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Sacred Harvest: Wendell Berry, Christian Agrarianism and the Creation of an Environmental Ethic

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Sacred Harvest:
Wendell Berry, Christian Agrarianism and the Creation of an Environmental Ethic

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Sacred Harvest: Wendell Berry, Christian Agrarianism and the Creation of an Environmental Ethic

Thesis directed by Professor Rodney Taylor

Abstract: Wendell Berry, a Christian agriculturalist and writer exemplifies through his life and work a new agrarian environmental ethic. This work will present the major tenets of that ethic and place this unique dictate of consciousness within an ongoing conversation about the importance of human morality in an ever-changing natural environment. Berry’s ethic questions the current notion of farming as a profane endeavor, and seeks to bring to light the reality of a connection between humans and landscapes, as well as between religion and agricultural practice. Through presenting the notion of bucolic landscapes as sacred space, Berry endeavors to question the current understanding of sacred realms in connection to how we view the natural world, as well as how we act in relation to that world. This thesis seeks to provide an explanation of Berry’s Christian agrarian ethic as a necessary voice among many within the environmental debate of our present society.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Wendell Berry, a Christian agriculturalist and writer, exemplifies through his life and work a new agrarian environmental ethic. This ethic questions our current notion of agricultural practice as the epitome of a profane endeavor and seeks to encourage a new environmental value system based on an alternative view of farming as a sacred act resulting in the recognition of sacred space. Such an ethic hinges upon a process, which is, for Berry, at once ritualistic, moralistic, as well as deeply and profoundly religious. Berry’s particular agrarian ethic is developed through the act of land cultivation, mindful assertion of a distinct mythology through the ritual process of writing, simplicity of life in connection to strong Christian ethics, and an advancement of solutions to our present agricultural issues by making appeals to our agricultural past, while maintaining his place as one voice among many in an ongoing conversation about humanity’s role in providing an environmental ethic that speaks to present issues and future concerns. In order to demonstrate the significance of his agrarianism in the edification of an unconventional environmental ethic, I will explore these aspects of the belief and practice of Wendell Berry illustrating how his comprehension of sacrality has contributed immensely to his own understanding of the roots and purpose of agricultural practice, as well as to the field of religion and nature in the consideration of environmental dictates of conscience.

Berry is in many ways a traditionalist. He often appeals to the past and he often focuses such appeals toward the maintenance of traditional values and practices, such as working together in community, nurturing the ideal of family, and passing down the history of place from generation to generation. In contradistinction to Berry’s traditional
agrarian ethic, there is a model utilized, which thrives on separation, specialization, increased individuality and mechanization without reference to the need for cooperation of humanity and human labor in order to maintain the health of the environment and human society.

Always implicit in a [specialist] model is the idea of replacing what has survived of the past, what exists in the present. These characteristics divide the model radically from ideals of the more usual sort. Such ideals as honesty or generosity or gentleness or symmetry do indeed have an influence on the future, but we recognize them from what we have known of them in the past and from what they require of us in the present.¹

While Berry has obvious tendencies toward emphasizing the importance of remembering the past, his work as a nature writer has made him a part of an ongoing conversation, which regards questions of how we should act in the world at present and in the future. He does not suggest that we return to some nonexistent problem-free version of ourselves represented in the past, but that we work together in community to create a better world.

There is a difference between thinking about problems and having problems. Where experts are thinking about problems, the people who have the problems are usually absent, are not even well represented. The only way out of this is for the teacher, the person of learning, the researcher, the intellectual, the artist, the scientist, to make common cause with community. They must commit themselves to a community in such a way that they share the fate of that community—participate in its losses and trials and griefs and hardships and pleasures and joys and satisfactions—so that they don’t have this ridiculous immunity that they now have in their specializations and careers.²

Berry recommends a medial position between an unachievable resurrection of a distant past and an isolating obsessive individualism, which often engages in overwhelming amounts of future gazing at the expense of the present environmental situation. While his


methods and perspective are different from those of his peers, he is anxious and willing to be involved in such debate and this fact is clear through his choice of writing and speaking within both academic and popular society. I hope to present Berry’s unique perspective as a Christian Agrarian as a necessary voice within this significant ongoing debate, and to provide some insight as to why such a voice is needed in order to create a sustainable human/environment relationship.

Following this introductory chapter, the second chapter will provide a demonstration of the significance of Berry’s emphasis on working the land, a process that he views as sacred. I will argue that working the land as a farmer, Berry apprehends a particular nexus between human and landscape that exemplifies an agrarian environmental ethic. Berry repeatedly asserts that agricultural labor encompasses his own connection to the divine. I will utilize this assertion to illustrate how Berry has nurtured a relationship with a specific place where he can retrieve such a notion of sacrality within the landscape. Furthermore, I will contend that such a process is contingent upon the ritualization of work which Berry exhibits through continuous care for the land in the form of wearing himself against the earth, in the form of work. In viewing work as sacred ritual, a better understanding of agrarian practice as exemplary of an environmental ethic can be ascertained.

I will discuss Berry’s distinction between the ‘exploiter’ and the ‘nurturer’ of landscapes. This distinction clearly illustrates his reasoning as it applies to the meaning and effects of agriculture. He maintains that the mentality of exploitation is deeply rooted in our American past as the offspring of so many who sought to explore, conquer and subdue, only to move on to the next place of exploration, annihilation, and
subjugation. In contradistinction to such a mentality, Berry recommends what he has called ‘a weaker tendency,’ “the tendency to stay put, to say, ‘No farther. This is the place.’”

Berry pleads for a mentality of settlement, cultured with a comprehension of sacrality in the land through the cultivation of a nurturing relationship with that land.

Wendell Berry also works as a writer and activist. In reference to this aspect of Berry’s work, I will present a discussion of the importance of the literary medium in Berry’s unique ethical method. The author of more than forty works of poetry, novels and influential essays, Berry speaks to some of the most pressing issues of rural society: population and growth, specialization and mechanization, soil and food quality, community and interdependence. This vast body of work is demonstrative of his commitment to and dependence on a literary tradition for expressing his beliefs and justifying his practices. I will explore this aspect of his philosophy in greater depth, as I perceive his writing to be an important medium in his own quest to join his understanding of the sacred with the reality of everyday life as a farmer. It is important to consider the significance of his intention to open others to the idea of agricultural practice as a sacred act through the literary medium, exhibiting how farming can be suffused with religiosity and space can be acknowledged as sacred through the act of communicating that sacrality to the world. It is my view that similar to the act of farming, the act of writing is, for Berry, a unique and significant ritual process, which serves as his own recognition of sacrality in the land, as well as an illustration of that sacrality to those who read his work.

In the third chapter, I will focus more directly on Berry as a Christian and as an adherent to a lifestyle that is marked by unpretentiousness and accessibility. I will

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discuss the implications of Berry’s emphasis on the demechanization of agriculture and the simplification of human life in connection to his unmistakable understanding of an agrarian ethic. In this section the link between his agricultural practice and his religious understanding of the world will become apparent through a discussion highlighting his opposition to organization, institutionalization, and specialization with relation to any human endeavor. The simplicity that Berry insists upon is one that is based in diversity: diversity of land, diversity of species, and diversity of knowledge. In contrast to such diversity, what we have is generalization and specialization. Berry suggests simplicity of life and diversity of skill as a solution to what he sees as an onslaught of institutionalization in the field of agriculture and in the disintegration of Christian thought through the spread of organized religion.

I will present Berry’s own prime example of simplicity and diversity, the Amish farmstead, in order to exhibit how Amish farming and religion constitute the most significant tenets of Berry’s ethics and comprehension of sacrality. I will also focus on Berry as a Christian writer and his recognition that he could not fully explain his understanding of an environmental ethic without some idea of religious faith. The undertones of his faith shine through most brightly when he speaks of God’s creation. He concludes that creation is a gift, which must be protected by those who have the means to cultivate it. While he utilizes scientific thought as a way of engaging intelligently in agricultural practice, there is something beyond science that Berry feels the need to attend to: immanent sacrality. The source of that understanding is found within his Christian belief and practice.
The fourth chapter will focus on the solutions that Berry offers to our many environmental problems. I will compare Berry’s agrarian ethic to other environmental ethical systems, assessing its strengths and weaknesses as one method among many. I will discuss Berry’s assertion of the importance of sustainable, principled agricultural practice in the pursuit of a sounder, healthier human planet. His focus on agriculture places him in the minority of environmental philosophers, and a look at some of his predecessors and contemporaries should prove useful in evaluating the need for an agrarian voice, as well as how that voice might harmonize with all of the other voices striving to be heard. Therefore, I will present the work of past and present philosophers in the field, such as Aldo Leopold and Gary Snyder, to provide some idea of what those other voices have to offer by way of answers to the environmental ethical dilemma. This section should serve as an example of how Berry’s work is created as part of a dialogue that cannot persist without a plurality of views and methods. However, the bulk of this section will center around Berry’s defense of the small, diverse, and healthy in contradistinction to what he terms the large, specialized, and unwholesome reality of our environmental crisis.

Through this work I hope to move toward an understanding of the link that exists between agricultural practice and an environmental ethic. Agriculture has been viewed in a myriad of ways across various cultures through an immense expanse of time. At the present moment it is most often seen as a business that represents one of the most progressively mechanized and streamlined institutions of human society. It is my aim to present an alternative theory, which can easily be derived from the philosophy and practice of Wendell Berry: farming is a sacred act, which results in the recognition of a
sacred place. When viewed in this way, farming can be seen as a significant generational link, with an important role to play in our efforts toward sustainability. My main purpose, in the end, is to present this alternative view in an approachable way, maintaining the relevance that the theory has within our present society and in relation to an overwhelming, yet no less questionable status quo.
Chapter Two

Laboring in the Fields of the Lord: The Ritual Process of Work as Both Farmer and Writer and the Formation of an Agrarian Ethic

I owned a slope full of stones.
Like buried pianos they lay in the ground,
shards of old sea-ledges, stumbling blocks
where the earth caught and kept them
dark, an old music mute in them
that my head keeps now I have dug them out.
I broke them where they slugged in their dark
cells, and lifted them up in pieces.
As I piled them in the light
I began their music. I heard their old lime
rouse in breath of song that has not left me.
I gave pain and weariness to their bearing out.
What bond have I made with the earth,
having worn myself against it? It is a fatal singing
I have carried with me out of that day.
The stones have given me music
that figures for me their holes in the earth
and their long lying in them dark.
They have taught me the weariness that loves the ground,
and I must prepare a fitting silence.

--Wendell Berry, “The Stones”

In the act of agricultural practice and academic composition, Berry finds what he concludes to be the clearest example of an environmental ethic based on a sacred connection between human and landscape and the illustration of that connection through writing. He owns and works the land as a small farmer on Lane’s Landing Farm, near Port Royal, Kentucky. When asked why he farms, Berry’s reply hints toward the inescapable consequences of birth:

I can’t say why. I was involved in farming from childhood, and my father lived and breathed it…. It’s hard to say why you love to do something. I love to write too, but I don’t know why. I grew up farming…. I grew up among people who simply could not conceive of farming as an inferior way of work, or an inferior art, or something for stupid people to do.²

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For Berry, farming was not so much a choice as a birthright. And, his conceptualization of farming as a worthy and challenging profession has come from an immersion in farm culture, tempered with a successful career as a writer, educator and academic. While Berry is well known for his efforts within the academy, his life as a farm owner and laborer has been the true constant in his formation of an environmental ethic. It is his farming that represents a repetitive ritual process, resulting in an intimate relationship between himself and the divine. Belden Lane’s description of place stands in contrast to Berry’s experience while also illuminating the illusive nature of placed existence in relation to divine encounter:

The sacredness of a place may be highly ephemeral, subjective, and hard to define. A special experience that one has at a place perceived to be sacred usually proves to be unrepeatable. Going back to the site never guarantees one’s being able to return to the experience. The place itself doesn’t readily retrieve the memories that people have of it.  

Berry has successfully cultivated a relationship with a specific place where he can retrieve such a notion of sacrality within the landscape. He has done this by ritually marking his farmland through redundant and continuous care for it in the form of land cultivation. Berry argues that the ritual process of work is necessary in the recognition of sacrality that is preexistent and stands outside of human creation. Such a concept of space as sacred space problematizes the notion that there is a natural distinction between ordinary work, such as farming, and sacred practice, such as prayer, in the recognition of sacred realms. The boundary between sacred and profane is not always clearly drawn in

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every human social situation, and Berry’s beliefs and practices as he presents them through his writing are one example of how such boundaries are constantly in question and continually blurry. Such obscurity has allowed him to sustain an ethical system that relies upon an appreciation of immanent sacrality, which he views as undeniably present.

Berry contends that the desecration of the land and the denial of the ritual process of work are contingent upon dualistic thought processes and the incessant derogation of manual labor. He states, “I never cared very much for…the body/soul dualism, the heaven and earth dualism.”4 Such binary thought has served to pejoratively isolate the material body/earth/matter and idolize that which stands in opposition to these physical aspects: essentially revering the transcendent and neglecting, or in some cases denouncing the immanent. “The soul is thus set against the body, to thrive at the expense of the body.”5 Such a division is, at this point in American history, an inherent part of our Western mentality. Alongside the positive elements of growth and knowledge, American culture has thrived and expanded as a result of the subjugation of human lives and the exploitation of landscapes. “We are all to some extent the products of an exploitative society, and it would be foolish and self-defeating to pretend that we do not bear its stamp.”6 Berry recommends a theory of interdependence in place of one of separation, and a system of nurture in place of exploitation. He describes the difference between the exploiter and the nurturer as tangible in the way that each of these


6 Ibid., 7.
personalities views the value of land in relation to humanity and in the way that they view
the meaning and purpose of work.

Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it
can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex
and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? (That is: How much can be taken
from it without diminishing it? What can it produce dependably for an indefinite
time?) The exploiter wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as
possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but
his characteristic wish is to work as well as possible. 7

The importance of such a distinction is apparent in the fact that Berry connects the action
of working on the land to a greater comprehension of the interface between body and
soul. In fact, farm labor is upheld as the most appropriate occupation for the recognition
of the interconnectivity of body and soul. For Berry farming is “a practical religion, a
practice of religion, a rite. By farming we enact our fundamental connection with energy
and matter, light and darkness.” 8 Working with the soil is, therefore, a type of religion.
And, it is this religious experience of toil that connects all life to each other, to the earth,
and to the whole interconnected cosmos.

An understanding of the unity of body and soul is veiled by the common notion
that farm work has no positive outcome other than food resources for human
consumption, and that this type of labor has no place in our understanding of religious or
sacred practice. Such a notion continues to encourage an attitude of exploitation. “The
growth of the exploiters’ revolution on this continent has been accompanied by the
growth of the idea that work is beneath human dignity, particularly any form of hand

7 Ibid., 7.

8 Ibid., 87.
work.”⁹ Many Americans strive to escape work at every turn, and such individuals have been successful at removing humanity from the toils of field labor on many of the farms across rural America. When the human element is removed from this equation through the sustained mechanization of human responsibilities, an integral piece of the relationship is lost. As we split body and soul, we also split profane and sacred space and actions. For Berry, there is no separation between sacred and profane. If we make such distinctions through human classification then we automatically participate in a value judgment: sacred=holy, divine, light, good; profane=worldly, human, dark, evil. Once these distinctions are made the opposite ends of the spectrum are defined and set. Ideas and objects can move from one end of the spectrum to the other in relation to human teleological understandings, alone. There is no comprehension of a higher power, an immutable universal law of sacrality which human beings have no power and no right to define. This type of ignorance is what Berry most readily wants to expose and question.

In the cycles of farming, which carry the elemental energy again and again through the seasons and the bodies of living things, we recognize the only infinitude within reach of the imagination. How long this cycling of energy will continue we do not know; it will have to end, at least here on this planet, sometime within the remaining life of the sun. But by aligning ourselves with it here, in our little time within the unimaginable time of the sun’s burning, we touch infinity; we align ourselves with the universal law that brought the cycles into being and that will survive them.¹⁰

This sense of a universal and moral law in connection to place suggests a belief in inherent sacrality, not dependent on human distinctions and transitory notions of holy

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⁹ Ibid., 12.

ground. All of creation is, therefore, sacred in that it exists and persists as part of and because of the infinite.

Berry’s assertion of non-duality not only helps us to view sacrality in a different way; it also pushes the boundary of defining the profane. By restricting agricultural practice to the realm of the profane, we further separate these categories, which Berry contends are interdependent. In addition, such a view of agriculture promotes the corporate structuring of agribusiness, which advocates monocultural crops, the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, expansion of space used, and depletion of human labor needed. Berry draws our attention to an unfortunate preference for quantity over quality, speed over efficiency, and machines over people on behalf of the corporate farmer and the modern world. He questions the logic of those who have detached humankind from its most basic purpose: the care of the land and the sustaining of their own lives. “The coming of the tractor made it possible for the farmer to do more work, but not better. And there comes a point, as we know, when more begins to imply worse.” As farms have grown in size, the human workers of those farms have decreased in number. The corporate farm relies more and more on machines to do the work that humans used to supply. This devalues the work of the farmer and turns it into something degrading and avoidable through the use of machines. Berry questions the legitimacy of such claims: Is work really something that we have the right to escape? Does the mechanized world really make life better or simpler for humankind? His answer is a definitive ‘No.’

[W]hen workers work independently and at home, the society as a whole may lose something in the way of organizational efficiency and economies of scale. But it begins to gain values not so readily quantifiable in the fulfilled humanity of the workers, who then bring to their work not just contracted qualities of ‘man-hours,’ but qualities such as independence, skill, intelligence, judgment, pride, respect, loyalty, love, reverence.\(^\text{12}\)

While quantities may be lessened through limiting mechanization, the quality of human life might be restored through an increase of the work available and an increase of human knowledge of the earth. The mechanization of our lives “divorces us from the sources of our bodily life; as a people, we no longer know the earth we came from, have no respect for it, keep no responsibilities to it.”\(^\text{13}\) The exchange that happens between human and earth is, for Berry, the most crucial relationship to keep in mind in the face of industrialization and environmental degradation. Without this exchange the sacrality of place is nonexistent, because Berry understands such sacrality through the fruits of such a relationship between humans and the land. “All the ancient wisdom that has come down to us…tells us that work is necessary to us, as much a part of our condition as mortality; that good work is our salvation and our joy; that shoddy or dishonest or self-serving work is our curse and our doom.”\(^\text{14}\) Further mechanization moves people farther and farther away from a sense of sacrality in the earth that they previously were in direct contact with, everyday, for survival.

Work is, therefore, recognized as ritual process, performed in acknowledgment of inherent sacrality within humanly defined profane realms. When a boundary between

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 110.

\(^{13}\) Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 52.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 12.
sacred and profane is defined many see the sacred realm as a place to ‘stop,’ a place to be still, as an act of reverence. While, for Berry, because all space is in a sense sacred due to the lack of such boundaries, sacred space is best defined as the space where one acts in the world. “To be convinced of the sanctity of the world, and to be mindful of a human vocation to responsible membership in such a world, must always have been a burden. But it is a burden that falls with greatest weight on us humans of the industrial age who have been and are, by any measure, the humans most guilty of desecrating the world and of destroying creation.”

The earth is made of sacred stuff, therefore, working with that stuff, getting one’s hands covered in the elements which comprise this interconnected sacred realm is the simplest way to understand its significance and to form an environmental ethic based on that understanding. “The effective knowledge of this unity must reside not so much in doctrine as in skill. Skill, in the best sense, is the enactment or the acknowledgment or the signature of responsibility to other lives; it is the practical understanding of value. Its opposite is not merely unskillfulness, but ignorance of sources, dependences, relationships.”

In this sense of ‘sources, dependences, relationships’ Berry finds a definition of the sacred that is inherent and inclusive. Life and all that which we are capable of interacting with in the world contribute to that sacrality and are a part of its nature and survival. Therefore, working with and within such a delicately balanced and interactive system requires human knowledge and skill.

“If agriculture is founded upon life, upon the use of human energy to serve human life,

15 Wendell Berry, Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Christ’s Teachings about Love, Compassion & Forgiveness (Shoemaker & Hoard, An imprint of Avalon Publishing Group, 2005), 67.

16 Wendell Berry, The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 91.
and if its primary purpose must therefore be to preserve the integrity of the life cycle, then agricultural technology must be bound under the rule of life. It must conform to natural processes and limits rather than to mechanical or economic models.”  

An ethical structure is then based on our own understanding of these natural processes, which we come to comprehend through interaction with the land rather than through mere contemplation or ‘stopping.’ Stopping in a place is only the beginning. It is the action, which takes place after the stopping that makes the sacred evident within and throughout reality and lived experience. This interaction with the environment, recognized as ritual process, promotes an ethic of care and kindly use in all forms of human work. When work is recognized as sacred practice in relation to sacred space, greater responsibility is taken in the maintenance of that human/environment relationship.

The other side of Berry’s work-life and skill-set is contained within his writing. The act of laboring on the land helps him to establish a personal relationship with the environment. His writing serves to give that relationship a voice, one that might aid in the envisioning of an agrarian environmental ethic while also serving to establish the same connection to the land that his physical interaction with it provides. He states:

Farming and poetry are both, to a considerable extent, formal disciplines. In both one must be concerned for the way that things are joined together, in one’s mind and art and in the world. Neither a farm nor a poem should be made at the world’s expense; the world must not be looked upon as a supply of “raw material” for either. To my way of thinking, any made thing should be made in harmony with its sources, and all things so made will have much in common; they will tend to be analogues of each other.”

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17 Ibid., 89.

For Berry, the act of writing is an act of appreciation for the natural world as well as a challenge to our modern modality of relating to nature as purely instrumental.

Berry’s prose continues to emphasize the importance of recognition of the modern tendency to rely upon dualistic thinking, and the actuality of an interrelated and interdependent human and nonhuman world. His poetry addresses the same sort of concern. In the construction of both forms of literature, Berry exhibits his own intention of providing an alternative environmental ethic, which includes the development of skill of both mind and body and the hope for a change of consciousness with regards to how we view the natural world and our place within it. Berry has chosen to utilize his intellect in the face of what he considers to be widespread ignorance about the present state and future demise of American landscapes. His particular method of writing from within the academic realm with the hope of also breaching the boundaries of academia to affect the masses of American society is a distinct act of contestation, promoting a less destructive existence for humanity in the hopes of maintaining the health of the earth through mindful agricultural practice. Gary Snyder, an American Buddhist and poet, speaks to the invaluable need for such work, specifically through the creation of works of poetry:

Poetry can disclose the misuse of language by holders of power, it can attack dangerous archetypes employed to oppress, and it can expose the flimsiness of shabby made-up mythologies. It can savagely ridicule pomp and pretension, and it can offer—in ways both obvious and subtle—more elegant, tastier, lovelier, deeper, more ecstatic, and far more intelligent words and images. Poetry also serves as a mode of speaking for our dreams and for the deep archetypes. Poetry will not only integrate and stabilize, it will break open ways out of the accustomed habits of perception and allow one to slip into different possibilities—some wise, some perhaps bizarre, but all of them equally real, and some holding promise of future new angles of insight.  

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As a writer, Berry has the ability to challenge our current intellectual structure and underlying mythology. I use the word mythology here in the same way that Mircea Eliade has defined it as “familiar especially to ethnologists, sociologists, and historians of religions, the sense of ‘sacred tradition, primordial revelation, exemplary model.’” In short, a myth is a story, which constitutes and continues to perpetuate our beliefs about ‘the way things are’ in the world. While certain foundational ideas establish the content of myth, our understanding of the environment and our responsibility as human agents within that environment is subject to change. Berry presents a particular mythology through the cultivation and communication of his Christian agrarian ethic, which challenges the modern mythology of separation between humanity and the environment.

Berry also has the ability through his skill as a writer to take a stand on the issue of contested space within the realm of American farmland. While much of the land of the small farmer is being overtaken by the power of the corporate farm, farmland in general is in danger of disappearance as a result of pressures to develop arable land for commercial and residential uses. Such land is generally flat and nutrient, making it perfect for farming, but also prime real estate for almost any type of development. Farming is usually not the top contender in the fight for such land, because it represents far less monetary gain than, say, a new residential neighborhood with million dollar homes for sale or a sprawling commercial market that provides a multitude of goods for purchase but no place to produce those goods sustainably. The voice of the farmer in the ongoing debate surrounding the contestation of land use is heard through Berry’s writing. Berry contends that interaction with the land through farming is a sacred act, which takes

place in recognition of sacred space. David Chidester And Edward T. Linenthal assert, “sacred space is inevitably contested space, a site of negotiated contests over the legitimate ownership of sacred symbols.” Their claim that such space is always liable to contestation is helpful in comprehending the unique quality of Berry’s importance as an academic writer and the relevance of his work as part of an ongoing process of a change in consciousness.

All my work comes from my loves and hopes. My essays come from a desire to understand what I love and hope for and to defend those things; they pretty much constitute a single long argument in defense. This has sometimes been laborious and dutiful work, and I have sometimes grown very tired of it. My work as a fiction writer and poet, in spite of the difficulties always involved, has been increasingly a source of pleasure to me—it is my way of giving thanks, maybe, for having things worthy of defense.

In defense of an inherent quality of the sacred within the natural world, the work of writing has become just as much of a ritual process for Berry as his work as a farmer.

His contestation of current land use practices is put forth through his own ritual process of writing, and such a process results in a new mythology on which to base an ethical understanding of the environment. As an essayist Berry has a unique ability to reach a wide audience in the hopes of advancing such a novel mythological structuring of ideals, and the essay format promotes response and democratic discussion. This attempt to cause a change in consciousness and its value in fostering respectful debate is easily aligned with Jeffrey Stout’s concept of expressive freedom. “Expressive freedom is positive, the freedom to transform both oneself and one’s social practices through a


22 Morris Allen Grubs, ed., Conversations with Wendell Berry (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 120.
dialectical progression of novel performances and their consequences. To take expressive freedom seriously is to see our capacity to engage in reasoning, including ethical and political reasoning." By establishing himself as a member of an ongoing conversation, qualified by expressive freedom and respectful debate Berry is able to express his own mythology amongst the voices of many differing ideals. That mythology contests the established notion of separation between religion and agriculture, and asserts that agricultural practice must rightly be viewed as religious practice in order to maintain the health of the land and the populations whose survival depend upon such maintenance.

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Chapter Three

The Foundations of Simplicity: Christianity as the Basis for an Environmental Ethic

The hand is risen from the earth,
the sap risen, leaf come back to branch,
bird to nest crotch. Beans lift
their heads up in the row. The known
returns to be known again. Going
And coming back, it forms its curves,
a nerved ghostly anatomy in the air.

--Wendell Berry “The Familiar”\(^1\)

Wendell Berry was raised in an evangelical Christian, Southern Baptist tradition,
however, he has spoken of himself saying, “I have not ever been a person very
comfortable in organizations. I never liked church very much and I never liked school
very much. And, I suppose, if I had ever worked for the government, I wouldn’t like the
government very much. As it is, I just have an amateur discomfort with government.”\(^2\)
Although Berry speaks lightly of his discomfort with organized institutions, he continues
to identify as Christian. He admits that his Christian identity is something that he is
“uneasy to talk about.” In relation to such uneasiness, he describes himself as “a
marginal Christian,” stating:

I was never satisfied by the Protestantism that I inherited, I think because of the
dualism of soul and body, heaven and Earth, Creator and creation—a dualism so
fierce at times that it counted hatred of this life and this world as a virtue. From very
early that kind of piety was distasteful to me. Nevertheless, I am devoted to that old
translation of the Bible, and I’m devoted to the literary tradition that we call
Christian.\(^3\)

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Here, Berry continues to express a discomfort with dualistic thinking, which was discussed at length in the previous chapter. However, his connection to tradition is extremely strong, and he often expresses a sense of devotion to the faith that he was raised to believe. He also expresses a sense of struggle with his Christian identity, in the sense that being Christian carries the weight of Christianity’s past.

Churches, sects, organized religions, denominations all come into being and cohere (insofar as they do) by agreeing on issues of doctrine and ritual, and by excluding all who don’t agree. We know what a bloody business this is. Christians, ignoring their specific instructions to the contrary, have been including and excluding, killing one another and also people of other faiths, virtually from the beginning. The “church”—in its organized forms—has always loved itself for excluding, and sometimes for killing, unbelievers and heretics. While Berry struggles with organized forms of Christianity, he takes comfort in scripture and he has found his own source of faith in God’s creation. Because he views the natural world as the work of God, he interacts with that world in specific ways in order to maintain the health of such a precious gift.

Berry has come to be viewed as a ‘Christian’ writer, and the undertones of his faith certainly shine through when he speaks about God’s creation. His own understanding of belief has formed over many years of personal study and personal journey. “For a while, I thought I didn’t have a religion. But then, the Bible and the hymns had sunk very deep into me. And, I think other people thought I was a Christian writer before I thought I was myself.” He considers his own Christianity to be aligned with the Christianity of Jesus and the relation of that faith through the Gospels. Such a

4 Ibid., 118-119.

faith does not deny any of the elements of Christianity’s past, good or bad. It recognizes
the pitfalls of orthodoxy and seeks wisdom in the peripheral.

The encrusted religious structure is not changed by its institutional dependents—they are part of the crust. It is changed by one who goes alone to the wilderness, where he fasts and prays, and returns with cleansed vision…. In going to the wilderness he goes to the margin, where he is surrounded by possibilities—by no means all good—that orthodoxy has excluded…. He returns to the community, not necessarily with new truth, but with a new vision of the truth; he sees it more whole than before.⁶

This marginal Christianity is one of the foundational elements of Berry’s agrarian environmental ethic. He is concerned that the same orthodoxy that can be observed in religion can also be seen in agricultural practice, “an agriculture…which is nearly uniform in technology and in its general assumptions and ambitions over a whole continent, and which, like many religions, aspires to become ‘universal’ by means of a sort of evangelism, proclaiming that ‘Other countries would do well to copy it.’”⁷ Berry advances a Christian ethic of ecumenical understanding and an agrarian ethic that relies on diversity for sustainability. Such an ethic relies on the very Christian notion of a moral order.

A moral order is apparent, once again, in Berry’s description of the difference between those who wish to exploit the earth and those who wish to nurture it.

The exploiter is a specialist, and expert; the nurturer is not. The exploiter’s goal is money, profit; the nurturer’s goal is health—his land’s health, his own, his family’s, his community’s, his country’s…. The competence of the exploiter is in organization; that of nurturer is in order—a human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery.⁸

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⁷ Ibid., 175.

⁸ Ibid., 7-8.
This ‘human order’ answers to an earthly order, as well as a divine order. The relationship between humanity and the earth creates, for Berry, the epitome of morality. In order to maintain healthy human populations, it is imperative that the health of the planet be maintained through human morality. “A healthy culture is a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration. It reveals the human necessities and the human limits. It clarifies our inescapable bonds to the earth and to each other. It assures the necessary restraints are observed, that the necessary work is done, and that it is done well.”9 The ability to create a healthy world is dependent upon human familiarity with place, and subsequent reverence for that place. Such familiarity is contingent upon settlement (staying put), and forming a deep knowledge of place that, in turn, creates a deep reverence of place. If we can understand that the destruction of the earth is the result of an absence of such a morality, then we might begin to understand Berry’s concept of an ‘absolute good.’

Having exploited ‘relativism’ until, as a people, we have no deeply believed reasons for doing anything, we must now ask ourselves if there is not, after all, an absolute good by which we must measure ourselves and for which we must work. The absolute good, I think, is health—not in the merely hygienic sense of personal health, but the health, the wholeness, finally the holiness, of Creation, of which our personal health is only a share.10

Such a notion of absolute good has caused many critics to label Berry a foundationalist. Foundationalism is defined as “a theory of knowledge or form of epistemology which assumes that all knowledge is built upon certain principles, givens, or unquestionable

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9 Ibid., 43.

10 Ibid., 222.
knowledge.”¹¹ For Berry, the existence of an absolute good is the basic, irrefutable truth upon which his methodology is built. And the maintenance of humanity’s recognition of this absolute good is found in those who practice restraint in implementing advances in science and technology to alleviate the necessity of human labor. His focus is, therefore, centered on the importance of tradition and tried-and-true methods, rather than reliance on an unequivocal notion of the value of progress.

Modern American agriculture has made itself a ‘science’ and has preserved itself within its grandiose and destructive assumptions by cutting itself off from the moral tradition (as it has done also from the agricultural tradition) and confining its vision and its thought within the bounds of internal accounting. Agriculture experts and ‘agribusinessmen’ are free to believe that their system works because they have accepted a convention which makes ‘external,’ and therefore irrelevant, all evidence that it does not work. ‘External’ questions are not asked or heard, much less answered.¹²

Berry is critical of the exclusive use of the scientific method in the formation of an ethical system. Agricultural practice should be hinged upon a common notion of morality, driven by belief and experience, tradition and attention to what works to sustain health.

This association of tradition and experience in the intelligence of a living person is humanly broad and deep. It is biologically, agriculturally, economically, politically, and culturally sound. It is deeply founded, solid enough to build a civilization upon, whereas the orthodox agriculture can support nothing but the shallow expansion of a bookkeeper’s economy.¹³

Berry has chosen to base his own farming practice in the ethics of Christian morality. He encourages others to recognize interconnectivity and unity of God’s creation, but he is


¹² Wendell Berry, The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 172.

¹³ Ibid., 193.
also open to the inclusion of people of other faiths and philosophies, promoting democratic conversation in the attempt to solve our environmental ills.

In opposition to Berry’s claims of unity and questioning of scientific processes in the place of moral order, some have espoused a pragmatic approach to environmental ethics.

On the one side, there is a temptation to feel a bit embarrassed for Berry, who does not seem to have received the news that the old Enlightenment view of science, with its mechanical world, its quest for certainty, its various attempts at reduction, and its notion that there are a finite number of problems to be solved—that such a concept of science is long since out of fashion. On the other side, one is somewhat amazed: Berry receives Guggenheim fellowships and sells loads of books. It is probably safe to conclude that the majority of his many readers find his tandem foundationalism very much to their liking.\(^\text{14}\)

I agree that it safe to conclude that there is a plethora of people who agree with Berry’s foundationalist approach. I think that this is because many of us out here in the world are foundationalists ourselves. We believe that there are some concepts and practices that are foundationaly wrong, such as slavery or rape. And in relation to that there are some concepts and practices that are foundationaly right, such as sustaining life, health and happiness. While Berry comes at environmental issues from a Christian agrarian morality, his approach is ecumenical and inclusive. The essential truth, which he asserts we can all agree to, is this notion of health as absolutely good. And while the pragmatists conclude that truth is always a vanishing point that should constantly be in question with relevance to new experience, they continue to agree with Berry on this point. “Because natural processes are necessary to our survival, we have an obligation to protect the process itself. The process is an ongoing one by nature, thus the preservation of it as

ongoing is requisite: it must go on into the future.”

The pragmatists are in agreement with the foundationalists when it comes to the truth of the goodness of human survival. While they may claim that this, too, is a truth that may be altered or questioned with the advent of new experiences, I highly doubt that we will ever question the logic of the foundational quality that this truth actually holds in reality.

Another questionable element of the pragmatist philosophy is apparent in the frequency of determining the notion of progress and growth as an indubitable positive. Richard Rorty compliments the pragmatist ethic for its “willingness to refer all questions of ultimate justification to the future, to the substance of things hoped for. If there is anything distinctive about pragmatism it is that it substitutes the notion of a better human future for the notions of ‘reality,’ ‘reason’ and ‘nature.’”

While Rorty views such a philosophy as praiseworthy in that it provides hope for the building of a better society in the future, Berry warns against such obsession with and reliance on the idea of a better future. “[T]he most prolific source of justifications for exploitive behavior has been the future. The exploitive mind characteristically puts itself in charge of the future. The future is a time that cannot conceivably be reached except by industrial progress and economic growth.”

Berry cautions us about becoming a part of this ‘cult of the future.’ “[T]he cult of the future has turned us all into prophets. The future is the time when

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17 Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 58.
science will have solved all our problems, gratified all our desires.”¹⁸ Such obsession with the future causes us to neglect the pressing problems of the present and ignore the valuable lessons of the past. With reference to the environmental issue that is most central in Berry’s work, the mechanization of agricultural practice, the cult of the future has extended their reach in imagining the farm of the future. “The issue that is raised most directly by these farms-of-the-future is that of control. The ambition underlying these model farms is that of total control—a totally controlled agricultural environment.”¹⁹ In this quest for total control, any semblance of mindful practice is lost. The complex and mysterious relationships that make up the land and that are approached in the act of farming are ignored in the constructed illusion that human beings are capable of such limitless control through mechanization and specialization.

Mechanization and ignorant practice are most evident for Berry in corporate farming. Such arrogant notions of the human ability to control the processes of the earth are inherent within the ignorance of the ‘expert’ and the ‘cult of the future.’ “The reason would seem to be that the specialists and the idea of control also have a symbiotic relationship, that neither can exist without the other. The specialist puts himself in charge of one possibility. By leaving out all other possibilities, he enfranchises his little fiction of total control.”²⁰ If we choose to live in a world of experts, then we are choosing the corporate model of existence. This model is proliferated by mechanization, which is upheld by a false sense of control.

¹⁸ Ibid., 57.

¹⁹ Ibid., 70.

²⁰ Ibid., 70-71.
Based on the foundational truth of the goodness of health, Berry promotes demechanization of farming, despecialization of work, deinstitutionalization of belief, and simplification of life. Such simplicity should not automatically be associated with a simple or unintelligent mind. Again, the simplicity that Berry insists upon is one that is based in diversity not generalization. “The disease of the modern character is specialization.”

For Berry, specialization represents the disintegration of something naturally integrated. His focus tends to be on the effects of specialization within agriculture, however the reach of the specialist does not end at the pasture gate. “Specialization is thus seen to be a way of institutionalizing, justifying, and paying highly for a calamitous disintegration and scattering-out of the various functions of character: workmanship, care, conscience, responsibility.” The specialist is taught to do only one thing, debilitating her ability to function in a variety of situations due to lack of knowledge and singularity of skill. Those who specialize are known as experts, but their expertise is, in fact, limiting in scope. This separation of skill-sets and limitation of ability is ignorant of the interconnectivity of life, which Berry recognizes as essentially apparent in the natural world and in humanity.

The community disintegrates because it loses the necessary understandings, forms, and enactments of the relations among materials and processes, principles and actions, ideals and realities, past and present, present and future, men and women, body and spirit, city and country, civilization and wilderness, growth and decay, life and death—just as the individual character loses the sense of a responsible involvement in these relations.

\[\text{21 Ibid., 19.} \]

\[\text{22 Ibid., 19.} \]

\[\text{23 Ibid., 21.} \]
Such generalization also deludes our understanding of the natural world and our conceptualization of an environmental ethic. “The concept of country, homeland, dwelling place becomes simplified as ‘the environment’—that is, what surrounds us. Once we see our place, our part of the world, as surrounding us, we have already made a profound division between it and ourselves.”

The environment takes on an identity of the profane in the process of this division. Land is seen as purely material, as merely commodity, and instrumental value becomes the focus of land use rather than intrinsic value. Therefore, with specialization, there is no sense of the bond between human culture and place.

Berry suggests simplicity of life and diversity of skill as a solution to this girth of institutionalization. “The only real, practical, hope-giving way to remedy the fragmentation that is the disease of the modern spirit is a small and humble way—a way that a government or agency or organization or institution will never think of, though a person may think of it: one must begin in one’s own life the private solutions that can only in turn become public solutions.”

In order to affect the mentality of all humankind, one must begin with discipline of the self. If an individual strives to gain complexity of skill, to live a life of responsibility, and to care deeply for the earth, then that individual acknowledgement will reverberate out into the world and create positive change in our present society. Again, Berry does not want to ignore the possibility of change at the individual level, but he also wants to encourage communication between individuals to enact that change positively in the world.

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24 Ibid., 22.

25 Ibid., 23.
Berry’s own Christian morality has served to help in the creation of a unique environmental ethic. Because he identifies with a Christian moral code, Berry has come to appreciate the value of distinct Christian communities as examples of working moral systems of thought and action. The Amish people represent a prime example of simplicity of life and diversity of skill for Berry. Amish farming and religion constitute the most significant tenets of Berry’s environmental ethic.

I do not recommend, of course, that all farmers should become Amish, nor do I want to suggest that the Amish are perfect people or that their way of life is perfect. What I want to recommend are some Amish principles:

1. They have preserved their families and communities.
2. They have maintained the practices of neighborhood.
3. They have maintained the domestic arts of kitchen and garden, household and homestead.
4. They have limited their use of technology so as not to displace or alienate available human labor or available free sources of power (the sun, wind, water, and so on).
5. They have limited their farms to a scale that is compatible both with the practice of neighborhood and with the optimum use of low-power technology.
6. By the practices and limits already mentioned, they have limited their costs.
7. They have educated their children to live at home and serve their communities.
8. They esteem farming as both a practical art and a spiritual discipline.

These principles define a world to be lived in by human beings, not a world to be exploited by managers, stockholders, and experts.26

The Amish exemplify an existence that takes into account a comprehension of limits and care that is characterized by Berry’s concept of ‘kindly use’ of the land. Their concern for communal values and farming as a spiritual practice typifies his understanding of interconnectivity and non-duality. “[I]t cannot be denied that they have mastered one of the fundamental paradoxes of our condition: we can make ourselves whole only by accepting our partiality, by living within our limits, by being human—not by trying to be

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gods. By restraint they make themselves whole.”27 Humanity can only realize its wholeness through the recognition of the need for others in order for the individual to survive. This conclusion is why diversity becomes necessary in order to achieve unity, and why democratic deliberation becomes necessary for positive results and policy change. This fact has been largely ignored by the corporate farm, which represents the majority of working farms in America. “For the principle of diversity, in nature and in earlier agriculture, and for the principle of unity that includes and depends upon diversity, orthodox agriculture has substituted a dull, tight uniformity, not only ignorant of other possibilities, but scared of them, and vengeful in its ignorance.”28 In contrast to such practice, the Amish have chosen to become masters of farm work and simple life, acquiring a myriad of skills through their life in the farm community. In this way they have been extremely successful in accomplishing a diversity of wisdom within the context of a holistic society, and this is the type of existence that Berry wishes to emulate through his own Christian agrarian ethic.

27 Wendell Berry, The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 95.

28 Ibid., 180.
Chapter Four

Sustainable Stewardship: The Agrarian Voice in a Cooperative Environmental Ethic

Let us pledge allegiance to the flag and to the national sacrifice areas for which it stands, garbage dumps and empty holes, sold out for a higher spire on the rich church, the safety of voyagers in golf carts, the better mood of the stock market. Let us feast today, though tomorrow we starve. Let us gorge upon the body of the Lord, consuming the earth for our greater joy in Heaven, that fair Vacationland. Let us wander forever in the labyrinths of our self-esteem. Let us evolve forever toward the higher consciousness of the machine. The spool of our engine-driven fate unwinds, our history now outspeeding thought, and the heart is a beatable tool.

Wendell Berry “Let Us Pledge”

The environmentalist movement and the American nation as a whole are filled with many voices of concern when it comes to the questions of how to build a better world and maintain a healthy environment. The voice of the farmer is but one among many; however, it is an important voice to consider, because the farmer is the individual who feeds us and who cares for the land that provides us with indispensable sustenance. If we fail to listen to the voice of the farmer, our environmental ethic will most certainly lack the sagacity that such expertise can provide. And, if we fail to question the practices of those who cultivate our land, the very health of humanity is at stake. Wendell Berry admits that his background and upbringing have influenced his beliefs, his intentions, and his sense of value with regards to agricultural practice as it relates to a broader sense of human life and culture. While it is fitting that his ethic would be based in the agrarian

tradition, it is also important that each member of the human culture is aware of the impact of such an ethic in each and every one of our daily lives.

The environmental crisis is described, first, by Berry as a ‘crisis of culture.’ The landscapes that we describe as homelands have become places that we strive to escape. The modern individual of American industrial society seeks to distinguish themselves from the landscapes and stories of their parents and their grandparents. “The history of our time has been to a considerable extent the movement of the center of consciousness away from home.”\(^2\) The search for a ‘New World’ was followed by its founding; the search for new technology has been followed by the industrialization of our world and the migration of its people from country farm to city factory; and, the search for a new self has pushed many of us farther and farther away from what we call home. We are a culture of exploration, appropriation, and exploitation. Once we have found a new place to conquer, we map it and categorize it, build it up and break it down to our hearts content. We use it until we have used it up, displacing those people who consider it a homeland in the process. After an instrumental value is assessed we continue to exploit the place until the rivers are dry and the soil is utterly depleted, and then we must finally displace our selves with the machines that comprise our modern society.

In all this, few people whose testimony would have mattered have seen the connection between the ‘modernization’ of agricultural techniques and the disintegration of the culture and the communities of farming—and the consequent disintegration of the structures of urban life. What we have called agricultural progress has, in fact, involved the forcible displacement of millions of people.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) Ibid., 41.
As a culture we have confused the negative reality of exponential and unhealthy growth beyond our means with the positive ideal of never ending progress. This crisis of culture is also, at its roots, a crisis of agriculture.

Each place we subject to our special sense of ownership, is a place that must sustain our ever-growing human population. Therefore, agriculture will always be a necessity where human life is concerned. Berry has spoken of the necessity of wilderness: “We need wilderness as a standard of civilization and as a cultural model. Only by preserving areas where nature’s processes are undisturbed can we preserve an accurate sense of the impact of civilization upon its natural sources.”

And: “If we are to be properly humble in our use of the world, we need places that we do not use at all. We need the experience of leaving something alone.” Such statements are exemplary of the environmental consciousness of those whom Berry can count as teachers and as friends.

For example, Aldo Leopold describes a ‘land ethic’ as follows:

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in the community, but his ethics prompt him also to cooperate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for). The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals: the land.

Berry’s own environmental ethic accounts for the inclusion of land as part of an interdependent community of life, and as something of both intrinsic and instrumental worth. He takes the land ethic of Leopold a step further by focusing on the need to question our own ethical practices within the realm of agriculture. His choice to rely

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4 Ibid., 30.
5 Ibid., 30.
upon the agrarian tradition to provide solutions for our most acute environmental problems is summed up in the following statement:

[W]e cannot hope—for reasons practical and humane, we cannot even wish—to preserve more than a small portion of the land in wilderness. Most of it we will have to use. The conservation mentality swings from self-righteous outrage to self-deprecation because it has neglected this issue. Its self-contradictions can only be reconciled—and the conservation impulse made to function as ubiquitously and variously as it needs to—by understanding, imagining, and living out the possibility of ‘kindly use.’ Only that can dissolve the boundaries that divide people from the land and its care, which together are the source of human life. There are many kinds of land use, but the one that is most widespread and in need of consideration is that of agriculture.  

Berry is realistic about the impossibility of relinquishing the land that is currently utilized as cultivated space. While wilderness space contributes to the health of our planet as an ecosystem and must be preserved, it is the agricultural space that needs the most serious consideration. This reality is apparent when the state of the American farm is assessed. The modern American farm is more and more readily identified as a business, allowing for standardization of practices and reliance on the corporate model. This model ignores the diversity of land, as well as the diversity of cultures that arise out of and thrive within such variances. On the corporate farm, questions of how to ethically care for these environments and for the human populations who call them home are often dictated by profit margins rather than by the health of the land or the quality of life that the land affords. Berry suggests that we come to terms with the fact that we must use much of our land for food production, but that land must ethically consist of smaller farmsteads, encouraging the farmer to gain an intimate understanding of the land that he has chosen to cultivate.

[K]indly use is a concept that of necessity broadens, becoming more complex and diverse, as it approaches action. The land is too various in its kinds, climates, conditions, declivities, aspects, and histories to conform to any generalized understanding or to prosper under generalized treatment. The use of land cannot be both general and kindly—just as forms of good manners, generally applied (applied, that is, without consideration of differences), are experienced as indifference, bad manners. To treat every field, or every part of every field, with the same consideration is not farming but industry. Kindly use depends upon intimate knowledge, the most sensitive responsiveness and responsibility. As knowledge (hence, use) is generalized, essential values are destroyed.\(^8\)

These essential values of an absolute good in the health of both land and life-forms are lost within the corporate model, and can only be maintained within an agrarian ethic based on stewardship and smallness of scale.

For Berry, cultivated space should work in connection to the wilderness space that surrounds it. This notion can be traced back to an ancestry marked by naturalism and an affinity for the life of the homesteader. Henry David Thoreau kept a field of beans, which he writes extensively about in his most liminal work, *Walden*. His words attest to the significance of the relationship between cultivated field and wild forest floor. “Mine was, as it were, the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field. They were beans cheerfully returning to their wild and primitive state that I cultivated.”\(^9\) Thoreau insists that his field was successful because he farmed in this ‘natural’ way. He states: “I came to love my rows, my beans…. They attached me to the earth.”\(^10\) Thoreau felt a connection to the earth,

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\(^8\) Ibid., 31.


\(^10\) Ibid., 112.
which resulted from his own recognition of the relationship of his crop to the wild
landscape in which it was cultivated. In a similar fashion, Berry contends that a healthy
farm is one that coexists seamlessly and naturally with its wild surroundings in a
symbiotic relationship, promoting ongoing health and flourishing.

A healthy farm will have trees on it—woodlands, where forest trees are native, but also fruit and nut trees, trees for shade and for windbreaks. Trees will be there for their usefulness: for food, lumber, fence posts, firewood, shade, and shelter. But they will also be there for comfort and pleasure, for the wildlife that they will harbor, and for their beauty. The woodlands bespeak the willingness to let live that keeps wildness flourishing in the settled place.\(^\text{11}\)

The healthy farm is one on which both cultivated space and wilderness space are considered of intrinsic and instrumental value, because they both perpetuate health in their interdependence and in their mutual thriving in relation to one another. Berry’s agrarian ethic is, therefore, understood best as an inclusive ethic, striving toward the health of all environments through recognition and maintenance of their unique qualities and essential diversity.

Berry’s agrarian ethic of stewardship is enriched when juxtaposed with the ethical thought and stance of his most respected colleague and friend, Gary Snyder. While he comes at the environmental issue from a very different religious perspective, and from a non-agricultural focus, Snyder concludes the same sense of responsibility toward the natural world. “Stewardship means, for most of us, find your place on the planet, dig in, and take responsibility from there—the tiresome but tangible work of school boards, county supervisors, local foresters, local politics, even while holding in mind the largest scale of potential change. Get a sense of a workable territory, learn about it, and start

acting point by point.” Snyder’s understanding of stewardship starting with the individual and spreading out to change the community and the world is easily aligned with Berry’s own definition of stewardship. Berry asserts that the individual decision to be mindful of one’s effect on the environment and to consider that influence in the way one chooses to live is the most impacting of decisions that anyone can make in this life.

To use knowledge and tools in a particular place with good long-term results is not heroic. It is not a grand action visible for a long distance or a long time. It is a small action, but more complex and difficult, more skillful and responsible, more whole and enduring, than most grand actions. It comes of a willingness to devote oneself to work that perhaps only the eye of Heaven will see in its full intricacy and excellence.

Like Berry, Snyder concludes that the need for ideological and methodological change stems from unchecked growth and the ignorant notion of the value of never-ceasing ‘progress.’

The soil is being used up; in fact, humanity has become a locustlike blight on the planet that will leave a bare cupboard for its children—all the while living in a kind of addict’s dream of affluence, comfort, eternal progress, using the great achievements of science to produce software and swill…. It must be demonstrated ceaselessly that a continually “growing economy” is no longer healthy, but a cancer.

Berry’s remedy for this ‘cancer’ is implemented in the form of a revolutionary type of agricultural practice, based on traditional modes of farming and an ethic of treading lightly on the earth.

While many of Berry’s contemporaries have called for change in how we interact with the natural world, he has sought to enact such change in his daily life as a farmer.

12 Gary Snyder, A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 1995), 43-44.


He asserts: “If we cannot establish an enduring or even a humanly bearable economy by our attempt to defeat nature, then we will have to try living in harmony and cooperation with her.”\textsuperscript{15} This means that demechanization, despecialization, poly-culturalization and a decrease in acreage of farmland are a must. This call to action and implementation of practice within the boundaries of his farm provide a unique and beneficial environmental ethic, which speaks to the reality of our industrial and agricultural nation and its influential status as a world power. Berry contends that now, more than ever, the agrarian voice must become a part of the conversation about how to create a healthier society and a healthier environment.

Our federal system was conceived as a way to balance national unity with local self-determination and self-sufficiency. Terrorism has now made local economic integrity more necessary than ever before. All the regions of our country are dangerously dependent on long-distance transportation. The emphasis in agriculture should now be on genetic diversity, local adaptation, and conservation of energy. We need, for a change, an agriculture policy to focus above all on the health of the land and the economic prosperity of the smaller farmers rather than on the enrichment of the agribusiness corporations.\textsuperscript{16}

Berry insists that as a nation we move forward with policies that emphasize self-sufficiency and lessen our dependency on foreign produced products. His focus is, once again, based in agriculture; however, he seeks to question our reliance on global corporations in all endeavors by advocating the support of the small and local as opposed to the large and global.

Berry’s agrarian concentration is novel in comparison to other Christian scholars and activist, as well. Thomas Berry (no relation), Christian theologian and Passionist

\textsuperscript{15} Wendell Berry, \textit{The Way of Ignorance: And Other Essays} (Shoemaker & Hoard, An Imprint of Avalon Publishing Group, 2005), 109.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 18.
priest, appeals to the appearance of Christ as a reminder for humanity of its special connection to the Christian God through a specific human/immanent figure. He states: “When we ask why the world is so beautiful, a very simple explanation is that some absolute power exists that chose to create it out of the urgency of its own reality. This self-sharing suggests not only that the divine could create such a beautiful world and bring humans into the world, but also could become present to this world in a very special, incarnational manner.”

His reliance on the Christian God and the appearance of God on earth in the form of Jesus Christ are both foundational and indispensable to Thomas Berry’s methodology. He goes on to say:

It is not simply that Christ comes into the world at a certain period, but he came into a world that was made originally in and through himself as the creative context of all existence. Christ as the principle of intelligibility is called the Word. The Word here is the logos, which has to do with intelligibility. The universe comes into existence through the Word. Later, the Word becomes flesh in a particular human individual.

Thomas asserts that the story of Christ, the story of the universe and the story of humanity are all the same story. This narrative could not have played out in any other way; humanity is the natural result of an emergent universe, and Christ is the natural result of a God who wishes to make himself unmistakably manifest in the world. He concludes:

Somehow there seems to be an affected quality in our efforts to establish an intimate presence to the natural world. In reality the story of the universe is our personal story, however we think of the universe. The reason for Christian aversion to the story of an emergent universe is that the story has generally been

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18 Ibid., 73.
told simply as a random physical process when in reality it needs to be told as a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical-material process from the beginning.  

Wendell Berry differs from Thomas Berry in that his theology is much more in the background while his methodology comes to the forefront of his argument. Through the use of agrarianism as the basis of his ethics, his solutions are more likely to resonate with those who stand outside of the Christian tradition. Wendell’s personal relationship with Christ and with the Gospels has certainly informed his ideology, but his prose suggests theory and method that goes beyond that relationship and opens his ideas and practices up for utilization beyond the Christian community. Thomas asserts: “In accord with the teachings of Saint Paul and Saint John we might perceive that there is a Christ dimension to this more extensive community of Earth and that what we do to this community we do in some manner to Christ himself.”

While Thomas’s argument is helpful within the context of Christian environmental concern and the practices of Christian environmentalists in relation to their understanding of the role of Christ as the incarnation of God on earth, Wendell’s call to implement an agrarian ethic based on his own Christian understanding of God’s presence in the world allows for an ease of application in a pluralistic society. Wendell Berry appeals to the centrality of agriculture as something that we all have in common. We all must have food in order to survive, and the health of that food determines the health of our bodies. Even if you do not believe that Christ was God manifest in the world, you might agree that destruction of the earth, which sustains you, is detrimental to life, and therefore not a recommended practice.

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20 Ibid., 45.
Berry’s emphasis on the agrarian ethic has also inspired many of his descendants to take his ideas in a different direction. Ellen F. Davis, a current professor of theology at Duke Divinity School, has recently written a work, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*, which examines the Biblical text through an agrarian theological lens. She concludes:

The essential understanding that informs the agrarian mind-set, in multiple cultures from ancient times to the present, is that agriculture has an ineluctably ethical dimension. Our largest and most indispensable industry, food production entails at every stage judgments and practices that bear directly on the health of the earth and living creatures, on the emotional, economic, and physical well-being of families and communities, and ultimately on their survival. Therefore, sound agricultural practice depends upon knowledge that is at one and the same time chemical and biological, economic, cultural, philosophical, and (following the understanding of most farmers in most places and times) religious. Agriculture involves questions of value and therefore of moral choice, whether or not we care to admit it.²¹

Davis’s understanding of agricultural practice as informing an environmental ethic mirrors Berry’s theoretical format. The extent to which she utilizes scripture obviously builds upon Berry’s Christian agrarianism through textual exegesis. However, Davis, unlike Berry, relies on the work of present agrarian writers in relation to the Bible. She is not interested in reinstating past agricultural practices to create a healthier planet. Her interest is more geared toward our agricultural future in recognition of textual references to an agrarian ethic. Davis’s interpretation of the following Biblical passage is enlightening:

> For the land which you are entering to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and watered it with your feet, like a garden of vegetables; but the land which you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from

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heaven, and a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.  

Davis states in interpretation of this verse:

This is a brilliant piece of agrarian rhetoric. The authorial voice of Deuteronomy is that of a skilled preacher, here urging the Israelites to reimagine their land as blessed precisely in the fragility that necessitates and therefore guarantees God’s unwavering attention. Thus indirectly the Deuteronomic preacher commands the people’s caring attention to their land, and that is the basic aim of all agrarian writing.

Davis continues to compare the voices of the Bible to the voices of contemporary agrarian writers, such as Berry. Her attempt at textual analysis is a fresh perspective based on the agrarian writing of Berry and others, but with an eye toward the justification of our agrarian present and future rather than any appeals to past practices.

Berry’s Christian agrarian ethic is part of an ongoing international, interfaith dialogue. His ideology has been a source of contention for some and a source of inspiration for others; but at its core, his methodology is one that must be taken into consideration in the present state of our environmental and agricultural world. Much of our environment consists of agricultural landscapes, and those landscapes and the way in which we act upon them affects the health of the environment as a whole. Through his work, Berry has made himself a part of this ecumenical conversation, advancing an agrarian ethic as part of the solution to environmental issues, which present themselves in the various realms of our global, political world.

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22 Duet. 11:10-12 (RSV).

Conclusion

Wendell Berry’s environmental ethic is inextricably linked to his life and work as a farmer, writer and activist in the modern world. However, his Christian agrarian ethic cannot be fully understood outside of the appeals he has made to our agricultural past in the hopes of creating a sustainable environmental ethic in the present, which can be easily maintained into the future. He asserts that the current corporate model, which relies heavily upon machine technology, monocultural crops, and the use of damaging chemicals is utilized in ignorance of an innate connection between all life, especially that between humans and the land, and this model is detrimental to human life and culture, to the soil, and to the living things which nurture our bodies as well as our souls. In reference to the vast amount of people who have accepted this way of farming as the norm he states:

They appear to have concluded that agriculture is purely a commercial concern; its purpose is to provide as much food as quickly and cheaply and with as few man-hours as possible and to be a market for machines and chemicals. It is, after all, “agribusiness”—not the land or the farming people—that now benefits most from agricultural research and that can promote humble academicians to highly remunerative and powerful positions in corporations and in government.¹

In opposition to the corporate model, Berry suggests a model that takes into account the reality of diversity and interconnectivity, a model based on the unity he perceives within the natural world. Such a model persists in recognition of the complexity of knowledge and skill that is required of any farmer who wishes to farm in acknowledgement of this unity.

That is because the best farming requires a farmer—a husbandman, a nurturer—not a technician or businessman. A technician or a businessman, given the

¹ Wendell Berry, The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 88.
necessary abilities and ambitions, can be made in a little while, by training. A
good farmer, on the other hand, is a cultural product; he is made by a sort of
training, certainly, in what his time imposes or demands, but he is also made by
generations of experience. This essential experience can only be accumulated,
tested, preserved, handed down in settled households, friendships, and
communities that are deliberately and carefully native to their own ground, in
which the past has prepared the present and the present safeguards the future.²

Berry comprehends the farmers respect for and utilization of past methodology as a
source of rich knowledge and as an obligation, because that knowledge is helpful in the
perpetuation of healthy farms and communities. His appeals to the past have caused
many to criticize him for being too nostalgic, and for having too much of an aversion to
progress. His response to such criticism is enlightening:

If you are making a criticism of the way things are, then you have to contend with
readers who need to find a way to dismiss you. One easy (and silly) way to
dismiss my argument is to call it nostalgic. There are indeed things in the past
that I look back upon with love. But I know that the past does not return. I have
been a steadfast critic of the past and certainly of my own inheritance from the
past. History demonstrates certain possibilities, both good and bad, that we had
better not forget. But my argument will stand or fall by the validity of its concern
for the preservation of necessary things. I’ve tried to learn from the waste or
destruction or ruin of some things that we might have inherited from the past, and
that we need now.³

Berry relates his understanding that the past is important as a reminder, as a history, and
as a source of knowledge about what works and what does not. He does not attempt to
revive the past in total, but simply to preserve the ‘necessary things,’ which are a source
of felicity in the present.

In relation to Berry’s supplication to our agricultural past, he insists that each
individual should relinquish his or her aversion to work. He exemplifies the benefits of

² Ibid., 45.

³ Morris Allen Grubbs, ed., Conversations with Wendell Berry, (Jackson: University
Press of Mississippi, 2007), 120-121.
human action through his own work as a farmer and as a writer. His farming practices exhibit the merit of working with the land, and the intimate relationship that should become apparent through the involvement in such work. His work as a writer serves as yet another example of the benefits of cultivating a diversity of skill in order to maintain a rich and variant human culture, while also serving as a mouthpiece for the dissemination of his own ideas and methods. As it is observed through the life of Wendell Berry, the act of working can best be described as ritual process. Work is performed in recognition of an essential sacrality within the natural world; however, the work that must be done is relative to the time and place in which a human agent is acting. Good work is done in recognition of a human connection to the natural world:

As the connections have been broken by the fragmentation and isolation of work, they can be restored by restoring the wholeness of work. There is work that is isolating, harsh, destructive, specialized or trivialized into meaninglessness. And there is work that is restorative, convivial, dignified and dignifying, and pleasing. Good work is not just the maintenance of connections—as one is now said to work “for a living” or “to support a family”—but the enactment of connections. It is living, and a way of living; it is not support for a family in the sense of an exterior brace or prop, but is one of the forms and acts of love.⁴

Such beneficial work must also be performed in acknowledgement of what is needed to sustain health. And Berry concludes, “everywhere the need is for diversity…. We need a greater range of species and varieties of plants and animals, of human skills and methods, so that the use may be fitted ever more sensitively and elegantly to the place.”⁵ Berry recommends a change of consciousness, a variation of our current, common mythology, by proclaiming the foundational actuality of the absolute goodness of health and the

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⁵ Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 114.
factuality of interdependence of life. However, by acknowledging the natural tendency of the flourishing of life through diverse means, relative to place and time, Berry allows for the proliferation of healthy human cultures and environments in a naturally variant and shifting world.

The same sense of openness is apparent within Berry’s religious background and current affiliation as a connecting force with regards to his own understanding of the link between himself and the environment. While Berry identifies as Christian, and has credited his Christian perception of creation as informing his agrarian environmental ethic, his respect for the importance and necessity of diversity lends itself to an inclusive, ecumenical and flexible ethic of care. He relates his own system of belief and practice to that of Christ, as his life and teachings are related in the Gospels. It is this type of Christianity that Berry strives to emulate in his own life, a Christianity of acceptance, inclusivity, and love. He makes a distinction between this type of Christianity and an institutional Christianity with reference to his understanding of ethics.

Our time increasingly requires of us the same free-hearted neighborliness, the same practical charity, that the Gospels require of us but the churches generally do not. The churches generally sit and watch and even approve while our society hurries brainlessly on with the industrialization of child-raising, education, medicine, all the pleasures and all the practical arts. And perhaps this is because religion itself is increasingly industrialized: concerned with quantity, “growth,” fashionable thought and an inane sort of expert piety.6

Berry acknowledges his Christian understanding of the world as one ideology among many, and he acknowledges its imperfections alongside what he perceives as its merits in the creation of an environmental ethic. While Christianity has undoubtedly been the source of Berry’s adherence to foundational truths, it has not hindered him from hearing

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the voiced concerns of people of other faiths and backgrounds, and has, in fact, helped him to relate the significance of diversity in the continuation of the health and prosperity of humanity.

Wendell Berry’s Christian agrarian environmental ethic is an ethic that is specific in its formulation but far-reaching in its inclusiveness, applicability and adaptability to place and time. Berry seeks to confront what he perceives as a common illusion of separateness and to help humanity to awaken to the reality of our unity with each other and with the natural world. Without such a sense of wholeness, he believes that we can never reach a state of wellness. This sense of wholeness is only attainable, for Berry, through a complex and penetrating knowledge of place built up over generations through the transference, accumulation, and protection of such knowledge because it is useful, tested, and necessary for survival. This kind of intimacy with place is both individual and communal and it relies upon a commitment to the health of oneself, to their community, and to the land that sustains them. And, this kind of intimacy thrives in recognition of immanent sacrality and the inviolable nature of the human responsibility to care for the earth. While the agrarian voice is one among many, the loss of that voice would surely be a loss that we, as a people defined by placed existence, could not afford. Wendell Berry has maintained that voice as a part of the ongoing conversation regarding the past, present, and future flourishing of the environment and of humankind as an integral part of the whole.
Bibliography


