



# Agrarian ecotheology

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## Abstract

In this essay an agrarian approach to ecotheology is briefly described.

## Keywords

agriculture, creation, ecotheology, Scripture, urbanization

Agrarian traditions began roughly 10,000 year ago as people gradually shifted from hunter-gatherer to agricultural ways of living in the world. This was a momentous shift because it introduced radically new economic and political ways of living in place, relating to plants and animals, and thinking about society, culture and ultimate reality. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century we are well into a second momentous shift in human history: the mass migration of people from the land into urban centres, many of which are unparalleled in their size and insularity with respect to ecological realities. Like the movement into agricultural lands and communities, today's urbanization represents radically new ways of living in a region and configuring our relationships to each other, fellow creatures and ultimate reality: ways that also threaten ecosystems' well-being.

This brief history is important to appreciate because agrarian writers argue that the way we think about reality – the meaning of God, community and earth – is dependent upon *where* we are. More specifically, it is dependent upon the perception and the sympathies that develop as the result of our making a home within a particular place. It should not surprise us, therefore, that Jewish and Christian Scriptures refer to God as the Good Shepherd or as the Gardener/Vinedresser when we remember that their writers and hearers/readers lived in a predominantly agricultural world. Agricultural sensibilities and sympathies saturated their theological reflection and their world-view because animals, food crops, soil, water and work were ever present concerns.<sup>1</sup>

How does one interpret an agrarian Scripture in today's highly urbanized world? I take this to be a vital question because I assume in my work that theological reflection depends on Scripture as a vital source and inspiration. Both our journey

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to God and God's journey to us are mediated, most basically, through God's gifts of food and nurture, and through the work we do when participating in God's gardening and farming ways with the world. As an agrarian ecotheologian I assume that agrarian responsibilities and tasks – growing food, harvesting energy, nurturing a community and one's homeland, passing on traditions and skills of good work, and supporting a just and sustainable economy – open lines of questioning and visioning that are often missed by other theological approaches. Attending to these lines is vital because they refer us to what is fundamental and inescapable about our needs as embodied creatures.

Participating in San Francisco in the map-making exercise with fellow ecotheologians and scholars of religion and nature helped me see how distinctive an agrarian approach is. In part this stems from a different starting point and focus. Much of environmental writing in its North American context has focused on the protection of wilderness areas and endangered species. This is a laudable and very important effort. My work, however, refers us to the vast amounts of land *between* cities and wilderness, land that we daily depend upon for food, fibre and energy. The neglect of agriculture in theological and philosophical circles is striking, particularly if we remember that this has been the primary place of human habitation and livelihood over the last 10,000 years. I privilege an agrarian point of view in my work because I believe that in the years ahead we are going to need detailed knowledge and a wide array of skills necessary to live long and well on the land, knowledge and skills that have developed over thousands of years of diverse agricultural practices.

Developing an agrarian ecotheology in no way means that the approaches of others – ecofeminism, deep ecology, social ecology, the Universe Story, postmodernism, ecocriticism or environmental virtue (to name but a few) – are therefore illegitimate. We need many paths on the journey towards thriving communities and a healthy planet. We need the paths to intersect so that we can learn from each other. In my own work, for instance, I have been deeply informed by postmodern critiques of instrumental reason and industrial models of economy and politics.<sup>2</sup>

An agrarian approach is uniquely suited to be in conversation with a variety of diverse disciplines ranging among cultural studies, environmental history, gender studies, urban design, conservation biology and scientific ecology. This is because agrarian life is the practical interface between nature and culture. The 'new agrarian' critique of modern industrial agriculture presupposes not only an understanding of the development of modern economies, political systems and land-use planning but also philosophical, artistic and literary traditions.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, world agrarian traditions are deep and diverse, reflecting the many religious traditions of the world and their unique geographical settings. Agrarian ecotheology stands to learn much from sustained discussions with Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Shinto and indigenous traditions (to name a few).<sup>4</sup>

My agrarian focus has also encouraged me to examine and recover elements within theological teaching and tradition that have often been forgotten or underemphasized. For instance, my work has focused on developing a rich doctrine of

creation: one that centres more on the moral and spiritual character of the world than its origin.<sup>5</sup> It has also submitted food, its production and consumption – realities often taken for granted in today's urban world – to sustained theological analysis.<sup>6</sup>

Much of the modern academy, especially the disciplines of theology and philosophy, has kept agrarian traditions of insight and responsibility at the margins. Welcoming agrarians in will greatly enrich our conversation and work.

### Notes

1. Ellen Davis's *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) is the definitive contemporary statement on the agrarian context of Scripture.
2. James C. Scott's *Seeing like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) is a fine example of what this sort of critique looks like.
3. The work of Wendell Berry is of signal importance here. See especially *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, DC: Counterpoint Press, 2002).
4. See Todd LeVasseur, Pramod Parajuli and Norman Wirzba (eds), *Sustainable Agriculture and the World's Religious Traditions* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, forthcoming in 2013).
5. See my *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
6. See my *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

### Author Biography

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