BAPTIZED WITH THE SOIL

Christian Agrarians and the Crusade for Rural America

KEVIN M. LOWE

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Baptized with the Soil

Introduction

CONSECRATING THE AMERICAN COUNTRYSIDE

> *Living in the country district, having more joy in nature, loving the soil, loving the neighbor, loving God, we shall have a real civilization. . . . Some children thought the soil was very dirty, but now they begin to love it. . . . So once a week I send them to the soil and say "Baptise with the soil."*
>
> TOYOHIKO KAGAWA, 1936

OPEN ALMOST ANY major Christian publication today and you can find discussions about agriculture and rural life. Readers can easily find, for instance, critiques of corporate agricultural subsidies in the mainline *Christian Century*, while both Catholic and evangelical Protestant writers champion the virtues of organic gardening and the community-supported agriculture model—trends that appeal to people of many faiths and of none.[1] Leslie Leyland Fields, writing in *Christianity Today*, concludes that "as believers . . . we should be more thoughtful about food production and our treatment of God's creatures and his earth. . . . As we [are], we will discover another essential means of divining God's glory in our midst and living out our stewardship of God's earth, ourselves, and our neighbors."[2] Evangelical farmer Noah Sanders, for instance, calls his Alabama farm "born-again dirt," land on which he and his family try to carry out "God-glorifying agriculture that springs from a Biblical worldview."[3] Not all Christians agree, of course; many conventional farmers are probably devout Christians also, and resent these critiques, and many Christians who are not farmers probably have no opinion at all. Still, although it is not necessarily a majority view, there does seem to be a growing sense among American Christians that conventional agriculture—"big ag," heavily

reliant upon mechanization, fertilizers, and corporate contracts—is not the only, or necessarily the best, way to run a farm.

"Conventional agriculture," however, is really only one hundred years old. Only after World War I did American agriculture start to become *agribusiness*, built upon an industrial economy of scale, capital, and mechanization that has required fewer and fewer people to work the land. That process of industrialization sped up after World War II, and the number of people involved in farming plummeted. Conventional agriculture now accounts for the vast majority of American farm production. As a result of this change, rural communities have become smaller and more dispersed. Rather than the web of small farms and villages it once had been, much of the American countryside (especially in the richly productive Midwest) has been transformed into endless fields of mechanically harvested crops, with hardly a person or village in sight.[4]

Those who argue that today's agriculture is in need of reform echo the arguments of critics who experienced the initial industrialization of agriculture in the twentieth century. Yet much of the history of that original opposition has been lost, and the shift to agribusiness has come to seem straightforward and inevitable. *Baptized with the Soil* presents a new history of those who believed that the industrial model of agriculture was dangerous, because of the consequences it had for rural communities. It is a history of the belief that community is more important than the individual, that solidarity was more important than profit, and that one should put one's neighbor (and the earth) before oneself. It is a history of people who championed *agrarianism*—a vision of rural society based on family farms and small, face-to-face communities—in the face of agribusiness.

For much of the twentieth century, the loudest defenders of agrarian community values were actually Christian churches. Beginning around the time of World War I, American Christianity developed an influential agrarian voice. Critical of industrialization—though by no means opposed to the modern world—Christian agrarians staunchly defended family farms, small-scale agriculture, and rural communities that attempted to provide a measure of justice and opportunity for everyone. They stood by the idea of the rural community when many other social leaders were willing to sacrifice it to the twin goals of progress and modernization. Redoubling their efforts during the Depression, and then maintaining them for decades to come, they promoted environmental conservation, teaching churchgoers about the importance of preserving the soil for future generations and developing a rural spirituality based

on appreciation for the natural world. In other words, they argued that a healthy nation required healthy rural communities and healthy rural churches.

Biblical scholar Ellen F. Davis has recently argued that agrarianism is fundamental to the worldview of the Bible.[5] Yet in our histories of Christianity, agrarianism plays little if any role. Scholarship on Christian agrarianism in the United States has examined only its Catholic dimension.[6] *Baptized with the Soil* explores a more active, more wide-reaching, and more influential wing of Christian agrarianism—mainline Protestantism. Protestant and Catholic agrarianism largely operated on separate, though parallel, tracks. Although they shared many assumptions, mainline Protestant agrarians had wider publicity and enjoyed a closer relationship with the state than Catholics did. That close relationship would prove critical for the spreading of agrarian ideas.

That relationship allowed Protestant churches to have a strong influence on the national conversation about the future of the countryside. This book shows how closely religion became entwined with the power of government, especially through state universities and cooperative extension. Although scholars have tended to portray the state, and state universities, as almost single-minded proponents of agribusiness, this book demonstrates the degree to which state universities and extension services supported the alternative agrarian vision at the same time. For much of the twentieth century, the circles of church and state in the United States easily overlapped. Protestant agrarians took advantage of this blurry boundary to advance their goals. Though not always recognized, their legacies have been long-lasting.

The Transformation of Rural Life

At the beginning of the twentieth century, American farmers shared a general optimism about what the future might hold. American agriculture was booming, adding nearly a million farms and doubling in gross income between 1900 and 1920. In those twenty years the average farm tripled in value. Much of the nation's produce was exported, generating income averaging about fifteen billion dollars a year.[7]

But amid this economic boom, the culture and society of rural America were changing. Americans were leaving rural communities in significant numbers. In 1900, 40 percent of the American people had lived on farms,

with roughly another 20 percent living in rural villages (population centers of fewer than 2000 people). By 1920, that rural majority had disappeared. The 1920 census revealed that, for the first time, more than half of all Americans lived in urban places. The rest continued to live in the countryside, both on farms and in villages, but the census data clearly indicated that the nation would become even more urban as time went on.[8] By the 1920s, this demographic shift had left the countryside both richer and poorer. In the South especially, wealthy farmers found it increasingly easy to consolidate and industrialize, leaving small farmers (both black and white) at an increasing disadvantage, and driving a broad wedge between rural rich and poor.[9]

The boom years of American agriculture came to a close shortly after World War I. During the war, European and military need had driven up American commodity crop production and prices. After the war, when international demand slackened, prices fell precipitously. Trapped in a bind, many American farmers continued to produce at the same high rates as during the war. This resulted in large commodity surpluses that only drove down prices further. And because so many farmers had expanded their operations on credit during the war years, they owed huge sums to banks and insurance companies. Farmers began to struggle with a recession even while other sectors of the economy continued to expand.[10]

From that point onward, American agriculture and rural society began to undergo a rapid industrial revolution, shifting to a mindset that increasingly encouraged farmers to expand, mechanize, and streamline, after the fashion of a factory. Those who could not were increasingly forced out of farming. The general success of the non-farm economy made heavy farm machinery like tractors and combines cheaper and more accessible. Farmers had already bought almost two million cars by 1920. Companies began to market other consumer products directly to farmers, encouraging them to buy radios, telephones, and electric home appliances, in order to be more like their urban counterparts. Industrialization seemed to take advantage of the farm recession in order to quickly update and modernize rural life.[11]

It was difficult for many Americans to digest changes like these, because many people were accustomed to treating the rural countryside as the nation's moral rudder. Many Americans—mostly from the middle and upper classes, and mostly white—believed that farming was not just a way to make a living; it was a way to make a moral life. That moral

influence, they believed, was necessary for the nation as a whole. "That the farm is the corner-stone of our national prosperity is a trite but true estimate," wrote Mabel Carney of Illinois State University in 1912. "Whatever affects the country is therefore of national concern, not only because of the material dependence of society upon farmers but because of the social, educational, and moral influence of so large a percentage of the general population."[12] Her language typified the kind of rhetoric that characterized farmers as paragons of national virtue.

According to this rhetoric, the countryside offered fewer temptations than did cities. Life on the land was family-centered, rooted in dignified work and wholesome recreation. Children raised in such an environment, proponents argued, could grow up morally upright and go on to do great things. Presbyterian leader Henry McLaughlin, for instance, stated emphatically at a 1929 meeting of the Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia that "the nation must be kept pure and virile in its ideals at the sources of its supply. . . . The country communities are the springs, the seed plots and the nurseries of the nation's life." McLaughlin noted that the nation's most prominent business, political, and educational leaders had grown up in rural communities. "The national safety, therefore, will depend upon having a sufficient number of such communities from which the nation may draw its leadership."[13]

But many who championed rural life as wholesome, moral, and necessary also believed that cultural rot was setting in under the surface. Even as farming itself was booming at the beginning of the century, many argued that the demographic and social pressures being put on the countryside were destabilizing rural communities. In 1907, for instance, Kenyon Butterfield, president of Massachusetts Agricultural College (now UMass Amherst), admitted that rural communities suffered from isolation, a lack of organization, poor education, and declining morality.[14] These problems constituted a major challenge to society, he believed, but one that many people were eager to solve: "The whole nation is astir with it; its significance is commonly acknowledged; and remedies for its solution are proposed on every hand," wrote Mabel Carney.[15]

The rhetoric of crisis in the countryside was one of the dominant narratives of American society in the early twentieth century. The notion of crisis gave rise to a variety of possible solutions. One possible remedy was to simply apply the tools and resources of economic modernization to the countryside. The Progressive spirit of national uplift and scientific reform that dominated American urban politics at the turn of the century found

a rural outlet in the form of the Country Life movement. This loose network of social scientists and reformers typically advocated bringing the scientific "progress" of urban America to the countryside—improving schools, churches, workplaces, and farms themselves to make them more efficient, streamlined, and modern.[16] The Country Life Commission created by President Theodore Roosevelt, for instance, delivered a report in 1909 proposing better roads, public health facilities, better postal delivery, and cooperative organizations for farmers.[17] Other groups, like the American Country Life Association (founded in 1919) and the smaller but very similar Association for the Advancement of Negro Country Life (founded in 1928), advocated scientific farming, the wise use of technology, and cooperatives as solutions to the economic and social problems of the countryside.[18]

Making the countryside scientific went hand in hand with the industrial transformation of agriculture. The Great Depression solidified this transformation. Economic pressures forced many poor farmers to sell their land, allowing wealthier farmers to consolidate and increase the size of their farms. Franklin D. Roosevelt's programs expanded electrification, upgraded rural roads, and encouraged farmers to purchase more labor-saving technologies. At the same time, New Deal policies created a new agricultural regime based largely on subsidies, production restriction, and acreage allotment—a collection of legislation that "provided a base for all farm programs for the next half century."[19] After World War II, these changes would speed up. Farmers would increasingly purchase things they had once produced on the farm, such as seeds, fertilizer, and animal feed. They began to use greater quantities of synthetic chemical pesticides and herbicides. They increasingly began to produce crops on contract for large corporations. The number of Americans involved in farming started declining even more rapidly—half the farm population vanished between 1920 and 1960.[20]

Although this was a long-range trend, by the 1930s it had become clear that American agriculture was being reorganized as an industry like any other. Yet the solutions proposed by Country Life reformers and others who worried about the "rural crisis" actually destabilized rural communities even further. Industrialization and mechanization had a drastic human cost. If these changes continued, fewer and fewer people would ultimately be needed to work the land, further upsetting the long-standing community networks in place in rural areas. Unlike Country Life reformers who really wanted to urbanize the country, some reformers began to

talk much more about the intrinsic benefits of small rural towns, villages, and family farms—the foundational tenets of agrarianism.

What Is Agrarianism?

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, agrarians were not necessarily agriculturalists. The word referred to a radical belief in social leveling through the equal distribution of land, and in antebellum America, the term was often pejorative.[21] The term was subsequently applied to the populist political and economic interests of farm organizations like the Farmers Alliance, the Grange, and the formal People's Party. Members of these groups advocated cooperative purchasing and marketing of farm machinery and farm products, opposed banks and urban political machines, and eventually became embroiled in debates over monetary policy.[22] Their positions preserved, for many observers, the radical political threat of the earlier use of the term.

Critics in the early twentieth century still harkened back to the populists, referring to agrarianism as concerted political action by a bloc of farmers.[23] But contemporary thinkers knew that the practicality of populism had expired. The term generally lost its radical populist force and began more generally to refer to anything having to do with farming or rural life; economist Troy Cauley, for example, defined agrarianism in 1935 as simply "an economic and social system under which the chief method of making a living is that of tilling the soil."[24]

Since the early twentieth century, agrarianism has become an attitude primarily moral and philosophical rather than political and economic. As philosopher Paul B. Thompson has recently articulated it, the central argument of agrarianism is "the idea that farming practices have the power to shape the moral character of the individuals who engage in them, and that a society's farming culture—its means of subsistence—reverberates through all its institutions."[25]

In expressing this moral conviction about agriculture, some agrarian literature became overtly nostalgic, less concerned with creating the future than reenacting the myth of a better past. This usage was typified by a group of Vanderbilt University academics known as the Southern Agrarians, who published a manifesto in 1930 called *I'll Take My Stand*. This archconservative essay decried the industrialization of agriculture in the South, calling for the rebirth of Southern manual farming culture. Not only were the Southern Agrarians nostalgic for the farming past, but

the past they sought to revive was a segregated one, based explicitly on slavery. The Southern Agrarians yearned for what they saw as the genteel plantation culture built on coerced African labor.[26]

Although groups like the Southern Agrarians helped construct agrarianism not so much as active politics as myth, the Southern Agrarians' commitment to the plantation was anachronistic and unusual. A myth more typical of twentieth-century agrarians, and one that continues to have tremendous power in the American popular consciousness, was the "Jeffersonian myth." This was the iconic ideal of the virtuous American yeoman farmer, standing outside the marketplace as a democratic bulwark against the oppressive forces of capitalism. As Thompson notes, Jefferson believed that small farmers were the most likely to defend their country because of the work they had invested in improving the land. In reality, though, farmers had always participated in both the formal and informal commercial markets.[27]

In the 1920s and 1930s, a visible "back to the land" movement based on this Jeffersonian myth encouraged Americans to abandon industry and consumerism.[28] Homesteaders like Bolton Hall produced manuals describing how to live productively on just a few acres of land. Helen and Scott Nearing moved to a remote corner of Vermont in 1930, built a home and a life by hand, and eventually described their experiences in the 1954 manifesto *Living the Good Life*. Marketing expert Ralph Borsodi moved to land outside of New York City, founded the School of Living, and published numerous writings criticizing industrialism, like the 1929 screed *This Ugly Civilization*.[29] Inspired as they may have been by Jefferson's tradition, the back-to-the-landers' vision of the past expressed the values and desires of their own historical moment rather than a true understanding of Jefferson and his time.

Agrarianism today is a network of ideas about the importance of place, stability, work, and the health of the land. It can represent a simple, romantic idealization of country morality. At the other end of the spectrum, reactionary agrarians can oppose industrialization and modernization entirely and seek to preserve or construct an imagined ideal of past conditions. Others seek a middle ground within the modern world—either by simply protecting existing rural communities, or by growing new rural communities and reducing the impact of urbanization.[30]

One of the central values of the kind of philosophical agrarianism that Thompson describes is the belief that the small family farm represents the ideal working relationship between people and the earth. Agrarians have

consistently praised the dedication that small-scale farming requires—to the health of the land, to animals being raised, to the family that would grow up on the land and that would extend that dedication into future generations. Agrarianism, in the way the subjects of this book use the term, therefore means a small-scale rural life devoted to place and stability rather than growth, and communities built upon that devotion. Agrarianism is the direct opposite of agribusiness.[31]

The American Family Farm

The term "family farm" requires some clarification. Although almost all American farms are legally classified as "family farms" rather than corporate enterprises, today very few of them meet our conventional understanding of a family farm. As Marty Strange points out, family farming "does have a commonly understood cultural meaning, particularly when it is used to describe a system of agriculture rather than to categorize individual farms."[32] Family farming, as Strange describes it, generally refers to small farms that are owned and operated by a resident family without too much additional hired labor, produce diversified crops and livestock rather than a monocrop, and are generally committed to maintaining land productivity into future generations. Agribusiness, or factory farming, by contrast, is generally organized on an industrial model, relies substantially on both mechanization and hired labor, is generally specialized rather than diversified, and is generally devoted to economic growth rather than long-term stability.[33]

Scale, rather than simply ownership, is therefore a significant factor in analyzing farms. Of American farms, 88 percent (as of 2007) are what the USDA calls "small," making annual sales of less than $250,000. Many farms actually make far less; in fact, the average net income of an American farm is just over $43,000. Taken together, however, those 88 percent of American farms only produce 16 percent of the country's farm output. The vast majority of American farm *production* takes place on large (or even "very large") farms. Even though many of these large farms are legally classified as family operations, they do not adhere to the conventional understanding of a family farming system.[34]

Although there are many small-scale family farms in the United States today, they represent a comparatively small proportion of real farm productivity. Most farms, of course, fall somewhere along the wide spectrum between the family- and factory-farm archetypes. These descriptions

represent overall trends and general conceptions of how to run a farm. Many crops, such as fruit and tobacco, are extremely labor intensive and cannot generally be produced profitably by the members of a family alone. Farms growing these crops, although they may be owned by the members of a single family, rely heavily on hired seasonal, often migrant, labor.

Although their ideal farm would not and could not work everywhere, the agrarians described in this book still argued that scale, diversity, and philosophy were all deeply important characteristics of a family farm. Agrarians called for farms that were small enough to primarily employ the members of a family, and successful enough not to require too much, if any, off-farm work. They believed that growing a diverse array of crops was safer, both financially and environmentally. And they believed that commitment to the health of a place, into future generations, was far more important than perpetual growth and profit.

The Christian Agrarian Crusade

This book tells the story of Christian agrarians, who have largely been left out of the history of agrarian thought.[35] They blended the historical legacy of agrarian political action with their own distinctive religious commitments. Even secular rural reformers expected that Christianity could provide energy to the reform effort. But although secular reformers might pay lip service to Christianity, it was reformers from within the churches themselves who most strenuously developed a vital role for the religion, both in constructing ideas of agrarianism and in animating people's actions in rural spaces.[36]

This book makes several central arguments about the Protestant Christian agrarian project, arguments that are taken up throughout the following chapters. First, Christian agrarians were committed to the viability of the family farm. They believed not in retreating from or standing outside the market, but rather in converting the corporate economy into a diverse network of small-scale family-operated farms.

Christian agrarians believed in the family farm because they saw the family as the primary engine of Christian life. As Baptist professor C. R. McBride put it, "the home is our natural, primary, and God-planned teaching institution."[37] A family living and working in the active environment of a farm would produce great moral and spiritual results. Christian agrarians opposed tenant farming and sharecropping because these systems

offered no vital connection between farmer and land; a family needed to own its own farm and be free from economic exploitation in order to fulfill its own potential. This theme is addressed in the first chapter.

Second, Christian agrarians were fundamentally devoted to rebuilding the rural church and placing it at the center of rural communities. Christian agrarians argued that rural communities needed not only personal dedication and care from residents, but also a particular spiritual and social focal point—the church. As one observer wrote in 1914, "The country town needs a social centre. The church need offer no apology for its ambition to take this place in the community. . . . Ideally the one church should be the soil of the town and the centre of the social life."[38]

Constructing an agrarian society, and rebuilding rural communities in the process, would often mean reengineering the role of the church itself, bringing a certain amount of modern efficiency to the experience of living in the country. As they reimagined the experience of worshipping in a rural church, Christian agrarians also forged close relationships with the American state. State universities and extension services, along with the federal government, cooperated with church organizations to promote the Christian agrarian vision. This theme is taken up especially in the second and third chapters.

Third, Christian agrarians saw the ultimate purpose of their reform efforts as not just the material improvement of the lives of rural people, but as the construction of the kingdom of God on earth. Of course, all versions of agrarianism were about more than just immediate needs. Agrarianism was always an attempt to prescribe national values and goals. It was a discussion of the best ways to live and work, issues that mattered to all Americans, regardless of where they lived. Christian agrarians, however, believed fervently that human action, especially work within society, could bring forth the kingdom of God promised by the Bible.

This devotion to a visible kingdom of God on earth became increasingly anachronistic within American Christianity. Although a fierce commitment to the idea of a present and visible kingdom had animated much of nineteenth-century Christianity, by the mid-twentieth century most American Christians had either abandoned the notion of a visible kingdom, or else committed themselves firmly to the belief in a future reign of God inaugurated only by the cosmic Second Coming. Christian agrarians held onto nineteenth-century beliefs in the perfectibility of society, the dignity of work, and the capability of humans to cooperate with God in God's plan. This theme is especially prominent in the fourth chapter.

Fourth, while building the kingdom of God, Christian agrarians developed an innovative language of environmental stewardship to describe the proper Christian treatment of the land. Rebuilding rural communities would depend on changing how Americans saw themselves, and how they saw working in the countryside. An agriculture that laid waste to the soil in the name of productivity horrified agrarians.

In response, Christian reformers constructed a vision of Christian life that was rooted in the productive and spiritual power of the soil itself. They argued that the most important thing about working in agriculture and living in a rural area was that it put one as close as one could be to God and the process of creation. Christian agrarians called creation innately holy, and called upon farmers and all rural people to treat the earth with respect, care, and even veneration. They opposed the destructive forces of industrialization and urbanization that had led to soil degradation and community instability. Calling agriculture a form of partnership with God, Christian agrarians turned it into a kind of religious vocation, in order to convince people in rural communities that it was better to stay than to leave. This theme is taken up especially in the fifth chapter.

Theologies of Christian Agrarianism

As the third and fourth central themes in the previous section make clear, the practical solutions developed by Christian agrarians for improving what they perceived to be the problems of the countryside rested upon firm theological foundations. The religious motivations for their political and social work set Christian agrarians apart from the rest of the agrarian movement. Their vision of agrarianism rested upon four core beliefs: the present reality of the kingdom of God, the social gospel, the holiness of the earth, and the promise of the abundant life.

The Kingdom of God

For much of the nineteenth century, Protestant theology was divided over eschatology—the understanding of the "end times" that were to come. Many Protestants adhered to a millennialistic eschatology, awaiting the thousand-year reign of Christ (the chiliasm or millennium) described in Revelation, which was connected with the Second Coming (*parousia*). The ambiguity of the Revelation text, however, allowed Protestant theologians to interpret the millennium in at least two diametrically opposed ways—premillennialism and postmillennialism.

Premillennialists argued that the *parousia* would occur before the millennial reign. They assumed that life on earth would gradually descend into sin and despair—the period of the tribulation, described in Revelation. After the tribulation, the Second Coming would occur and inaugurate the thousand-year reign of Christ. Postmillennialists, on the other hand, believed that Revelation described a thousand-year reign of Christ occurring before the Second Coming, which would then signal the end of time. Postmillennialists believed that because the millennium would be a part of human history, the church on earth could inaugurate the reign of Christ by perfecting human society. (Catholic, Orthodox, and most Anglican theologians, in contrast to Protestants, generally rejected the whole concept of millennialism, arguing instead that the descriptions in Revelation were purely symbolic and that there would be no literal millennial reign, either before or after the *parousia*.)[39]

Premillennialism, which itself came in a number of different subvarieties, was most common among evangelical Protestants. It came into vogue at the end of the nineteenth century, and was revived yet again in the twentieth century by those who came to be called Fundamentalists. The more optimistic postmillennialism, on the other hand, which had dominated Protestantism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, declined in favor after the Civil War.[40] It was replaced with what James Moorhead has called "the eschatology of the kingdom," developed near the end of the nineteenth century by nonevangelical Protestants. Kingdom theologians inherited the optimism of the postmillennialist tradition, but discarded specific temporal claims about the end of time. They began to argue for God's kingdom as "a present ethical reality rather than as a dominion to be introduced in the future."[41] Kingdom theologians saw social reform work as an attempt to create this reign of Christ on earth.

Protestant agrarians remained committed to the belief in the creation of the kingdom of God on earth, even as their mainline denominations on the whole moved away from reference to the kingdom. Presbyterian missionary Frank W. Price spoke for many agrarians when he wrote in 1938 that "the Kingdom of God begins to come when men and women and children on the land, when those who toil with their hands and help to feed and clothe mankind, find and worship God where they are."[42] The devotion to this kind of spiritualized social progress caused agrarians to seem increasingly out of step with the rest of American society (and American Christianity) as time went on. The resurgence of evangelicalism after World War II, especially in the figures of preachers like

Billy Graham, brought premillennialism once again to the forefront of American Christianity. Most mainline denominations stopped speaking in terms of millennialism at all. The more pacific postmillennial agrarians came to seem like throwbacks to a previous age.[43]

The Social Gospel

The belief in a visible kingdom of God on earth was closely connected with devotion to the social gospel. Many of the Protestant agrarians described in this book fall broadly within the social gospel tradition, keeping that tradition alive decades after it had fallen out of favor in urban America.

The social gospel movement within mainline Protestantism at the turn of the twentieth century devoted attention and energy to making society more just. Closely aligned with Progressive politics, social gospel crusaders from the Protestant churches worked tirelessly to reform society, generally among the immigrant populations of the major cities. Theologians like Walter Rauschenbusch argued that Christianity had a responsibility to uplift and improve communities in crisis.[44] John Marshall Barker, a Boston University theologian, called the church's ideal "a commonwealth of God," or "the progressive social incarnation of God in the realm of good will and mutual service."[45] This could be achieved by bringing civil institutions under the ethical, if not spiritual, influence of the churches. Government and social organizations could and should create social justice. In other words, according to James Moorhead, the social gospel "encouraged men and women to look to nonecclesiastical activities and institutions to fulfill religious ideals."[46]

Like the agrarians, many social gospellers believed that their reform work could bring forth the kingdom of God. Where the agrarians differed was in their commitment to the church first and foremost. Traditional social gospellers always ran the risk of obscuring the need for the church itself, arguing that secular institutions could themselves produce Christian justice. Agrarians agreed that the forces of secular society could indeed help inaugurate the kingdom of God, but they preferred reform to be definitely Christian in nature. Their first priority was to harness the Christian capacity for labor and right action. Only after Christians themselves stepped forward could they align themselves with the secular world.[47]

Christian agrarians kept the social gospel tradition alive throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Despite the rapid changes of the twentieth century, agrarians continued to look to the nation's future with

hope. They believed that agriculture and religious practice could be the foundations of national identity.[48]

The Holy Earth

Protestant agrarians were deeply concerned with the earth, and argued everywhere for the importance of treating the earth as holy. The belief that the whole earth was literally holy ground runs constantly throughout the various proposals that American Protestant agrarians developed. Even more than to recognized figures like John Muir and the Transcendentalists, Protestant agrarians traced this idea primarily to the writings of an academic horticulturalist named Liberty Hyde Bailey.[49]

Bailey, who became the dean of the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University in 1904, believed that loving nature was fundamentally about loving agriculture. "Man is a land animal," wrote Bailey, "and his connection with the earth, the soil, the plants, animals and atmosphere is intimate and fundamental. This earth-relationship is best expressed in agriculture,—not agriculture merely as a livelihood, but as the expression of the essential relationship of man to his planet home."[50] This devotion to agriculture in the context of the entire earth has been called "planetary agrarianism."[51]

Bailey's 1915 book *The Holy Earth* set forth a "biocentric" vision of life on earth and humanity's relationships with all of that life.[52] According to Bailey, the earth was more than just worthy of respect—it was literally holy ground. It was holy "because man did not make it. We are here, part in the creation." Since the earth itself was holy, everything on the earth was also holy. Plants and animals and all other living things, Bailey wrote, "do not belong to man to do with them as he will. Dominion does not carry personal ownership." The responsibility for properly overseeing a holy earth fell largely to farmers, in Bailey's view, because the farmer's "gain is also the gain of all the rest of us. . . . He is the agent or the representative of society to guard and to subdue the surface of the earth; and he is the agent of the divinity that made it." Farming was not just labor, it was a divine sanction, a holy occupation—a vocation. In fact, Bailey claimed, "a man cannot be a good farmer unless he is a religious man."[53]

Bailey's ideas were so popular that Protestant agrarians in particular routinely cited them for decades to come; Bailey had, according to Brethren pastor Edward Ziegler, "left all rural thinkers in his eternal debt."[54] *The Holy Earth* was reprinted for a new generation by the Christian Rural Fellowship in 1943. The holiness of the earth, and the responsibility of

farmers to cultivate that holiness, became key insights on which much of Protestant agrarianism was built.

Stewarding the land, according to Christian agrarians, would also require good science. Agrarian reformers, for example, worked hard to understand soil erosion and to publicize soil restoration strategies from a scientific perspective. But at the same time, agrarians believed that the earth was ultimately a mystery, in the theological sense. The earth could never be thought of only as a substance for analysis; it also needed to be respected and treated with reverence. This made for a creative tension between science and spirituality; Christian agrarians embraced a sacramentalism more akin to Catholicism than to much of their own Protestant background.

These insights emerged decades before the 1960s environmentalist counterculture adopted the idea of stewardship. Christian agrarians worked to promote an environmental ethic based not on evocative wilderness landscapes but on the settled working landscape of American agriculture. The roots of the contemporary creation care movement lie in the Christian agrarian project.[55]

The Abundant Life

Another core principle to which Protestant agrarians subscribed was that when farmers diligently cultivated the holy earth, everyone prospered. Agrarians viewed prosperity as both material and spiritual. Responsible farming would produce healthy and abundant crops, and economic success when those crops were sent to market. But living and working close to the land also meant growth in terms of spiritual abundance. Protestant agrarians believed that Christian farmers were partnering with God, enjoying a close relationship with God's creation. Engaging in such a holy pursuit created holiness not only for the farmers themselves but also for the communities around them—and, eventually, for all of society.

Protestant agrarians saw this as the heart of the Christian life. To live and work in accordance with God's creation was to be in tune with John 10:10, in which Jesus described his own teleology: "The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (KJV). Protestant agrarians seized on the idea of abundance. Agrarianism meant an "abundant life," one that was rich in all the good things that God had created—not only plants and animals but also rewarding work, loving families, and worshipping communities that would give glory back to God. In 1939, Earl