Flexibility in the Ecology of Ideas: Revelatory Religion and the Environment

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Ideas, like everything in the universe, do not exist in isolation. Ideas bear traces of the past, are in a state of continual evolution in the present, and are intertwined in dialectical relationships with other ideas and the world in which they are immanent. Even ideas considered revelatory, having issued from a source beyond the din of the mundane, are tangled in relationships between the revelator, the receiver, the world, and the medium (linguistic or otherwise) by which messages are transmitted. Ideas are part of an interrelatedness that is a fundamental aspect of being—described in the Western tradition as Aristotle's "efficient" cause, the cause which is "the primary source of . . . change."[1] This concept suggests that all beings (living and non-living alike) are shot through with the effects of contact with others—a notion also present in the Buddhist principle of emptiness, which maintains that "any belief in an objective reality grounded in the assumption of intrinsic, independent existence is untenable."[2]

Anthropologist and social theorist Gregory Bateson (1904–80) describes an "ecology of ideas" in which ideas are interconnected and interact with one another in complex ways across space and time.[3] He refers to ideas as existing in constellations that operate somewhat independently yet are also bound together in complex networks of relationships. In these constellations of ideas, creation mythologies are central nodes in the unconscious bedrock of thought, being, and action.[4] 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."[5] 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. Whether the world and its human and non-human inhabitants are seen to be the fruit of theogenic creation *ex nihilo*, an organization of preexisting elements by an intelligent agent, an emergence through a center (*omphalos* or navel), the result of a random series of mutations, or some combination thereof, creation stories are foundational to the way in which cultures view themselves in relationship to the world at large.

Latter-day Saints believe in the basic creation account in Genesis, yet that account has inspired both the destruction of and contempt for the world as well as affection for it and the desire to preserve it. The same creation text was wielded by the crusaders, the conquistadors, the Puritans, Saint Francis of Assisi, and Martin Luther King. Yet rather than simply jettisoning Christianity and its texts as insufficient or ambiguous to the point of uselessness, many Latter-day Saint thinkers may feel a kinship with thinkers such as essayist Wendell Berry who states: "There are an enormous number of people—and I am one of them—whose native religion, for better or worse, is Christianity. We are born to it; we began to learn about it before we became conscious; it is, whatever we think of it, an intimate belonging of our being; it informs our consciousness, our language and our dreams. We can turn away from it or against it, but that will only bind us tightly to a reduced version of it."[6]

Like Berry, most Latter-day Saints have been reared in the Western Judeo-Christian tradition, a tradition with a troubling cultural and environmental legacy. Yet unlike those who frame the Judeo-Christian/Western legacy in exclusively negative terms and speak of rejecting religion altogether, I, like Berry, believe that doing so often results in becoming bound to a reduced and often caricatured version of it.[7] Most environmentally minded LDS thinkers would agree with Berry's affirmation that "our native religion should survive and renew itself so that it may become as largely and truly instructive as we need it to be."[8] In this respect, Mormonism provides a framework with the requisite epistemological flexibility.

Bateson notes that, on both an individual and a societal level, ecologies of ideas do not bestow equal importance on all ideas. While some new ideas are entertained, evaluated, employed, or rejected, others become more deeply engrained: "Ideas which survive repeated use are actually handled in a special way which is different from the way in which the mind handles new ideas."[9] These engrained "trusted ideas" tend to settle to a level below the scrutiny of conscious inspection and solidify into the bedrock of the unconscious. Trusted ideas, Bateson continues, "become nuclear or nodal within the constellations of other ideas, because the survival of these other ideas depends on how they fit with the hard-programmed ideas."[10] "Hard-programmed ideas" thereby become the unconscious foundation upon which the framework of subsequent thoughts and attitudes are built.

While the passing of ideas from the realm of critical inspection into the unconscious is not negative per se—and is, in fact, required for mental and social economy—Bateson notes that, simply because an idea has survived long enough to become solidified in the unconscious, does not prove "that the idea is either true or pragmatically useful over a long time," or that patterns of thought that may have formerly been benign may not later "become pathogenic."[11] The need therefore arises to maintain epistemological flexibility, allowing the evaluation of new ideas and bringing even hard-programmed ideas into the light of critical inspection. In such a flexible framework, unconscious ideas may be retained, modified, or rejected, based on a continually renegotiated dialogue between new information, current needs, and the legacy of the past. The emphasis is on process rather than teleology. This flexibility, Bateson maintains, is crucial to the continued health of systems while, conversely, "the using up of that flexibility is death."[12] Systems of thought that influence how individuals or societies perceive themselves in the context of the world must therefore be continually evaluated and modified based on new information and evolving needs and circumstances. Bateson's model of flexibility suggests that continual modifications must be made to preserve overall systemic integrity.[13]

Joseph Smith conceived of an epistemology that was simultaneously flexible in adapting to changing knowledge and circumstances and open to various sources of truth. Smith spoke in

broadening terms when he asserted: "One of the fundamental principles of 'Mormonism' is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may"[14] and, on another occasion, "Truth is Mormonism."[15] He often blurred the distinction between what has come to be considered "sacred" and "secular" knowledge. In his conception of Mormonism, truth must be ascertained both from divine revelation *and* through the God-given faculties of perception and discernment. When petitioning the Lord for instruction, Oliver Cowdery was famously told to "study [the matter] out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right" (D&C 9:8).

In this model, revelation is predicated on the exercise of perceptual and deliberative abilities, and apprehension of truth is a synthesis of the exercise of cognition as well as receptivity to external revelation. The Doctrine and Covenants affirms that "the glory of God is intelligence" (93:36), encourages Saints to acquire knowledge "of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass" (88:79), and promises "Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come" (130:18–19).

Similarly, Brigham Young did not limit valorized knowledge to what is contained in scripture, or even revelation, but taught that "fields and mountains, trees and flowers, and all that fly, swim or move upon the ground are lessons for study in the great school our heavenly Father has instituted for the benefit of his children," and encouraged Saints to "explore this great field of information that is open before us in . . . the great laboratory of nature."[16]

Joseph Smith's flexible epistemology resisted formalization into rigid creeds, and he lamented the yoke of inflexible tradition that constrained his followers from accepting new ideas. Rather than dogmatic tradition, Smith emphasized revelation and spoke of it in flexible terms, affirming its adaptability to changing circumstances. Speaking to a conference of Church elders in the spring of 1834, Oliver Cowdery recorded Smith's proclamation: "We are differently situated from any other people that ever ex-

isted upon this earth; consequently those former revelations cannot be situated to our conditions."[17] In a personal letter to Nancy Rigdon in 1842, Smith states: "God said, 'Thou shall not kill'; at another time He said, 'Thou shalt utterly destroy.' This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed."[18] Richard Lyman Bushman notes that Smith resisted the rigidity that would have been implicit in systematizing Mormon belief into a formal creed, a practice prevalent throughout Christian history. Such creeds "circumscribed truth, when he [Smith] wanted expansion. . . . Revelation overturned old ideas and was forever evolving." Even the thirteen Articles of Faith, Bushman notes, "were never meant to encompass all Church doctrine or even distill its essence."[19]

However, Smith fought an uphill battle against the tendency of his followers to doggedly cling to fixed traditions rather than flexibly accommodating the flow of new truths and principles: "I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God; but we frequently see some of them, after suffering all they have for the work of God, will fly to pieces like glass as soon as anything comes that is contrary to their traditions," he lamented in a discourse given in Nauvoo in January of 1844.[20] Although he maintained enough doctrinal structure to prevent the Church from falling into chaos or theological and cultural relativism, Smith emphasized that flexibility was necessary in the Mormon system of thought to maintain its vitality.

As Bateson warned, rigidity in constellations of thought can become "pathogenic," "disastrous," and ultimately "lethal."[21] Key moments in the history of Western religious thought illustrate the perils of rigidity in how the religiously minded perceive the world. A well-known example is that, for centuries, the Ptolemaic or geocentric sense of the universe was almost universally accepted as the definitive cosmic model. Inherited from Aristotle, this model described the earth as the center around which the moon, the sun, planets, and the stars rotated in concentric spheres. Epistemologically, this worldview was based on fairly sound evidence of the time—passed down as the wisdom of the ancients, confirmed by a certain reading of biblical passages: "The world also

shall be stable, that it not be moved" (1 Chr. 16:30). This worldview also seemed to be confirmed phenomenologically and was supported by a long-held view of the universe as an ordered system (Greek *kosmos*, or "good order"). The Ptolemaic sense of the universe therefore settled into the unconscious of the thinkers of the time. Assumed to be an accurate picture of the world, it therefore needed no further revision or critical examination. As this geocentric worldview became engrained as mental habit—a central node in the constellation of contemporary religious ideas—it became intertwined with theology, as vividly depicted by Dante's *Divine Comedy*. As the Catholic Church inflexibly wedded itself to a particular (and in this case largely extra-scriptural) sense of the world, threats to the validity of the Ptolemaic universe were perceived as threats to the Church's validity. Thus, Galileo was tried for heresy when he dared to assert "the false doctrine taught by some that the sun is the center of the world and motionless and the earth moves even with diurnal motion."[22] While not fatal to the Church, this inflexibility proved damaging to its credibility when dogmatically held views were later demonstrated to be incorrect.

Maintaining Joseph Smith's flexible epistemological framework may help modern Latter-day Saints avoid these traps of the past, or what Bateson refers to as "the grooves of fatal destiny."[23] One example is evolution. The popular biography of famous Mormon scientist Henry Eyring provides a useful case study of such essential epistemological flexibility. Renowned in his field, Eyring acknowledged his belief in the possibility of biological evolution as the means by which the various forms of life on earth have come into being. His views attracted the ire of some in the Church who espoused a literal creationist interpretation and insisted on a creation lasting six days. The most conspicuous spokesman for the literalist view was Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith, with whom Eyring exchanged letters and had a "lively" in-person discussion on the subject.[24] According to his biographer, Eyring "enthusiastically studied the possibilities and even the probabilities of evolution . . . yet notwithstanding this scientifically rigorous speculation, in the end he wouldn't take a stand on how God did it."[25] Despite the temptation to assume a definitive stance on the question of the processes of creation, and knowing the credi-

bility he could impart by virtue of his status as a renowned scientist, Eyring maintained a certain humble agnosticism, refusing to definitively align himself with either faction.[26] Rather than simply being noncommittal, however, his position recognizes humankind's inherent ignorance before the largely unknown and perhaps unknowable facts of the universe. Eyring's stance maintains the flexibility necessary to accommodate further infusions of light and knowledge to be gained both from empirical observation and, potentially, from divine inspiration.

Bateson's sense of the need for flexibility in ecologies of ideas provides insight into the teachings of Joseph Smith regarding the need for continual revelation. In presenting himself as a prophet to the world, Smith challenged fundamental conceptions of the ontological nature of creation, and being, and the divine. In doing so, however, he did not rely on systematic or definitive expositions of his doctrine to persuade or compel. Rather, as reported in an 1832 article in the *Evening and the Morning Star*, he invited Mormons to invoke the principle of continuing revelation: "Ask your Heavenly Father, in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, to manifest the truth unto you, and if you do it with an eye single to His glory, nothing doubting, He will answer you by the power of His Holy Spirit. You will then know for yourself and not for another. You will not then be dependent on man for the knowledge of God."[27]

As I read Joseph Smith's position, he prophetically desired each human being to fundamentally evaluate engrained modes of thought which had slipped beneath the realm of critical inspection and to seek personal spiritual confirmation of the ideas he presented as the truths of the restored gospel. In doing so, he made each individual responsible for evaluating the truth, rather than simply relying on him for its confirmation. Smith's emphasis on the need for continuing revelation and his belief in the possibility of acquiring truth from a variety of sources safeguards the flexibility necessary for Latter-day Saints to walk the high wire, balancing reason and empirical observation with faith.

Notes

1. Aristotle, "Physics," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKenon (New York: Random House, 1941), 194b30.

2. The Dalai Lama, *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality* (New York: Morgan Road Books, 2005), 46.

3. Bateson notes that, through the "ecology of ideas," ideas may survive beyond the death of their originator(s): "The very meaning of 'survival' becomes different when we stop talking about the survival of something bounded by the skin and start to think of the survival of the system of ideas. . . . The contents of the skin are randomized at death. . . . But the ideas, under further transformation, may go on out in the world in books or works of art. Socrates as a bioenergetic individual is dead. But much of him still lives as a component in the contemporary ecology of ideas." Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 467.

4. In referring to "mythologies" I employ the word in its sense as story (the Greek root *mythos* can refer to anything delivered by word of mouth or speech, or to any story or narrative), rather than pejoratively as narratives that are considered false or fanciful.

5. German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) used the German *In-der-Welt-sein* ("being-in-the-world") and *da-sein* ("being there") to attempt to dislodge the Cartesian subject/object dualism prevalent in the Western philosophical tradition and to posit instead that the surrounding world is co-constitutive of human "being" and not simply a world of objects that exist "over there," discrete from the perceiving human subject. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927; rpt., Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), esp. 7–9.

6. Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 95–96.

7. Lynn White, (1907–87), "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science*, March 10, 1967, 1203–7, is the most widely known of this strain of thought. White blames much of the modern environmental destruction on the Judeo-Christian tradition. He argues that "pagan" views of nature were characterized by a certain animism that allegedly fostered respect for spirits immanent in nature itself; this attitude thereby kept ancient peoples from perpetrating significant environmental harm. In contrast, Judeo-Christian monotheism maintained a sense of the divine as distinct from nature and had the goal of transcending the dross of the surrounding world. From this root attitude, White argued, sprang modern environmentally destructive attitudes and practice.

8. Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community*, 96.

9. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 509.

10. A child, for example, when learning to walk dedicates much mental energy to coordinating muscle movements and carefully maintaining balance, yet upon mastering the skill of walking, the child gives

little attention to such basic mechanics and his or her mind is therefore free to concentrate on other things. According to Bateson, "trusted ideas" become habit and form the foundation of the way in which individuals (and societies) think and perceive the world. They become automatic, "available for immediate use without thoughtful inspection, while the more flexible parts of the mind can be saved for use on newer matters." Ibid., 509–10.

11. In discussing ideas that have become engrained simply through tradition, but that may, over the long run, prove destructive, Bateson states that, while "hard-programmed ideas become nuclear or nodal within constellations of other ideas . . . frequency of validation of an idea within a given segment of time is not the same as *proof* that the idea is either true or pragmatically useful over long time. We are discovering today that several of the premises which are deeply engrained in our way of life are simply untrue and become pathogenic when implemented with modern technology." Ibid., 510.

12. Bateson's sense of flexibility operates within certain tolerances, the violation of which results in "discomfort, pathology and ultimately death." He employs the example of an acrobat on a high wire who must maintain a certain amount of rigidity as well as the flexibility "to move from one position of instability to another." If, instead, "his arms are fixed or paralyzed . . . he must fall." If a system of thought becomes so rigid that it loses the flexibility to evaluate even its unconscious assumptions or so supple that it loses all form, then it will consequently fall. Ibid., 503–6.

13. Bateson states that the ecological thinker must be adamant about maintaining flexibility. "[The ecologist] must also exert authority to preserve such flexibility as exists or can be created. At this point (as in the matter of unreplaceable natural resources), his recommendations must be tyrannical. Social flexibility is a resource as precious as oil or titanium." Ibid., 505.

14. Joseph Smith Jr. et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* edited by B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev. (6 vols., 1902–12, Vol. 7, 1932; rpt., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980 printing), 5:499. He delivered this sermon Sunday, July 9, 1843, at the grove near the temple.

15. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 419.

16. Brigham Young, August 31, 1862, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1855–86), 9:369–70.

17. Fred C. Collier and William S. Harwell, eds., *Kirtland Council Minute Book* (Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing, 1996), 37.

18. Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 508.

19. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 172.

20. Joseph Smith, January 21, 1844, *History of the Church*, 6:184–85.

21. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 509.

22. Maurice A. Finocchiaro, editor and translator, *The Galileo Affair: A Documentary History* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1989), 288: The panel of theologians who tried Galileo asserted that his belief that "the sun is the center of the world and motionless is a proposition which is philosophically absurd and false, and formally heretical, for being explicitly contrary to Holy Scripture; That the earth is neither the center of the world nor motionless but moves even with diurnal motion is philosophically equally absurd and false, and theologically at least erroneous in the Faith."

23. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 504.

24. Henry Eyring, "A Tribute to President Joseph Fielding Smith," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7 (Spring 1972): 15–16.

25. Henry J. Eyring, *Mormon Scientist: The Life and Faith of Henry Eyring* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 228. The Book of Abraham substitutes "time" for the Genesis use of "day," implying indeterminate periods of creation, and states that, after planning the creation "the Gods watched those things which they had ordered until they obeyed" (4:18), suggesting a process rather than a one-time creative act.

26. Hugh Nibley wryly described the ongoing debate between evolution and a literal creationism as "a foolish contest between equally vain and bigoted rivals in which it is a moot question which side heaps the most contempt on God's creatures." Nibley, "Before Adam," in *Old Testament and Related Studies: Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol. 1*, edited by John W. Welch, Gary P. Gillum, and Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1986), 50.

27. Joseph Smith, "To the Honorable Men of the World," *Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 3 (August 1832), 22, http://www.centerplace.org/history/ems/v1n03.htm (accessed February 15, 2011).