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To the Glory of God: Mormon Essays on Great Issues
Truman G. Madsen and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds.

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(Reviewed by Edward Geary, assistant professor of English at Brigham Young University. Dr. Geary has been book review editor and is now associate editor of Dialogue: A Journal for Mormon Thought.)

The Festschrift poses special problems for the reviewer. Should a book made up of the products of many hands be read as a single book or as a multitude of separate works brought together by an accident of binding? To the Glory of God is a memorial volume for B. West Belnap, late dean of the College of Religious Instruction at BYU and contains a dozen essays written by his friends and colleagues. Yet, though the book has no explicit topical focus, the title suggests a singleness of purpose. How are we to take such a high-sounding title? As indicating the wish of the authors and editors to dedicate their labors to the glory of God, or as suggesting that the book as a whole can tell us something about the glory of God or about the nature of religious dedication? Does a common cause produce a common insight?

To a significant extent, I think the answer to this question is yes. Although the essays reflect a wide range of interests and present diverse ideas about the nature of man and the role of divine purpose in the world, most of them cluster
around a single theme: the interdependence of man’s spiritual and temporal existence and the necessity of striking a proper balance between these aspects of life if one is to be truly dedicated to the glory of God. Several of the authors approach this theme by way of analogy—or something more than analogy—with environmental ecology. For example, Hugh W. Nibley quotes Brigham Young’s advice to the Saints in the early days of Utah: “You are here commencing anew. . . . The soil, the air, the water are all pure and healthy. Do not suffer them to become polluted with wickedness” (p. 3). In a more explicit comment on the evil nature of pollution, Nibley says, “Why should the enemy seek to pollute? There was an early Christian teaching, reported by Eusebius, that the evil spirits, being forever deprived of physical bodies, constantly go about in the world jealously seeking to defile and corrupt such bodies, glorying in foulness and putrefaction as they ‘move about in thick, polluted air,’ and make charnel houses and garbage dumps their favorite haunts . . . ” (p. 5). C. Terry Warner compares man to a tree which requires careful pruning to attain a balance between rank growth and productive fruition. Neal A. Maxwell points out that the “full spirit of stewardship” should make us “concerned about the environment we transmit to our successors,” but he emphasizes that we transmit not only a physical but a moral environment: “The sewage of sin is so devastating downstream in life that it overshadows physical effluence about which we have a right to be concerned” (p. 91).

Every serious reader should find at least some of the book’s insights meaningful. Reed H. Bradford, in “The Meaning of Love,” suggests that spiritual maturity lies in achieving an integrated balance in one’s “network of relationships” (p. 78). Chauncey C. Riddle argues that the fragmentation of mortal life comes about because the spirit, “which is the real person,” is bound by a body subject to the laws of a fallen material universe. “The Fall was thus a sundering of man, resulting in a duality. This duality is the basis of both conflict and progress in the individual person” (p. 138). Wholeness can be reattained only as the body is subjected to the discipline of the spirit. Both Martin B. Hickman, in “Reciprocal Loyalty: The Administrative Imperative,” and Neal A. Maxwell, in “To the Youth of Zion,” discuss the relationship between individual and institutional values, Hickman, exploring the
implications of the sustaining process in Church government, and Maxwell, emphasizing the “high adventure or orthodoxy” (p. 99). Truman G. Madsen, in “Man Illumined,” looks into the concept of light in the gospel and concludes that spiritual illumination is not merely a metaphor but a literal possibility. Light is “somehow the substratum of all reality and also of all intelligent awareness of reality” as well as “the foundation of good” (p. 127).

I personally found most rewarding the two longest essays in the book, “Commitment and Life’s Meaning,” by C. Terry Warner, and “Brigham Young on the Environment,” by Hugh W. Nibley. Warner’s essay is a deeper exploration than he has previously offered to the Church audience, a well-reasoned and highly persuasive argument that only profound commitment to a divine person can invest one’s life with real meaning. Nibley’s article is in the same spirit as the concluding section of Since Camorah and is valuable both for his own insights and for the pithy quotations from the sermons of Brigham Young. He portrays President Young as a man who, with his Yankee sense of thrift and his understanding of the principle of stewardship, was far ahead of his time in his awareness of the exhaustability of natural resources and his appreciation for the fragility of the natural environment. Nibley contrasts Zion—the community of the Lord’s people, living in harmony with the earth that is their home—and Babylon—the commercial society motivated by the desire to possess the earth wholly and exploit its resources—and argues that an important index of one’s spiritual maturity is his ability to appreciate the earth without wanting to own it. Stewardship is first of all a feeling about the earth:

Without being able to tell exactly why, we take immediate offense at such statements, made by men in high positions, as “I do not believe in conservation for conservation’s sake,” or “I do not believe in clean water for the sake of clean water.” But we soon learn that our shocked first reaction is a healthy one; when the forest is reduced to the now proverbial one redwood, it is too late. What prevents such a catastrophe is not the logic of survival but the feelings of wrongness. “Are you not dissatisfied,” says Brigham Young, “and is there not bitterness in your feelings, the moment you find a kanyon put in the possession of an individual, and power given unto him to control the timber, wood, rock, grass, and, in short, all its facilities? Does
there not something start up in your breast, that causes you to feel very uncomfortable? . . . " The voice of revelation has told the Saints . . . where to put their priorities: "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" (Moses 3:9). Trees were made in the first instance to be looked at and enjoyed; we are aware of that before research and experience show our intuition to be quite sound—but the feeling for beauty must come first if we are to survive (pp. 11-12).

There are three essays in the book that do not fit the "spiritual ecology" theme, but they too are of considerable interest. Richard L. Anderson describes Oliver Cowdery's activities during his apostate decade, and Leonard J. Arrington sketches the careers of several men who left the Church to become prominent in other fields. From Arrington's article we learn, among other things, that the infamous John C. Bennett after leaving the Church became an important agriculturist whose greatest achievement was introducing the Plymouth Rock breed of chicken, and that one of Brigham Young's nephews succeeded Mary Baker Eddy as the leader of the Christian Scientists. Robert K. Thomas's "A Literary Critic Looks at the Book of Mormon" is a fascinating essay whose only real fault is its brevity; it whets an appetite that it fails to satisfy.

The essays which make up To the Glory of God are no less varied in quality than in subject matter. Some are highly developed and carefully reasoned essays that reward the reader's closest attention. Others, more accessible, perhaps, but also less rewarding, are obviously talks that have been slightly worked over for this collection. A few belong to that unfortunate genre of Mormon writing, the pastiche of quotations loosely connected by an occasional sentence of the author's own. This range of depth and quality may reflect the editors' desire to provide something for everyone, but there is no doubt that To the Glory of God offers a good deal to the serious student of Mormon thought. The best essays give us perceptive intellectual insights into matters of the spirit, a fusion found all too infrequently in Church literature, and the book as a whole is a fitting memorial to a respected colleague and a volume not unworthy of its lofty title.