EDITOR’S NOTE: This is the second installment of the “Bounds and Conditions” column, which explores the intersection of science and health issues with Mormon theology, culture, and experience. Please submit your reflections to column editor Rick Jepson at bounds.and.conditions@hotmail.com.

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HE TYPES OF explorations of science and health we hope to feature in this column wouldn’t be possible without a strong Mormon tradition of science writing. In the last few decades, Duane Jeffery, Erich Robert Paul, Richard P. Smith, Keith Norman, David Bailey, and other capable authors have blazed a path for us to pave and enlarge.

Mining through their work has been among the most rewarding endeavors of my life. I’ve enlarged my testimony, humbled my intellect, and found a comforting camaraderie with authors who ably navigate through troublesome questions that keep my eyes open at night and my mouth shut at church. And though I’m still at the foothills of this expedition, several important themes have begun to emerge.

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HE attempt to demarcate scientific knowledge from religious faith has been a perennial subject inviting varied approaches. For example, LDS scientist Henry Eyring denies any essential difference between the two, saying:

“Science is less faith-promoting than a physical science like chemistry, he described the difficulty of claiming to know anything and suggested a different ambition altogether for religious faith:

Now how does a scientist respond when he faces the query, “What do I know?” He can’t go through a set of catechismic rituals that are implied by the eight year old or the twelve year old who is giving a testimony before a group—something approximating the memorized statement. He must make sharp, relative distinctions between “I would like to believe” and “I believe,” and between “I had a past belief” and “I know.” He can’t go through a set of catechismic rituals that are implied by the eight year old or the twelve year old who is giving a testimony before a group—something approximating the memorized statement. He must make sharp, relative distinctions between “I would like to believe” and “I believe,” and between “I had a past belief” and “I know.” Now a testimony in the fullest sense seems to be introduced with the assertion, “I know.” That is the most frequent rhetoric, “I know that,” “I know that,” “I know that,” and “I know that.” The characteristic of an educated man, on the other hand, is marked by some certainty of the burning bosom which confirms the goodness of the Church and the truth of the principles which it teaches.”

This feeling can be so consuming as to eliminate all doubt. 

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OTHER common theme is the comfortable acceptance that science and faith would frequently be at odds—at least for now. John A. Widtsoe once wrote that “the struggle for reconciliation between the contending forces is not an easy one. It cuts deep into the soul and usually leaves scars that ache while life endures.” Yet Mormon literature is full of authors willing to bear that burden, scientists unfazed by points of contention between their faith and their study.

The late Stephen J. Gould famously out-
lined a philosophy of religion and science he called NOMA, or “non-overlapping magisteria,” wherein the two realms of science and religion are encouraged to maintain a respectful, strict separation. “NOMA seeks no fusion,” he explains, “but urges two distinct sides to stay on their own turf” and to “develop their best solutions to designated parts of life’s totality.” In other words, faith and knowledge must remain entirely separate; any attempt at reconciliation invites disaster.

But Mormon literature demonstrates an alternate approach. With near consensus, LDS authors express something that might be called GOMA, or gradually overlapping magisteria. They seem to share a sentiment that while knowledge and faith may presently be at odds, once both are fully understood, they’ll harmonize perfectly. Richard P. Smith puts it best: “Since Mormonism and science are both basically true, they will converge eventually.”

This belief does not imply that we should expect, or even want, any overlap today. It remains inappropriate, for example, for the Church to make an official doctrinal stand on evolution or geology. Duane Jeffrey writes:

Authoritative statements concerning scientific matters seem neither necessary nor desirable, even if the knowledge to make them did exist, and it seems clear that it does not. Effective arguments can be marshaled to support the point that such pronouncements, necessarily restrictive in their nature, would stifle the very experience that life is supposed to provide; they would be inimical to the very roots of the process of “evolving into a God.”

Nor, in fact, should we be too concerned about what Church leaders believe about the age of the earth, the mutability of species, or the details of the Creation. Eyring explains, “I never worry what the Brethren believe about the details of the Creation; instead they hear that much of what the schools teach is wrong and they had better not believe it. I’m thankful that my faith wasn’t subjected to that test and that I had help with my concerns about whether a scientist could be a Latter-day Saint.

David Bailey echoes this concern and worries that we have replaced the pro-science doctrines of the early restoration with anti-science sentiment borrowed from traditional Christianity:

Latter-day Saint theology, with its rich tradition of naturalism and open-minded attitudes toward science, is to many intellectually minded members a major factor in their continued faith. There is no question that its foundation of natural law and rationality permits a significantly cleaner accommodation of the principles of science than most other theological systems.

However, this tradition may be in danger as the Church continues to experience exponential growth, bringing in converts whose beliefs are deeply rooted in the theologies of traditional Christianity. Current Church literature frequently includes statements about God’s absolute omnipotence and his ability to alter the laws of nature, even though these sectarian doctrines sharply disagree with traditional Mormon theology. Similarly, the conservatism that pervades modern creation beliefs in the Church seems to have more in common with certain Christian fundamentalist sects than with the open-minded philosophies of the early Church leaders.

Outside of these important themes, there have been numerous treatments of more specific matters: cosmology, evolution, psychology, and more. But in nearly all cases, even very specific topics are still related to or build upon the three themes I’ve listed here. And they are themes that will probably influence most future contributions as well.

It is exhilarating and daunting to begin a new column dedicated to the intersection of Mormonism with science and health. But discovering just how large and solid the foundation is, I’m all the more excited to start building. I invite your contributions to this important endeavor.

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