, God formed the man's body from the dust of the ground, and then *took his spirit and put it into him*. Logically, this means that the spirit existed elsewhere before it was incarnated into his created body. Man becomes a "living soul" when the premortal spirit and physical body is combined, but the premortal spirit

[47] LDS doctrine, here, may be difficult for a Protestant or Catholic to follow because of differences in definitions. LDS doctrine indicates that the *spirit* is what other Christians traditionally think of as the *soul*. In LDS thought, it is *spirit* that has co-existed eternally with God. The human *soul*, in Mormon parlance, is the united entity of *both* the immortal spirit and the physical body.

itself lives outside of and before this embodiment, before the emergence of the soul. Importantly, spirits are not immaterial in LDS thought. A traditional, mainstream Christian reading of this text would allow for a pre-existing immaterial spirit to be implanted into the newly formed physical body. However, within Mormon thought, such an immaterial spirit does not—and cannot—exist. There is, of course, an ontological difference between spirit matter and fleshy matter, but it is nonetheless all matter of some kind. *The Doctrine and Covenants* asserts, "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).

Perhaps this distinction seems arbitrary or semantic, as spirit matter cannot even be seen by physical eyes. Within Mormon thought, however, the difference is certainly not pedantic. Joseph Smith addressed the misconception directly:

> The body is supposed to be organized matter, and the spirit, by many, is thought to be immaterial, without substance. With this latter statement we should beg leave to differ, and state that spirit is a substance; that is material, but that it is more pure, elastic and refined matter than the body; that it existed before the body, can exist in the body; and will exist separate from the body, when the body will be mouldering in the dust; and will in the resurrection, be again united with it.[48]

Although there is this difference between spiritual matter and physical matter, both substances are nonetheless material. Premortal spirits are neither fully incorporeal nor immaterial. Like everything else that exists, they are composed of matter. The emphasis on materiality—even for spirits—is necessary because it serves as the basis for the eternity of the spirit. The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, an exhaustive and "semi-official" guide for LDS topics

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[48] Joseph Smith Jr., *Joseph Smith's Teachings: A Classified Arrangement of the Doctrinal Sermons and Writings of the Great Latter-day Prophet*, ed. Edwin F. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1922), 172, http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009024652.

published by Brigham Young University, helpfully summarizes this distinction between different kinds of matter:

> In strict analogy to principles governing physical matter, the revelations to Joseph Smith stress that eternity for spirits also derives from the eternal existence of spiritual matter or elements. The preeminent manifestation of the eternal nature of both physical and spiritual matter is found in the eternal existence of God and ultimately his human children as discrete, indestructible entities. In this unique LDS doctrine, matter in all of its many forms, instead of occupying a subordinate role relative to philosophical paradigms, assumes a sovereign position, along with the principles and laws governing its properties and characteristics.[49]

It should also be noted, in an effort to quantify the similarity between spiritual matter and physical matter, that Latter-day Saints teach that physical matter is crafted in the likeness of spiritual matter. That is to say, our physical bodies (along with the physical structure of everything that is created) are at least similar in appearance to our premortal spirits. As the *Doctrine and Covenants* explains, "that which is spiritual [is] being in the likeness of that which is temporal; and that which is temporal in the likeness of that which is spiritual; the spirit of man in the likeness of his person, as also the spirit of the beast, and every other creature which God has created" (D&C 77:2).

God's existence before the creation of the earth alongside others who were "like unto God" (Abraham 3:24) often raises an objection among outsiders: namely, that His existence alongside other eternal intelligences calls his sovereignty into question. Thus, it is important to note briefly that the existence of premortal spirits does not diminish God's supremacy within LDS thought. Mormons clearly and exuberantly affirm the superiority of God; there is no question that He is the creator of the world and the father of the savior to whom all humankind owes its chance at salvation. The existence of premortal spirits alongside Him does not

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[49] David M. Grant, "Matter," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: MacMillan, 1992), http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Matter.

compromise His holiness or the reverence with which Mormons treat Him. God remains supreme. A particularly pertinent passage in the Book of Abraham makes this clear. In describing those premortal spirits that existed alongside God before the creation, the text reads,

> Howbeit that he made the greater star; as, also, if there be two spirits, and one shall be more intelligent than the other, yet these two spirits, not withstanding one is more intelligent than the other, have no beginning; they existed before, they shall have no end, they shall exist after, for the are *gnolaum*, or eternal. And the Lord said unto me: These two facts do exist, that there are two spirits, one being more intelligent than the other; there shall be another more intelligent than they; I am the Lord they God, I am more intelligent than they all. (Abraham 3:18-19)

Although spirits have existed alongside God for time immemorial, God remains supreme as the most intelligent of all intelligences. These LDS scriptural passages point to the preexisting nature of mankind's spirits while still affirming the superiority of God the creator.

Much of LDS beliefs about the preexisting nature of spirits, the eternal nature of matter, and speculations about God's ontological nature are well represented in Joseph Smith's King Follett Discourse, also called the King Follett Sermon, delivered in 1844. Smith's sermon sought to comfort and to educate a massive gathering of Latter-day Saints by teaching on the eternal existence of souls. In an effort to explain this immortality, Smith explored the creation of the earth *ex materia*, the preexistence of souls alongside God, and the nature of God Himself. The entire discourse is fascinating and is essential reading for anyone desiring a complete understanding of early Mormon thought on matter, man, and God. Smith taught in that discourse: "But if I am right, I might with boldness proclaim from the housetops that God never had the power to create the spirit of man at all. God himself could not create himself. Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle."[50] Thus, the self in Mormon thought is what LDS philosopher Sterling M. McMurrin calls "a necessary existent," explicitly

[50] Joseph Smith Jr., "The King Follett Sermon," *Ensign*, May 1971, https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/05/the-king-follett-sermon?lang=eng.

not created by God in the beginning. McMurrin sums up the ramifications nicely and indicates the link between this uncreated self and the doctrine of *ex materia* creation:

> The Mormon concept of man is distinguished from the classical Christian doctrine primarily in its denial that man is essentially and totally a creature of God. This follows from the fundamental thesis of Mormon metaphysics that all primary being is original and uncreated… The most important facet of this denial of origins, with radical meanings for the Mormon religion as well as for the theology, is the doctrine that the human self in its essential being is given and uncreated.[51]

Ex materia thus lays the groundwork for the unique Mormon conception of man. Mankind is very near to God in LDS theology; there is no absolute gap of transcendence that separates the Creator from the created. Material, premortal spirits exist eternally alongside God, rather than being ontologically dependant upon God for their very existence. Indeed, they are seen in the creation account in Abraham, at least observing and perhaps participating alongside him in the act of creation. Mormon scholars who have written on environmental ethics have emphasized the importance of this doctrine of premortal existence. George Handley, BYU professor and author of "The Environmental Ethics of Mormon Belief," makes reference to the spiritual matter of nature frequently. He notes: "Because of the Mormon conception of our premortal life and its suggestion that we have witnessed and may have participated in the very creation of the world under Christ's direction, we have a unique opportunity to always remember our intimate relationship with creation."[52] This intimate relationship with creation will be addressed further later, but it bears mentioning here because it again affirms the presence of our premortal spirits during the very creation of the earth. The principle of premortal existence is the first major principle that *ex materia* foundation allows for in terms of the makeup of man.

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[51] Sterling McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), 49.
[52] George Handley, "The Environmental Ethics of Mormon Belief," *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 195.

Second, *ex materia* creation accounts allow for a slightly limited, material conception of God. The Mormon conception of the ontological gap between God and mankind is fundamentally different than the mainstream Christian conception—in fact, in LDS theology, there is virtually no ontological gap between the creator and the created. Again, Smith's King Follett Discourse makes this clear. He preached, "I will go back to the beginning, before the [world] was, to show what kind of a being God is. What sort of a being was God in the beginning?... God himself was once as we are now, as is an exalted Man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens."[53] In Mormon thought, there is much more about God's nature that is *similar* to man's than is different, or at least there is much more *potential* for man to be similar to God. Although it is not found in Mormon scripture, the so-called Lorenzo Snow Couplet aptly summarizes LDS thought on the potential for mankind and thus deserves to be quoted here: "As man is, God once was. As God is, man may become."[54] There is no gap of transcendence here, no unbridgeable ontological divide between man and God.

Going too deep on these matters is problematic, precisely because the LDS Church takes no firm stance on what it might mean for God to have once been "as we are now." The couplet, while repeated and understood to refer to both God's nature and mankind's nature, is valued much more as a tool of affirmation in relation to mankind's potential to progress toward becoming like God, rather than any normative statement about God's past.

This general LDS ambivalence on the principle is well summarized by then-Church president Gordon B. Hinckley's statement to Time Magazine in 1997. When asked whether the Church believes that God was once a man, Hinckley said, "I don't know that we emphasize it… I

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[53] Joseph Smith Jr., "The King Follett Sermon," *Ensign*, April 1971, https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/04/the-king-follett-sermon?lang=eng.
[54] Charles R. Harrell, "Theogony," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: MacMillan, 1992), http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Theogony.

understand the philosophical background behind it, but I don't know a lot about it, and I don't think others know a lot about it."[55] Clarifying this statement after the publication of the interview, Hinckley explained that he sought not to downplay, deny, or devalue the teaching, merely to note that God being an exalted man is not a frequent topic of public discourse and that other aspects of the faith are emphasized much more heavily.

Regardless of exactly what it means for God to be an "exalted man," God the creator clearly has a very material aspect in LDS theology. As even human spirits are made of refined matter, so is God. "The Father has a body of flesh and bones," *The Doctrine and Covenants* reads, "as tangible as man's; the Son also" (D&C 130:22).

The idea of the creator being composed of matter and possessing a physical body often raises objections as to His omnipotence from critics of Latter-day Saint theology. Although Latter-day Saints refer to God as omnipotent, LDS use of the term differs slightly from more traditional usages. *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism* provides a useful discussion of this slight different in definition. It reads:

> The Church affirms the biblical view of divine omnipotence (often rendered as "almighty"), that God is supreme, having power over all things… However, the Church does not understand this term in the traditional sense of absolutenesss, and, on the authority of modern revelation, rejects the classical doctrine of creation out of nothing. It affirms, rather, that there are actualities that are coeternal with the person of the Godhead, including elements, intelligence, and law… Omnipotence, therefore, cannot coherently be understood as absolutely unlimited power. That view is internally self-contradictory and, given the fact that evil and suffering are real, not reconcilable with God's omnibenevolence or loving kindness."

Effectively, the LDS Church uses the term omnipotent to mean something akin to God having all power that is possible to have, a practical sort of omnipotence. In *The Seventy's*

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[55] David van Biema, "Kingdom Come," *TIME*, August 4, 1997, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,986794,00.html.

Course in Theololgy, B.H. Roberts—one of the most highly respected LDS writers in Church history—taught,

> Not even God can have two mountain ranges without a valley between. Not even God can place Himself beyond the boundary of space: nor on the outside of duration. Nor is it conceivable to human thought that he can create space, or annihilate matter. These are things that limit even God's Omnipotence. What then, is meant by the ascription of the attribute Omnipotence to God? *Simply that all that may or can be done by power conditioned by other eternal existences*—duration, space, matter, truth, justice—*God can do*.[56]

Thus, the LDS Church teaches a slightly limited, material God. The term "omnipotent" is so often used to refer to God, however, that it becomes easy to overlook the slightly limited nature of the Mormon conception of God. Additionally, like most other Christian denominations, Latter-day Saints speak of God's power regularly, so the frequent language of the so-called *omnis*—omnipotence, omnipresence, omnibenevolence, omniscience—can mask the more limited, material conception of God. Nonetheless, the theology does point to some limitations on God, and it is significant that those who point out these limitations do so in language that emphasizes the eternal nature of matter and the rejection of *creatio ex nihilo*. It is indeed the doctrine of creation from preexisting materials that guides and allows for the LDS conception of a slightly limited, material God.

This calls for a note of clarification: in referring to a God who is slightly limited, it is not my intent to disparage this idea of God or to cast doubt upon the validity of Latter-day Saint beliefs. The creator God remains powerful and supreme in Mormon thought. Returning to the analogy of the potter with his clay again will be instructive. As a potter shapes and molds clay into a design all her own, it matters not to the clay itself that the potter did not create it. Rather, as far as the clay is concerned, the potter is indeed all-powerful, as she can shape and mold the

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[56] B.H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology: Third Year: The Doctrine of Deity* (Salt Lake City: Caxton Press, 1910), 70, https://archive.org/details/seventyscoursein34robe. Emphasis mine.

clay any way she likes, and the clay is entirely at her disposal. This analogy, with God as the potter, is helpful in understanding the *practical* omnipotence of the LDS conception of God. Calling the clay into being from nothing is not a prerequisite for having tremendous creative power and influence over it.

It would probably be a valid point to argue that this view of God is merely anthropomorphism. I say that this would be valid because that is precisely what Mormon theology does, and precisely what it aims to do—to reduce the ontological and theoretical gap between God and man. This is neither a mistake nor a misplaced reductionism in Mormon thought. Rather, it is found throughout LDS theology, within its scriptures, its hymns, the writings of its prophets and leaders, and the language of the culture itself. God's similarity to man is celebrated and viewed as a source of inspiration. Turning again to Smith's King Follett discourse, we see this anthropomorphism in Smith's preaching: "That is the great secret… If you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—*like yourselves*, in all the person, image, and the very form as a man."[57] God's materiality, His physical being, and His closeness to his creation are important in Mormon thought.

Stephen H. Webb, a theologian and apologist for LDS theology (though not Mormon himself), summarizes the importance of this materiality in his book *Mormon Christianity*, noting, "Mormonism is a very complex branch of Christianity, but if all its beliefs can be traced back to a single philosophical root, this [emphasis on materiality] would be it."[58] This philosophical root is extraordinarily consequential, and *ex materia* creation lays the groundwork for it. A God defined not by transcendence, but by His materiality and His similarity to created man, becomes the God to whom Mormons owe their allegiance and worship. The importance of materiality—

[57] Joseph Smith Jr., "The King Follett Sermon," *Ensign*, April 1971, https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/04/the-king-follett-sermon?lang=eng.
[58] Stephen Webb, *Mormon Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 84.

and, as its source, the creation of the world *ex materia*—can hardly be overstated for LDS doctrine.

The third major principle to be discussed that *ex materia* creation allows for is the unique LDS plan of salvation. Because of the fact of premortal existence and the closeness of God in LDS thought, Latter-day Saints see virtually unlimited potential for themselves to progress toward perfection for eternity; this belief is fittingly referred to as "eternal progression." It is dependent upon the doctrine of the preexistence of spirits and, in fact, explains the creation of the earth.

In LDS theology, the earth is created explicitly for man—or perhaps more appropriately, explicitly for the premortal spirits coeternal with God. In the book of Abraham, during the scene in which God speaks to those premortal spirits, He makes clear His intention in creating the earth: "And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them; And they who keep their first estate shall be added upon… and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever" (Abraham 3:25-6). A note on terminology: the term "first estate" refers generally to premortal existence; that is to say, existence of human spirits before incarnation onto the earth. "Second estate," then naturally refers to the mortal existence of each embodied spirit upon the earth. "Keeping" these estates effectively means fulfilling the moral duties and obligations that God grants mankind, including performing and receiving salvific ordinances. Upon keeping the second estate, the premortal spirits are rewarded with seemingly never-ending glory. This principle—eternal progression—indicates that the spirits of mankind can gain in understanding and righteousness, ever progressing to become more pure, more intelligent, and more like God.[59]

[59] Including a discussion of eternal progression in an academic paper can be problematic, especially as I write from an outsider's perspective, precisely because the principle is often linked with deification—the belief that humans

Indeed, the entire creation of the earth is intended so that premortal spirits may prove their worthiness and progress. A well-known verse in the Book of Mormon speaks of this purpose poetically: "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25). This underlying theology regarding the Fall differs from more mainstream Christian notions of the effect of the Fall. While mainstream Christian theologies often point to the Fall as the origin of Original Sin and the separation of man from God, LDS doctrine sees the Fall quite differently. LDS doctrine teaches that Adam's Fall is a necessary part of the ultimate plan of salvation. The Fall was entirely necessary so that humankind could experience temporal mortality, reproduce, and thus make themselves able to partake in eternal progression.

As Mormon philosopher Sterling McMurrin noted, "Mormonism from its origins has been grounded in an affirmative doctrine of man and his predicament that denies original sin while accepting literally the Biblical account of Adam. This has necessitated a paradoxical interpretation of the Fall as conforming to the divine will, an interpretation that has centered on the idea that the fall was essential to the moral development of the human soul."[60] The Book of Mormon notes the effect of the Fall as such, after explaining that Adam and Eve's actions in the

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have the ability to become gods themselves. Deification itself is complex and is a source of extreme criticism from those outside the LDS Church, and the criticism often springs from the idea that those Mormon believers who progress to full godhood will become "gods of their own planets," nearly always used as a mocking, critical term. This idea—that faithful Mormons can receive their own planets over which to rule upon exaltation—is not found explicitly in canonized LDS scripture, and is a caricature of the actual, less concrete teachings of eternal progression. Although eternal progression is certainly an important Mormon principle in terms of the afterlife and in terms of understanding the nature and potential of mankind, it remains vaguely defined. In fact, the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* admits, "The principle of eternal progression cannot be precisely defined or comprehended, yet it is fundamental to the LDS worldview." The term "deification" itself first appeared with Brigham Young, but the notion of deification can be traced back to Joseph Smith's King Follett discourse. Important leaders in the Church have written on the idea of deification in important publications and in well-respected published works in the years since Brigham Young popularized the principle; despite these fascinating writings, there has been no *revelation* on the subject and thus much of the discussion surrounding it is theoretical and speculative in nature. However, eternal progression and deification are not identical. The vast majority of discussion and writings on the principle of eternal progression focus on improvement *not* explicitly aimed at some far-off goal of becoming a literal God. Instead, teachings on eternal progression most often focus on morality, human potential, and the importance of continued striving towards lofty ideals. When discussing a handful of quotes from Brigham Young, I *will* make reference to explicit deification. However, for the most part my discussion of eternal progression will remain focused on learning, experiencing, growing, and progressing in the second estate, i.e. *this* mortal life.

[60] McMurrin, *Theological Foundations*, 64.

Garden led to inevitable temporal death: "Now behold, it was not expedient that man should be reclaimed from this temporal death, for that would destroy the great plan of happiness… Therefore, as they had become carnal, sensual, and devilish, by nature, this probationary state became a state for them to prepare; it became a preparatory state" (Alma 42:8-10).

It is only through the Fall of man that the LDS plan of salvation can be achieved. That is to say, Adam's Fall is a blessing in LDS thought, as it allows the spirits of men to ultimately "have joy." The environmentally-minded LDS scholar George Handley writes, "The conditions of human probation, rather than curses, are blessings because they are the ethical testing ground to restore our relationships—to God, to land, and to our bodies—that characterized the experience in the Garden of Eden."[61] Just as significant as the Fall providing this ethical testing ground, Handley also notes how the Fall does not fundamentally change the ontology of man: "Nor, in Mormon belief, has the Fall resulted in a categorical divide between our biological nature and spirituality."[62]

God's creation of the earth thus began the process toward eternal progression for those spirits with Him in premortal existence. The earth—even in its state *prior* to Adam's Fall—was created to provide premortal spirits with an opportunity to become more like God. In Smith's King Follett Discourse, he also noted this motivation: "God himself… saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge."[63] Over and over again in LDS theology, the human ability to progress and become more like the divine is emphasized. Because of our status as originally premortal spirits coexisting alongside God, and of the same material

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[61] Handley, "The Environmental Ethics of Mormon Belief," 191.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Joseph Smith Jr., "The King Follett Sermon," *Ensign*, May 1971, https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/05/the-king-follett-sermon?lang=eng.

substance as God, speaking of a gap of transcendence or a gap between the material and the spiritual in Mormon theology is simply misplaced.

As the principle behind eternal progression developed in Mormon culture, this closeness between man and God became more pronounced. Such a close ontological and functional relationship thus allows for a close imitative relationship as well. Brigham Young—successor to Joseph Smith and president of the Church from 1847 to 1877—spoke often of this need to pattern ourselves after God, centered around the principle of eternal progression. In 1862, he taught: "We are trying to be the image of those who live in heaven; we are trying to pattern after them, to look like them, to walk and talk like them, to deal like them, and to build up the kingdom of heaven as they have done."[64]

Thus, to bear the image of God is more demanding for Mormon believers than it is for more mainstream Christian believers, precisely because the natures of God and of mankind are so similar. It is worth briefly noting, again, that the Bible is authoritative for Latter-day Saints, insofar as it is translated correctly. Thus, the verses relating to the "image of God" from the Old Testament quoted earlier in this paper serve as scripture for Latter-day Saints as well as more mainstream Christians. Additionally, unique LDS scriptures contain their own allusions to the image of God. We have already seen the close parallel between the Book of Abraham and the creation account in Genesis 1, and this parallel holds true for the verses relating to the image of God: "So the Gods went down to organize man in their own image, in the image of the Gods to form they him, male and female to form they them" (Abraham 4:27). Alongside this parallel creation account, The Book of Mormon contains several more verses referring to this image of God within humankind. The brother of Jared (otherwise unnamed in the Book of Mormon) is visited by the Lord, and this visitation is chronicled in the Book of Ether. During their

[64] Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 9:170, http://jod.mrm.org/9/167.

interaction, the Lord says, "Seest thou that ye are created after mine own image? Yea, even all men were created in the beginning after mine own image" (Ether 3:15). Alma also sermonizes on the image of God. During his sermon to the people in the city of Zarahemla, Alma preached, "I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances?... I say unto you, can ye look up to God at that day with a pure heart and clean hands? I say unto you, can you look up, having the image of God engraven upon your countenances?" (Alma 5:14-19) LDS scriptures thus contain the same emphasis on the image of God that more mainstream Christians teach.

Again, Mormons are granted the ability to imitate God in a way foreign to more mainstream Protestant believers because of the similarity between God and mankind. Not only does God share the material makeup of mankind, and not only did He create the earth out of preexisting matter in order to allow premortal spirits to progress to exaltation, but He called those premortal spirits to cooperate, observe, and perhaps even assist in the creation of the world. Being called to act in His image is a call to act as He did during creation. Brigham Young preached this himself, saying, "It is our advantage to take good care of the blessings God bestows upon us; if we pursue the opposite course, we cut off the power and glory God designs we should inherit."[65] According to Young, this power and glory that we are designed to inherit is precisely the ability to act *exactly* as God acted during the earth's creation; that is to say, to create *ex materia* as we progress eternally. This is no hyperbole. In an 1853 sermon, Brigham Young utilized the metaphor of the gold rush to indicate to his followers what are the *true* riches God has in store for the faithful:

[65] Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 9:171, http://jod.mrm.org/9/167.

> When we can call gold and silver together from the eternity of matter in the immensity of space, and all the other precious metals, and command them to remain or to move at our pleasure; when we can say to the native element, "Be thou combined, and produce those commodities necessary for the use and sustenance of man, and to make this earth beautiful and glorious, and prepare it for the habitation of the sanctified;" then we shall be in possession of true riches.[66]

However modern, more liberal-minded Latter-day Saints interpret exactly what it means to progress in the plan of salvation, it is clear that for Brigham Young, eternal progression meant exact replication of God's creative act, including formation of commodities from preexisting materials, (or "native elements" in his terminology). Nowhere in mainstream Christian theology can mankind imagine imitating God's creative act in so exact a fashion. Mormon theology alone imparts this potential on mankind—the potential to progress so far that the actual creative act can be duplicated. Hugh Nibley hints at this same idea in his summation of Brigham Young's environmental teachings, while also linking our behavior toward creation with God's expectations for us as a result of the Fall. In 1972, he wrote, "We are being tested to demonstrate to the heavens, to ourselves, and to our fellows just how we would treat the things of a glorious and beautiful world if they were given to us as our very own."[67] Truly anticipating the day when perhaps an exalted Latter-day Saint would have the ability to create *ex materia* could give a devout Mormon ample reason to behave toward creation with a careful eye to the image of God within himself.

I have outlined three principles, supported by the doctrine of *creatio ex materia*, that inform Mormon theology in terms of ontology and potential: First, I demonstrated how *ex materia* creation allows for the existence of premortal spirits. Second, I demonstrated the material nature of God supported by *ex materia* foundations. Third and lastly, I demonstrated

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[66] Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 1:269, http://jod.mrm.org/1/264.
[67] Hugh W. Nibley, "Brigham Young on the Environment," in *To the Glory of God: Mormon Essays on Great Issues,* ed. Truman Madsen and Charles D. Tate, Jr. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1972), 12.

the eternal potential of man and his ability to imitate God closely due to shared material substances and a lack of a transcendence gap between God and man. These three pieces of theology, when understood together under the umbrella of materiality, could lead to the construction of a unique, robust, and important Mormon environmental ethic.

However, before I define what it is precisely that this ethic would look like or what behavior it might inspire, I will first examine what it is *not*. A handful of LDS eco-theologians and environmentally minded scholars have attempted to argue for an individualistic non-anthropocentric environmental ethic, using the importance of materiality in LDS thought and retrieving verses from the Book of Mormon on preexisting spirits to do so. In order to better define the environmental ethic that I believe Mormons can construct and enact, I will first demonstrate the problems with trying to force an individualistic non-anthropocentric ethic onto the essentially anthropocentric orientation of LDS theology.

Before beginning this discussion of anthropocentrism, a note on terms is needed. The straightforward definition of the term "anthropocentrism" as meaning human-centered needs some nuance and definitional division before it can be used meaningfully in ethical thought. Two of the primary senses of how this term can be used are necessary for this thesis: the metaphysical sense of the term, and the moral sense of the term.[68] Metaphysical anthropocentrism in its practical sense is the idea that human beings, in their fundamental nature, are set apart from the rest of creation. As J. Baird Callicott, environmental ethicist and scholar of Aldo Leopold, notes, "The biblical worldview is… metaphysically anthropocentric because Genesis declares that human beings were uniquely created in the image of God and thus assigned

[68] I draw these definitions from J. Baird Callicott, especially from his book *Thinking Like a Planet*. Callicott's deconstruction of the term is helpful and called for here especially because of his work on Aldo Leopold's land ethic, which will be discussed later in conversation with my proposed environmental ethic for Latter-day Saints.

an exalted and privileged place in the hierarchy of creation."[69] A metaphysical non-anthropocentrism would be one that does not see humanity's fundamental nature or makeup as any different from the rest of creation, such as in an atheistic evolution-centered worldview. The traditional Christian worldview, including the LDS worldview, is clearly metaphysically anthropocentric, so when discussing the term in regards to environmental ethics, I will most often use the moral dimension of the term.

This moral dimension is, of course, related to metaphysical anthropocentrism, but should be understood separately for the sake of clarity. This dimension of the definition relates to what beings have moral standing—that is, to what beings ethical regard and ethical behavior is due. Moral anthropocentrism thus argues that only human beings have ethical standing, while moral non-anthropocentrism grants ethical standing to other groups of beings as well, anything from only other sentient beings to plants or waters or land itself. One further clarification is important: the difference between individualistic and holistic under this anthropocentric term. Moral anthropocentrism can be either individualistic or holistic, meaning it can grant moral standing to *individual* entities of a species or group, to the *collective* of this species or group, or to both at once.[70] With those terms quickly defined, we can begin an examination of the writings from Mormons on anthropocentrism in environmental ethics.

We have seen that the *ex materia* creation accounts in LDS theology allow the material essences of the created world, material bodies, and the material God to be tied up together in substance and in destiny. This is not an overstatement. LDS environmental ethicist Jason Brown theorizes: "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

[69] J. Baird Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet: The Land Ethic and the Earth Ethic* (New York: Oxford, 2013), 9, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199324880.001.0001.
[70] Ibid.

than as fallen, flawed mortal substance becomes plausible."[71] An understanding of matter as sacred is certainly not misplaced within Mormon theology and metaphysics. Where I argue that this estimation of matter as sacred becomes wrong-headed is when it is used to argue for individualistic moral non-anthropocentrism, or for granting spiritual and moral status to the individual members of the rest of creation *on the same level* as the spiritual and moral status of mankind. There *is* room within the theology, metaphysics, and doctrine for such an argument to be taken seriously, but I think it is ultimately not helpful in establishing an environmental ethic that Latter-day Saints will find palatable.

Jason Brown notes that the creation account in the Book of Moses is unique in imbuing all living creatures with souls. The language in the holy text is difficult to argue against: "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*. For it was spiritual in the day I created it" (Moses 3:9). And again, in describing the creation of the beasts: "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 are also *living souls*" (Moses 3:19). The language allows for little ambiguity; the text uses "living soul" to refer to vegetation, beasts and fowls. It uses this identical language in describing the creation of man: "And man became a *living soul*" (Moses 3:7). This is also the phrase used in the creation account in Abraham.

It takes no great intellectual leap to posit that the spiritual status—or, to use the Deep ecology term, intrinsic value—of every part of creation is identical based on these texts. Indeed, no text in mainstream Christianity comes anywhere near making such an explicit claim that animals and even plants have living souls. Brown draws primarily from these texts when he

[71] Brown, "Whither Mormon Environmental Theology?" 82.

argues for his non-anthropocentric ethic, although he also draws from the statements of church leaders and theologians. He argues: "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."[72]

There is much here for an individualistic non-anthropocentric environmental ethicist to build upon. The idea that anything besides human beings possesses souls is practically alien to mainstream Christianity, and LDS theology certainly allows for such an argument. Brown uses these texts to argue for "democratizing humanity's place in the cosmos as subjects among subjects."[73] However, it is this individualistic non-anthropocentrism, this essential devaluing of mankind's moral uniqueness—as "subjects among subjects"—that I consider ultimately unproductive in practical environmental attitudes and ethics among Latter-day Saints.

If *individual* entities are granted with moral and ethical standing akin to a human being's moral standing, the essential metaphysical anthropocentrism of LDS thought becomes muddied. This is not to say that the language of "living souls" within non-human creation is not important or should be ignored. What is important, however, is that this idea of the *living soul* of an individual animal not be conflated with the idea of the *image of God* within an individual human being. The metaphysical anthropocentrism and the anthropomorphic God of LDS thought effectively elevate each human being above each individual beast in moral standing. Only human beings are able to partake in eternal progression. Although the idea of "subjects among subjects" is a beautiful one, it diminishes the foundational importance of the ability of only

[72] Ibid., 80.
[73] Ibid., 81.

human beings to become more and more like God. Our special relationship to God is defined by our metaphysics along with our moral standing, and allowing non-humans individually into the ethical base class does not do justice to the image of God within each individual human being. On this basis, I see an individualistic moral non-anthropocentrism as not fully compatible with LDS theology. However—and perhaps counter-intuitively—I believe that a *holistic* moral non-anthropocentrism can exist happily in LDS environmental theology, and this is precisely the sort of ethic I will attempt to construct later in this thesis, and I will introduce a different reading of the "living souls" verses from the Book of Moses in describing that ethic. That being said, a brief dialogue between process thought and LDS theology will be helpful in establishing the sense of community and relationality that can exist within Mormon thought and can lend itself to a holistic ethic.

VI. Process theology and LDS becoming

In addition to building a definition of a sense of community and relationality and demonstrating how this can be brought into dialogue with LDS thought, process thought can contribute to this thesis on two other fronts as well. Dialogue with process thought will prove illustrative in further developing the closeness of the Mormon conception of God, and will also prove helpful in further explicating the principle of eternal progression, providing a new vocabulary from which to work. There is much in process thought that coincides with Mormon understanding of the material nature of the world.[74] Process philosophy is far too complex a school of thought to undertake systematically here, but summarizing a few of its main positions on metaphysics, in order to compare them to Mormon theology, will be helpful.

[74] For an excellent discussion of the point of convergence and points of divergence between process thought and Mormon thought, see the chapter in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies* entitled "A Dialogue on Process Theology" by David Ray Griffin and James McLachlan.

Process philosophy, a relatively new school of philosophy, was founded and pioneered by Alfred North Whitehead in the 1920s, culminating with his book *Process and Reality*. Process theology is heavily relational, especially in how it views the essence of the material world. Within process thought, the fundamental units of reality are described as processes rather than things—that is to say, it is the experience of subjects that comprise reality, rather than a subject itself. Put as simply as possible, process theology does not speak of *being* but rather of *becoming*, as a single entity does not exist in and of itself, but exists every moment as a result of processes coming together to create events (either physical or conceptual). This is a fundamentally different worldview from much of the rest of philosophical thought, as it posits that everything that exists is less a *substance* than it is an "occasion of experience" (to use Whitehead's term), the result of the union of countless processes and temporally-dependent. The actual entity—one of Whitehead's terms for the fundamental units of reality—is "a process, and is not describable in terms of the morphology of a 'stuff.'"[75]

Obviously, process theology depends upon the idea of interactions and experiences being the fundamental level of reality. Process thoughts posits that nothing exists as a non-dynamic, static object only to be experienced by high-level organisms, but instead that each actual entity has occasions of experience of its own—or, to put it more lyrically, all that exists does so in a state of *becoming* rather than a state of *being*. This philosophical thought speaks to an interconnectedness between *all* actual entities, and thus is not based around the anthropocentric worldview that Lynn White so famously criticized as dominant in the Christian worldview. Process thought does not draw hard lines of distinction between human and nature, or mind and body, or matter and spirit.

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[75] Alfred North Whitehead, *A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality,* ed. Donald Sherburne (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 8.

Because of this lack of necessary distinction between spirit and matter, much of what process theology teaches can be brought into friendly dialogue with Mormon metaphysics and ontology. This is not to say by any means that the two are identical. In fact, process thought is so large a category that it can be explicitly atheistic, agnostic, or theistic. The metaphysics behind process thought, however, share much with LDS metaphysics based on *ex materia* creation. In recent decades, some LDS scholars and philosophers have noted these similarities and written on them.[76] Aside from the rather complementary metaphysics, what process theology speculates about the nature of God is extremely complementary to what LDS theology teaches about His nature. Process philosophy does not demand any normative belief about the existence of God. However, process theology, when it is theistic, is known for its relational definition of God. God, however defined, is something that exists temporally and relationally, not as something transcendent, immutable, and impassible. God is neither ontologically different from the rest of creation nor entirely detached from it.

This radically different definition of God in process thought shares an important characteristic with the Mormon concept of God: God's similarity to mankind. Process theology is well-known for its frequent assertion that God acts persuasively, not coercively. This is not a statement about how God *chooses* to work; rather, it is a statement about God's *ability* to work. The God of process thought is, put overly simply, not omnipotent, as He is constrained by His own metaphysics and thus is not *able* to act coercively. Because process thought insists upon internal relatedness and panexperientalism, God's metaphysics are not ultimately different than

[76] Most notably James McLachlan, Mormon studies scholar and theologian, co-chair of the AAR's Mormon Studies Group, and member of The Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology. He has edited several volumes on Mormon theology and philosophy, and has contributed sections of process theology into several, most notably his extensive section on process thought in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies.* Another name of note is BYU professor David Grandy, who has published several articles on the similarities between certain aspects of process thought and Mormon thought. The tradition of noting similarities between the two schools of thought is not extremely new either; Garland E. Tickemyer wrote an article for *Dialogue* in 1983 entitled "Joseph Smith and Process Theology."

the rest of creation. A necessary extension of this lack of an absolutely omnipotent God in process thought is the belief that God is not immutable. Process thought teaches that, although God created the world, He is able to be affected and changed by it. Of course, God has the ability to influence His creation, but in turn, His creation has the ability to influence Him as well. To use Whitehead's famous phrase, "God is the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands."[77] Within theistic process theology, God is certainly not a transcendent, unknowable, impassible being. As one LDS scholar described this God of process thought, "As the composite of all emergent entities, God is himself an entity. He is temporal and has subjective aims for which he struggles to achieve satisfaction… God is not *before* all creation but is *with* all reality. All occasions emerging in the physical world are absorbed into God and add to his reality."[78]

Mormon theology teaches this same mutable God. Nowhere in scripture is this idea of a passible creator so beautifully demonstrated than in the Book of Moses in *The Pearl of Great Price*, and nowhere in scripture are God's tears so directly addressed. The prophet Enoch is granted a vision from God in which he sees God weeping over the wicked, sinning remnant of His people. "And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of his people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains? And Enoch said unto the Lord: *How is it that thou canst weep,* seeing that thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?" (Moses 7:28-9, emphasis mine). Enoch proceeds to remind God of the magnitude and majesty of creation before again asking *how* this God can weep. Enoch's confusion here reflects the more traditional understanding of God, as one who is impassible and immutable by the sheer fact of being the

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[77] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 532.
[78] Garland E. Tickemyer, "Joseph Smith and Process Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1984): 77.

eternal, unchanging God. God's response to Enoch, however, reflects both His passible nature and His affirmation of mankind's absolute free will: "I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency… But behold, their sins shall be upon the heads of their fathers; Satan shall be their father, and misery shall be their doom… wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?" (Moses 7:32-37)

Here, God affirms mankind's agency, His own ability to suffer, and His persuasive—rather than coercive—nature.[79] The weeping God of Mormonism thus reveals two important aspects of LDS theology that is in line with theistic process thought: God's mutability and mankind's free agency. Along with this free agency comes the teachings on eternal progression; after all, Latter-day Saints are not only free in that they have consequential free will, but are also free in the sense that they are not ontologically dependent on God's continuing creation *ex nihilo*. LDS philosopher and theologian James McLachlan notes,

> There is a good deal of the Latter-day Saint doctrine of God that is amenable to interpretation via process theology, which includes a dipolar conception of God as both infinite and finite because God and creation are mutually interdependent, temporal, and related genetically and in the 'generic' ideal of perfection, which arises out of their mutual relationship… There is an element in humanity, 'intelligence,' that is self-existent and free in the strong sense of that term, meaning free in relation to God. In LDS scriptures, these self-existent beings participate in the creation of the world from the beginning. This sense of freedom and creativity in LDS doctrine is shared with process theology.[80]

So here is where process theology is helpful in understanding the establishment of a robust scripturally- and philosophically-based LDS environmental ethic. In the fullest sense of the word, each individual human being is in a process of *becoming*. That is to say, in the drama

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[79] For an excellent discussion of how this chapter reflects Mormon views on theodicy and on the nature of God, see Eugene England's "The Weeping God of Mormonism."

[80] David Ray Griffin and James McLachlan, "A Dialogue on Process Theology," in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, ed. Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 197.

of eternal progression, each human soul has the ability to become perfected, to become more and more like God. This process of becoming is not abstract or metaphorical in LDS theology; instead Mormonism teaches that mankind has the unique ability to progress toward perfection eternally—existing in a continual state of *becoming*, to appropriate the language of process theology. Indeed, the terminology of process thought is extremely useful when speaking to the LDS doctrine of eternal progression. Latter-day Saints come closer to exaltation with each step taken toward imitating God—a God who is mutable, material, and able to weep for His creation. Without the insurmountable gap of transcendence that *ex nihilo* creation demands, Latter-day Saints can take their process of *becoming* seriously. Brigham Young, one of the Mormon leaders most prone to speculation on eternal progression and exaltation, taught in 1857: "We have the principle within us, and so has every being on this earth, to increase and to continue to increase, to enlarge, and receive and treasure up truth, until we become perfect."[81]

Truly understanding more about God leads us to at least an ability to better understand ourselves, even if this ability is not put into practice well. Bringing Mormon theology on this matter into dialogue with process theology further brings to light this sense of the nearness of the experience of God, and highlights the tendency of any philosophy that leans away from the *ex nihilo* framework to lean toward a respect for the experience of nature, however defined.

VII. Continuous cooperative creation

This brief dialogue with process thought neatly brings us back to Catherine Keller and Whitney Bauman. Both of these philosophic thinkers who explicitly reject *creatio ex nihilo* tend toward process philosophy in their descriptions of the world and of beginnings, as well as in their constructions of theologies. Bauman ends his work by proposing his own twist on *creatio*

[81] Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 5:54, http://jod.mrm.org/5/52.

continua. After systematically demonstrating the dualities that an insistence on *ex nihilo* creation necessarily constructs, Bauman theorizes a relationship with the earth that is not dependent on these dualities. Bauman argues that *ex nihilic* creation has torn apart God and the world; mind and body; self and other; history and nature; epistemology and ontology; and culture and nature. In a worldview not constrained by the construction of these dualities, Bauman argues that we can see ourselves as intimately connected with nature, as part of "the continuous process of planetary becoming,"[82] and as existing with our future tied together with the future of the planet as a whole, rather than holding tight to a vision of the future that either ignores ecology or teaches that the physical earth is irrelevant to salvation. Bauman's proposal, he readily admits, is agnostic—it does not depend upon the existence of God either theoretically or practically to function. He writes, "If ultimate origins serve (as I argue) to reify life into narrative forms and thereby cut them off from the living, and open a continuous process of creation, then the only theology that will be viable is one that leaves both ultimate origins and ultimate end open: *viz.,* a viable agnostic theology."[83]

Catherine Keller's ultimate proposal is similar in many ways to Bauman's. Much of Keller's work is less about constructing a eco-theology as it is about rejecting destructive modes of thinking and demonstrating the hermeneutical leaps that have led to these modes of thinking in the first place. Keller rejects the *ex nihilo* doctrine partly because she rejects the insistence on defining beginnings or origins. Her proposal is to seriously entertain the idea of *creatio ex profundis*, or creation out of the deep of Genesis 1:2, not because she believes that it is a reading demanded by scripture, but because such a reading allows for a nuanced beginning without a beginning that respects the unknown (that is, the Deep) without objectifying it, fearing it, or

[82] Bauman, *Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics,* 185.
[83] Ibid., 3.

doing violence to it. From here, Keller proposes that *creatio ex profundis* leads to a non-anthropocentric idea of creation that is *becoming* rather than static, communal rather than individualistic, and that allows for an understanding of time that it not necessarily linear.[84]

These constructive theologians share an inclination toward the liberal rather than the conservative, as perhaps most constructive theologians do. Reading their works without a background understanding of *creatio ex materia* in LDS doctrine would probably not lead the average reader to make any links at all between these thinkers and LDS theology. However, once these thinkers, process theology, and *ex materia* creation in LDS thought are all brought into dialogue, something emerges: Mormon theology can, in fact, demand a very similar environmental ethic to the one these thinkers propose, an ethic of cooperation with a community, focused on continuation and becoming.

Thus, all of this leads me to the environmental ethic that Mormon theology and ontology, understood holistically and in conversation with process thinkers, can call for. We have seen that, as understood by Latter-day Saints, the *ex materia* creator is not defined by transcendence, and creation is not ontologically dependent upon Him for its very existence at every moment. Instead, the God of Mormonism is embodied, material, and exists alongside matter, which He can neither create nor destroy, only organize. His organization of matter into this world as a proving ground for His spirit children and as the second estate necessary to the plan of salvation makes this world very important indeed. Likewise, we humans on this earth are of paramount importance as well, as our behavior here necessarily correlates to our eternal progression, and our creator has a desire to see us become more like Him.

In LDS thought, God's power over matter is not absolute, in that He can neither create nor destroy it in its elemental form. This unique conception of God proves, in a way,

[84] Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 230.

empowering for human beings. Our limited abilities over matter—including, of course, our inability to ultimately create it—are not dwarfed by the unfathomable power of an *ex nihilic* God. Instead, we share a sense of methodology and strategies with our creator to a degree, granting us the notion that we share influence over creation with the creator in a very real sense. Any sense that we are ultimately powerless to affect creation—extending as far as the well being of the environment and of the earth itself—falls flat in Mormon theology. Instead, we are imbued with what is frankly an incredible amount of influence and importance in comparison with our creator God. We see this manifested in the creation account of the book of Abraham, where premortal spirits participate in a council alongside God before the creation of the earth. Premortal spirits are co-creators in a literal sense there, as they assist in planning the formation of the earth, observe it actively, and proclaim it good alongside God Himself.

Being called to imitate God in His creative act from preexisting matter thus becomes, in a somewhat peculiar sense, almost mundane. We can take of these materials around us and organize them into more and more useful and more and more beautiful things; in fact, human beings have been doing this since time immemorial. Where a devout Mormon's task is different from any other human being is in recognizing that this simple act is reflective of God's creative act, and thus carries with it profound implications for eternity. While more mainstream environmentally conscious Christians must interpret the image of God within themselves more metaphorically, Mormons have an opportunity for a much closer imitation because of the ontological similarity between God and us.

Wanton destruction, callous disregard, and even negligent waste of the environment or its resources while in the second estate become a perverse reflection of the *ex materia* creator's use of resources during the earth's creation. Of course, calling for avoiding destructive acts toward

the natural world is not the foundation for an environmental ethic; it is little more than common sense. Mormons should not be called to merely avoid dumping toxic waste into the environment or to avoid setting an ecosystem ablaze. Instead, Mormon theology calls for an ethic of treating creation *as if it were our own*, as if we had a metaphorical hand in directly creating it ourselves. We are reminded of George Handley's observation: "We have a unique opportunity to always remember our intimate relationship with creation."[85] This certainly precludes behaving with violence or disregard toward nature, but it also inspires and requires behaving with a careful eye toward the image of the creator within ourselves.

I've chosen to call this Mormon environmental ethic "continuous cooperative creation."[86] This term is illustrative because it acknowledges the key aspects of Mormon theology and cosmology outlined in this paper, and also dictates a standard of behavior in moving forward. The "cooperative" term acknowledges the *ex materia* foundations of the earth; there is no sense of transcendence or raw omnipotence, and instead a sense of collaboration with that which already exists. Additionally, this "cooperative" term acknowledges the premortal spirits in existence alongside God before creation and the collaborative role they played in creation itself. Lastly, this "cooperative" term acknowledges the community in which we exist, and points toward a holistic understanding of creation and ultimately grants moral standing to the ecological community as a whole, but interestingly not to any individual members of the community, besides human beings. The "continuous" term is reflective of process thought toward the environment, in the sense that the material world is seen as countless entities existing in continuous relational processes. Putting LDS theology and process theology into dialogue illuminates the importance of *becoming* within LDS theology, particularly in eternal progression.

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[85] Handley, "The Environmental Ethics of Mormon Belief," 195.
[86] This is not a presumptive and pretentious attempt to coin a term of my own; it is simply useful as shorthand.

In the sense that humans are *becoming*, alongside creation itself, moving toward greater degrees of glory, LDS theology certainly acknowledges a "continuous" understanding of creation. Ending the phrase with "creation" acknowledges that human beings are continually in some process of creating *some*thing, and that moving forward always with this role of creators in mind should give us pause to ensure we are behaving within the standards of cooperation with our process of becoming, and in cooperation with the community that is becoming alongside us. Moving this ethic out of the lyrical and into the terms of environmental ethics, what "continuous cooperative creation" calls for is a holistic moral non-anthropocentrism that imparts moral duties upon individual human beings as well as the human community.

Mormons can make a real contribution to the environmental movement under this standard of this continuous cooperative creation. This ethic would hold a Latter-day Saint to a holistic environmental standard. That is to say, while the intrinsic rights and moral standing of an individual member of a species may exert no real force over a Mormon environmentalist's thinking, the welfare of the ecosystem as a whole *must* matter—this ecosystem which God has organized from pre-existing matter, and toward which we must behave as He did if we wish to progress as He has. On the whole, this environmental ethic is demanding but achievable, and it respects LDS theology. It does not carry with it any strong commitment to any individualistic rights of non-human beings, nor does it demand human population control. Instead, this continuous cooperative creation would demand that we take actions toward creation rather than destruction. This is not nearly as abstract as it sounds.

In order to better illuminate what I mean by this ethic of continuous cooperative creation, Aldo Leopold's thought will be useful. In 1949, Leopold formulated his so-called "land ethic" in *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*. It has been studied, critiqued, and

expanded upon by eco-theologians, environmental ethicists, and conservationists alike since its publication. At its core, it argues that human beings are part of the community of life, including not only other human beings and animals, but also "soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land."[87] He notes repeatedly that a system that preserves the environment only out of economic self-interest is unsustainable, and that an ethic that calls for an individual moral obligation is necessary and vital. Leopold grants intrinsic value to the biotic community as a whole and values its continued sustainable functioning as essential to life, including human life. The most familiar injunction of Leopold's land ethic speaks directly to the importance of community: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."[88] Leopold's land ethic does not necessarily grant any moral standing to individual members of the biotic community. One implication of this lack of individual moral standing is that if a certain predator were greatly threatening the sustainability of an entire biotic community, that predator's population could be thinned out in order to ensure the functioning of the community without any violation of the holistic ethic. This is a point of contention for many readers of Leopold's land ethic, but it is a strength when viewed through the lens of LDS theology.

The standard of continuous cooperative creation calls for a holistic moral non-anthropocentrism, as Leopold does, rather than an individualistic moral non-anthropocentrism. We must then return to those verses in the Book of Moses that LDS environmental writers have used as evidence for individualistic non-anthropocentrism. In the creation account in Abraham, we see God create trees, beasts of the fields, and fowls of the air, and call them "living souls," the same language he uses to refer to Adam. However, noting the *number* of things that God

[87] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 239.
[88] Ibid., 262.

creates and then proclaims living souls is extremely important here. God creates the physical body for Adam—not yet named in the verse but nonetheless the first *and only* man—and declares him a living soul (Moses 3:7). The next time the language of "living soul" is used, it is in reference to the creation of trees—trees in the *plural* rather than in the singular. The verse reads, "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" (Moses 3:9). The distinction here is significant in terms of what is being granted moral status; it is not each tree that God proclaims a living soul, but rather "every tree" apparently *sharing* "a living soul." That is to say, in a reading informed by metaphysical anthropocentrism and the understanding that God has created the earth as a proving ground for human beings in the plan of salvation, it becomes conceivable that every tree—the community of trees—shares a single living soul.

In granting living souls to the beasts and the fowls, the same principle is applied. The verse reads, "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" (Moses 3:19). Again, if it is the community of beasts and the community of fowls that are granted a living soul—and thus moral standing—then this text calls for a holistic ethic rather than an individualistic one. This holistic ethic, I argue, is what is compatible with the rest of LDS cosmology and theology, with the understanding of shared material origins and premortal spirits being granted with the image of God. For this reason, Leopold's land ethic—in arguing for the paramount importance of the biotic community, or the land, writ large—can speak directly to Mormon environmental values. God's act of creating communities from pre-existing matter, and then noting that these communities have value is an

important part of His creative act. God's closeness and similarity allow His embodied premortal spirits—that is to say, human beings—to approximate His actions closely, and because His actions were characterized by valuing community, Latter-day Saints should be called to value these communities as well.

A reading of the *ex materia* creation accounts in Abraham, and especially of the council of spirits that takes place before the creation begins, lends importance to the idea of the *community* of premortal spirits, acting cooperatively. As a material premortal spirit is embodied into a less-refined material body on earth, it is clear within Mormon theology that everything that surrounds him or her is of the same basic substance of himself or herself. The idea of an *ex materia* creation removes the transcendence gap between God and man and man and nature, making the sense of community all the more real to those with an understanding of this cosmology.

One strong criticism of Leopold's land ethic is that it is extremely difficult to practically define the biotic community, and attaching a moral imperative for behavior toward something intangible and indefinable may be a futile task. Mormon cosmology, I would argue, can answer this objection very effectively, perhaps more effectively than Leopold himself, as Leopold operated out of a more traditional view of creation. An understanding of creation guided by *ex nihilic* thinking makes a concept of a biotic community more difficult to fathom, as *ex nihilic* thinking leads to dualism—separation of mind and body, matter and spirit, man and God. Without this background of dualism guiding thinking, and instead buoyed by a cosmological understanding of the nearness of God and the essential *sameness* of creation in its material essence, biotic community becomes less a nebulous concept and more a comprehensible reality. True, the term "community" itself may remain rather nebulous even within Mormon *ex materia*-

guided thinking, but it is much less nebulous than under *ex nihilic* thinking. Under thinking guided by an *ex materia* understanding of creation, the sense of community is much more concrete because of the lack of a transcendence gap between man and his physical body and thus man and his physical environment. Just as a Latter-day Saint feels more compelled to care for his body because of its essential sameness as his spirit and its material importance to eternal progression, so should a Latter-day Saint feel toward the environment.

I would propose that this continuous cooperative creation need not apply and should not apply only to the so-called natural world. In fact, its practicality could best be seen in areas like sustainable development, agriculture, and city or building design. Human beings are actively creating when we plan cities, construct power plants, and dam rivers, to name just a few of the human behaviors that unmistakably affect the environment. This is when we are most clearly creating, and thus when we should be most clearly conscious of our imitation of God. In this context, the act of expanding a city or planning an increase in power consumption is not *by definition* an attack on the environment. In creating, we imitate God. However, creation is not a unilateral act, neither for God nor for human beings. The argument for thinking about the community and planning events of creation that benefit the community as a whole—and this includes human beings as well as the rest of the biotic community—finds strong roots in Mormon theology. We should create—and this term can even include expanding the human environmental footprint, in ways that are mindful of the community as a whole and in ways that demonstrate an inclination toward our process of *becoming*—not at the expense of the natural environment and its inhabitants, but in cooperation with it.

The idea of being made in the image of God is profound and weighty, extremely so for believing Latter-day Saints. The idea that we should care for creation because it is made by God

and because God declared it "good" is a common idea in religiously-based environmental ethics. For Latter-day Saints, however, the call to act in the image of God extends far beyond the nebulous idea of treating creation well. Rather, with the understanding that God can be closely imitated thanks to ontological similarities between God and man, LDS environmental ethics can look toward the details of the creation account itself, noting that *how* God made creation is clear: with abundance, with enough to sustain Adam and Eve both physically and spiritually. God did not create the earth in a state of strife, resource-depletion, tainted by pollution and ozone holes, or otherwise compromised in sustainability or beauty, at least not in any account of creation that the LDS Church holds sacred. The ethic of continuous cooperative creation would call a Latter-day Saint to follow this standard in imitating God: to frame his actions in terms of sustainability for the community of material out of which he is made, which is to say the ecosystem as a whole.

Although there is no individualistic moral non-anthropocentrism within this proposed ethic, there is all the more individualistic moral anthropocentrism. That is to say, because we are granted the image of God and the ability to partake in eternal progression, our moral decisions matter profoundly. Behaving with thoughtful care toward individual members of creation is required, of course, if we wish to make progress eternally. The fact that individual parts of creation do not have moral standing is not license to abuse, pollute, waste, or behave with violence towards them. No reasonable person of faith, assuming she has an understanding of bearing the image of her creator and thus approximating the creator's actions toward creation, would destroy creation simply because it lacks an individualistic moral standing, especially not when moving forward in eternal progression is at stake.

If Latter-day Saints are willing and able to make creative decisions—that is to say, decisions about creating—with the ecosystem in mind, founded *first* on the idea that the biotic

community deserves *moral standing* because God called these communities "living souls," and *second* on the idea that every individual thing that exists is of some essential *sameness* to man and God and thus deserves kindness and care, then under what standard are these creative decisions to be made? Referring again to our dialogue with process theology will prove instructive here. We have seen that LDS metaphysical thought shares much in common with process thought in terms of a sense of community, an understanding of interconnection. For that reason, an example of what one preeminent process theologian defines as a sound environmental ethic can bring the LDS environmental ethic into focus. In 1980, John Cobb, process philosopher, theologian, author of several early influential books on environmental ethics, and co-founder of the Center for Process Studies, proposed a shift in the burden of proof in regards to the environment:

> We see a world of interrelated things such that alteration of any one affects all. Important practical consequences follow from this vision. The currently dominant worldview places the burden of proof on those who would stop alterations in the environment. They must show that such 'development' has serious negative consequences in the readily foreseeable future. A society that adopted the view of all things as interconnected would place the burden of proof on those who would introduce changes. They must show both that their projects are really needed and that the risks run in these alterations are relatively minor, even when the indefinite future is considered. The results of such a shift in the burden of proof would be enormous.[89]

His sentiment deserves echoing here: the results of such a shift *would* be enormous. His use of the term "burden of proof" is revealing, as it seems to indicate that he recognizes just how burdensome most people would find this environmental ethic. However, I argue that his proposal is strikingly similar to the continuous cooperative creation ethic that I am outlining, and that it is possible for Latter-day Saints to enact this standard. Cobb's proposal indicates his holistic view of the importance of the health of environment and ecosystem, however difficult to

[89] John Cobb, "Process Theology and Environmental Issues," *The Journal of Religion* 60, no. 4 (Oct 1980): 443.

define these concepts sometimes are. My continuous cooperative creation ethic echoes this holistic view, not only in granting moral standing to the ecological community, but also noting that the essential sameness of the entire community of creation can foster a sense of cooperation. Importantly, it is my contention that Latter-day Saints, with a clear understanding of *ex materia* creation and the image of God, could meet even the most burdensome environmental ethic. If the image of God is taken seriously and the LDS community takes seriously its status as co-creators engaging in small acts of creation on a near-constant basis, no ethic is too burdensome. Being called to imitate God, not only for its own sake but also for the sake of becoming better and for the sake of eternal progression is a call that the devout could feel honor in answering, no matter how burdensome. When framed appropriately, the ethic that an understanding of the *ex materia* creation can call for can be simultaneously demanding, burdensome, and yet a source of great spiritual significance. As Brigham Young preached, "Not one particle of all that comprises this vast creation of God is our own. Everything we have has been bestowed upon us for our action, to see what we would do with it—whether we would use it for eternal life and exaltation, or for eternal death and degradation."[90] There is much at stake. If Latter-day Saints believe that they are enacting creation, engaging in cooperative creation with their communities both human and ecological on a daily basis and believe that calls for an approximation of the image of God, much could change.

A way that many people of faith recognize their ability to participate in some mysterious divine process of creation is through reproduction. Mormons are well known for their propensity toward large families, so reproduction could prove a fertile starting ground for encouraging members of the Church to recognize their own cooperative creative capacities. Although family size has been decreasing among most portions of the American LDS population in recent

[90] Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 8:67, http://jod.mrm.org/8/64.

decades, family size among the LDS population is still notably higher than that of Protestants, and American LDS families average one child more per family than American Catholics.[91] Certainly a regular point of discussion around environmental ethics and sustainability has been on population and birth rates. However, my proposed ethic of continuous cooperative creation does not seek to limit family size substantially, nor to propose any normative stance on the ethics of large families. Rather, in some ways, the continuous cooperative creation ethic can be used to support the theology and culture behind the impetus toward larger families. One fundamental way in which humans can participate in continuous cooperative creation is through reproduction, as Mormon beliefs about the foundational importance of the family speak to the imitation, through the family, of the individual's relationship with God, both in premortal existence and for eternal progression. Any environmental ethic that seeks to severely limit reproduction rates will certainly be viewed with suspicion—and likely rejected out of hand—by the majority of active Latter-day Saints. This is another strength of my proposed ethic of continuous cooperative creation, as it does not require Mormons to abandon their stance on the importance of the family and their inclination toward higher-than-average rates of reproduction.

The ethic of continuous cooperative creation acknowledges that, as married Mormons bear children, they participate in creation quite literally. David A. Bednar, member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, expressed this sentiment towards co-creation quite directly in an address entitled "Ye Are the Temple of God," and published in *Ensign* in September 2001. He said, "The most sacred of all our divine powers is to become a co-creator with Heavenly Father in providing physical bodies with His spirit sons and daughters."[92] This co-creation (or

[91] Tim B. Heaton, "Vital Statistics," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: MacMillan, 1992), http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Vital_Statistics.
[92] David A. Bednar, "Ye are the Temple of God," *Ensign,* September 2001, https://www.lds.org/ensign/2001/09/ye-are-the-temple-of-god?lang=eng.

cooperative creation, as I prefer to call it) is thus explicit and certainly found within contemporary Mormon theological dialogue. Reproduction is such a consequential and sacred aspect of both LDS theology and culture, and reproduction can surely be seen as a literal creation of another human being. In this creation, modeled after God's creation of the material bodies of the first humans, Mormons can see themselves as emulating God. Indeed, as a new human life is brought into the world, a mindful Mormon, aware of her obligation to imitate God, can be reminded of her obligation to a sustainable environment in connection with her creation of a new human life. That is to say, each birth could spark conversation and concerted effort on care for the environment, as each birth is an occasion of reminder of our immense creative power and thus our obligation to imitate God in accordance to His image within us.

Thus, as the sense of cooperative creation takes hold, framed in terms of reproduction, the principle could then be extended to the natural world as well without cognitive dissonance. Indeed, within LDS thought, I would argue that the relevant moral community includes future generations necessarily, thus making the environmental ethic that their theology calls for all the more robust. Mormons can avoid the debates with environmental ethics about how to define the relevant moral community of future generations, as they cooperatively create this moral community with an eye toward sustainability and respect for the biotic community. Mormons continuously create as they reproduce and thereby provide additional physical bodies for additional premortal spirits, and cooperatively create as they acknowledge the biotic community around them, recognizing that they are of the same substance of everything surrounding them, both spiritually and physically. Both of these characteristics of creating—cooperation and continuity—hearken back to the beginning, when a very material, embodied God created from preexisting matter with the collaboration of premortal spirits around Him. If Mormons are called

to act with the image of God in mind, the ethic of continuous cooperative creation must lead them to act in ways that are environmentally conscious and sustainable with the biotic community in mind.

This is not to say that all faithful Mormons behave this way toward the environment or even think along these terms. Nor is it to say that those Mormons who do not enact this ethic—that is, who do not emphasize the *ex materia* cosmology, the material nature of all that exists, and the obligation to act according to the image of God—are somehow not practicing their faith authentically, with conviction, or honestly. It is not my goal to broadly criticize any individual's enacting of theology and ethics. Rather, I simply propose an environmental ethic that is entirely compatible with unique aspects of LDS theology like premortal existence and *ex materia* creation. Continuous cooperative creation takes these doctrines seriously, both in terms of cosmology and practical theology, and leads inexorably to a valuing of the natural world if we are truly called to act according to God's image within us. A serious and thoughtful reading of LDS doctrine and teachings is thus not at all incompatible with the environmental movement, and the tension that exists between the two is less a function of theology and much more a function of political affiliations.

This is, of course, far from a perfect environmental ethic. None are, and none are precisely adapted to fit every ethically fraught situation or speak to every group of people. Perhaps a valid criticism of this "continuous cooperative creation" I have proposed is that it is too broad and cosmologically based to be of particular practical use. In its defense, I would argue that beginning with broad cosmological views is not necessarily misplaced in the field of environmental ethics. Beginning with Lynn White, we have seen that problematic views regarding religion broadly can lead to problematic attitudes toward domination of the

environment. "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not," he wrote so famously. "We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny."[93] The ethic I am proposing is not perfect. It is, however, an attempt to encourage people of faith to "rethink and refeel," based on sacred teachings about creation and mankind that are both profound and unique.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is so much about LDS theology that can speak to the human relationship with the natural world and that can take steps toward a reparative relationship with the earth. Of primary importance to LDS attitudes toward the environment is the doctrine of *ex materia* creation. It stands in sharp contrast to the traditional, more mainstream Christian notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, which necessitates a God defined by power and transcendence. The God to whom Latter-day Saints owe their allegiance and worship has much more in common with His creation. Much of the uniqueness and beauty of LDS thought comes as a result of this notion of a essential similarity between God and man, and the ability of mankind to progress toward God eternally. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, a married LDS couple who have recently coauthored a book, note the astounding love and relationality that defines how Latter-day Saints can view their relationship with God. "If we are co-eternal with God, then it is not God's creation of the human out of nothing that defines our essential relationship to him," they write. "It is His freely made choice to inaugurate and sustain loving relationships, and our choice to reciprocate, that are at the core of our relationship to the Divine."[94] Their book, entitled *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life*, speaks lyrically and beautifully of the notion of the creator,

[93] White, "Historical Roots," 1207.
[94] Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012), 102.

premortal existence, and human potential within LDS thought. The emphasis on coeternal cooperation, at the core of *creatio ex materia* and at the core of human understanding of our own nature and God's nature, speaks to so many aspects of Mormon life. Establishing an environmental ethic that takes the material nature of God and man seriously, and that takes seriously the call to behave in accordance of the image of God within us, can promote to a robust environmental concern that has been lacking thus far in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Emphasizing the unique character of Mormon theology, supported by the foundation of *ex materia* creation, could surely breathe fresh life into the dialogue surrounding Christian environmental ethics.

In an interesting parallel to what Lynn White would write 130 years later, the prophet Joseph Smith preached during the King Follett sermon, "It is necessary for us to have an understanding of God Himself in the beginning. If we start right, it is easy to go right all the time; but if we start wrong we may go wrong, and it will be a hard matter to get right."[95] It is too late to claim that we have started "right" in terms of care for the natural environment, but perhaps LDS theology can assist our move in that direction. Starting from a logic of *ex materia* creation, rather than the traditional logic of *ex nihilo*, could prove to be a right start in restructuring our behavior toward the environment and understanding our place within it.

[95] Joseph Smith Jr., "The King Follett Sermon," *Ensign*, April 1971, https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/04/the-king-follett-sermon?lang=eng.

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