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Farmageddon: Food and the Culture of Biotechnology

Brewster Kneen

Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 1999

viii + 232 pages, \$19.95 Softcover

Biotechnology, hardly a new issue, has exploded on the international scene in the midst of the globalization crusade of the world-wide corporate infrastructure. For a number of years, farm radical Brewster Kneen has concentrated on the agribusiness sector of this corporate offensive, so recently emblazoned on our media's front pages during the Seattle confrontations. As well, the major Canadian dailies have covered the issues of biotechnology as those who have read about the "terminator seed" can testify.

Into these contexts author and activist Kneen sounds the warning against the "biotech" gurus of the moment. His book *Farmageddon* reflects that tripartite genius we have come to expect from this prophetic figure:

1) Although hardly the meat of his work, his ability to catch our attention by gripping titles has not slackened over the years, i.e., *From Land to Mouth: Understanding the Food System* (1989), *The Rape of Canola* (1992); and now his prophetic blast against corporate biotechnology *Farmageddon: Food and the Culture of Technology*.

2) Captivating titles in Kneen's works never give way to second rate content. *Farmageddon* is no exception. Kneen reaches out to our minds. He builds a solidly researched account of the multi-horrors of biotechnology, and he shatters the myths of its promoters. He demonstrates that the history of capitalist monoculture involves manipulation of the public, control of government agencies, violation of the democratic process, destruction of farm cultures and assault on the natural diversity and regulation of our agri-resources. He exposes the cynicism of agri-power brokers in claiming the high road of morality and feeding the hungry to cover the relentless use of poorly tested technology to build control and profits. He contrasts those who have worked the land for centuries with those who treat the natural order as discreet "bits and pieces" to be manipulated by a voracious and relentless elite. He describes in horrific detail such case histories as the bovine growth hormone and experimental potatoes and tomatoes, thus demonstrating his in depth awareness of the issues.

3) Beyond his skill in providing us with appropriate information, Kneen portrays with utmost clarity the competing ideologies at stake in the biotech conflict. He crafts a convincing case that the corporate promoters of biotechnology and monoculture (Cargill, Monsanto, et. al.) promote an idolatry of domination that plunders both people and the entire planet in the name of profit. Theirs is a culture of control and disregard. Against this he posits a listening and attentive approach – a trust in the wisdom of the cultivators of

diversity, nature itself and those tillers of the soil who work with the rhythms of creation. Such a view has been described by the “shakers and makers” as reactionary and primitivist, but Kneen’s effective advocacy for community-oriented bonding with each other and nature exposes his critics’ apologia as name calling and trivializing.

As for those for whom a faith commitment forms the undergirding of their lives, Brewster Kneen speaks to and for them. His is a voice akin to the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and the radical message of Jesus about God’s reign. He is rooted in our churches’ call to Jubilee and debt reduction. To read Leviticus 25 on Jubilee and Jesus’ agricultural parables links us with the vision of Brewster Kneen. Indeed, his periodical *Ram’s Horn* comes across both as a call to action and a reminder that we are a biblical people called to defend and serve each other and the land we share in stewardship. The underlying foundation of Kneen’s message is deeply Jewish and Christian; *Farmageddon* mirrors these commitments. His call to justice struggle underscores such values:

Resistance must begin within, as a matter of conscience. It is a matter of life and death, stark as that may sound. It is an issue, in the words of the prophet Moses, of life and death. “I am offering you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live...” (Deuteronomy 30:19). The prophets of biotechnology may offer life, so that you, personally, may live forever – if the companies just get the investment and the regulatory approvals to develop their technology. But the cost, and the price, is death (191).

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Stories in my Neighbour’s Faith – Narratives from World Religions in Canada

Susan L. Scott, Editor

Etobicoke, ON: United Church Publishing House, 1999

183 pages, \$19.95 Softcover

It is no secret that the Canadian cultural and religious landscape is in rapid transition, and that the ethic of diversity is becoming much more of an imperative as so-called “world religions” play an ever increasing role in Canada’s self-understanding as a multi-cultural society. While it would be wildly naive (not to mention arrogant) for Canadian churches to assume that we can simply proceed with “business as usual”, as if the Christian voice were the *only* faith group representing the religious underpinning of Canada’s cultural milieu, it would be equally naive to assume that the various communities of faith could simply co-