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# The Future of Farming and Farming the Future

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Three generations ago, my great grandfather came to farm in Canada. These farm roots are typical of many Canadians. The current rural crisis of farm foreclosures and environmental degeneration in Canada therefore strikes at the heart of the personal history of many Canadians. For that reason, it offers a critical lens by which to illuminate the social challenge facing the global community.

Lutheran theologian Carl Braaten provides a helpful starting point for understanding this rural crisis in his identification of two paradoxical threats which confront human life and well being today. He writes:

The church in mission confronts two major crises that threaten the life and well-being of millions, even billions of people today. The first is the existential crisis of meaning, and the second is the global crisis of misery.<sup>1</sup>

The tragic situation facing many farmers is in fact the result of the convergence of these two threats to the human community. The rural crisis is both a social and a religious issue. It is social in its effect on our pattern of social/economic/political relationships. But it is also deeply religious in revealing the values that form the foundation for our community.

In the experience of farmers and rural people as they confront the farm crisis three key theological dynamics can be seen emerging. The first is a renewed awareness of the wholistic character of creation that involves the contradictory claims of being steward and owner of the land. The second is the incarnational character of "meaning" that involves not just time but also place. The third is the important call for a greater measure of justice to be realized in our pattern of economic,

political and social relationships which rural people, as victims, challenge us to address. It will be the aim of this article to identify the dynamics which inform each of these insights and thereby to challenge Christians and the church to a more fulfilled ethical vision for the future.

### Creation: Covenant or Contract?

With the industrial-technological revolution of the nineteenth century, humankind became able to measure things and time more precisely than ever before. This in turn enabled higher levels of productive efficiency, spawned the beginning of mass production, and fostered the emergence of interchangeable spare parts. While this brought many benefits to the human community, it also brought the challenge of a different view of nature and humankind's relation to it. Humans began to see themselves as separate from the natural environment which they "occupied." Nature became the inanimate object for manipulation to satisfy human desires. A tension emerged for the human community between a covenant relationship with creation *and* a contractual view of creation.

A contractual view of creation emphasizes the concept of "utility" in relationships between people and with creation. It may be characterized by a "What is in it for me?" attitude. The notion that enhancing the "common good" is primarily achieved by pursuing one's own self-interest forms the foundation for this view of the world. Such a worldview has a primary concern for discerning, in an almost mechanical fashion, how creation functions with predictable effects from certain actions or causes.

In contrast, a covenantal view emphasizes a "relational" view of creation. The image of "care-giver" or "steward" provides a role model for human activity. People are viewed as being in a "trust" relationship which recognizes the interrelationship of people and creation as well as the ultimate accountability of the stewards to the Creator.

In the face of the above two competing worldviews there is a temptation to claim that the covenantal view is more "biblical" and therefore the more religiously responsible. However, such a temptation fails to consider the reality of human relationships in community which are often broken by sin and

alienation from the Creator. Walter Brueggemann in an article entitled "The Earth,"<sup>2</sup> describes the interaction of these two different worldviews through the motifs of "earth" and "land." He observes,

The Hebrew word rendered as "earth" is also the standard word for "land." The word functions very differently when it is rendered "land" rather than "earth"... "land" is a concrete, historical phenomenon that participates in all the ambiguities of political and economic power and is never uncomplicated or uncontaminated. "Land" is always assigned, owned, and occupied. When one talks about "earth", everything is not owned, except by God.<sup>3</sup>

Brueggemann goes on to observe that the history of Israel was really an alternative movement that offered a different notion of "land tenure." This was not some romantic notion of creation but one that took seriously the illegitimate use of power, monopoly control of land, exploitive labour practices, and political oppressions. This theme is carried through into the New Testament with the vision of the "Kingdom of God." Brueggemann concludes that "Israel's disclosure to the world is that one cannot be human if one does not have land and the social power that goes with it."<sup>4</sup> It is not a matter of simply choosing between a contract or covenant approach but rather one of holding them together in a healthy, mutually informing tension.

The present prevailing adherence of our culture to the "contractual view" of creation, which seems also to dominate our current forms of social organization, has become so predominant as to undermine the mutually informing tension needed. This in turn has generated numerous social problems. Important among these is the matter of "land ownership" and the way in which increasingly large tracts of land are becoming concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer people. In Canada farmers and their families are leaving the farm in ever increasing numbers and many of those who are still farming are in serious financial hardship. As well, in the two-thirds world, many people have come to depend on the food aid from the developed world because the production from the First-world has undermined many local Third-world producers.

A second pressing issue is the appropriateness of current agricultural practices in the face of growing evidence of soil erosion, unhealthy reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, as well as the over-specialization of seed strains through



genetic engineering. The accelerating loss of arable land illustrates the issue very well. In the last 10,000 years it has been estimated that fifty percent of the original arable land has been lost to food production because of destructive agricultural practices. By the year 2000, it is further projected that another thirty percent will be lost. Moreover, this reduction is happening at the same time that almost one million people are still poor and hungry in Canada, not to mention the world. This accelerating loss of productive land is primary evidence of a vital requirement for an ethical vision of the future. We must pursue agriculture practices and social structures which will ensure an adequate and "sustainable" heritage for future generations.<sup>5</sup>

A renewed vision of creation is needed which will recognize the wholistic character of the ecosphere, including the human community. The world is not merely a passive component of human life. A vital part of the current discussions about the future of agriculture must include an increased recognition of the "relational quality" of creation.

### **Meaning: Incarnation vs. Spiritualization**

In the growing separation between people and creation, the current situation for Western industrialized societies also reflects a crisis of meaning. As Alex Sim recently commented, the current rural crisis is a "moral crisis as well as a metaphysical crisis—the meaning of meaning."<sup>6</sup> The human connection to land is a religious as well as a historical necessity. The devastating impact on Native people who have been dislocated from the land is witness to the vital connection between human identity and the land.

With industrialization has also come urbanization which has gathered the majority of the population in Canada into cities and urban/suburban centres. Increasing "specialization" has resulted in the dangerous tendency to divide life into various "compartments." When applied to faith, religion becomes "spiritualized" and divorced from the global historical context. In contrast, the fulfilled Christian experience celebrates the "incarnation" where,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things

were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth (John 1:1-18).

The Creator's self-revelation through the structures of creation is a continuation of the understanding of the ancient Hebrews. Thus the human focus on the "world to come" denies the fundamental arena of the world where God meets people. The revelation of Jesus Christ as the central *event* for the Christian community is central both in *time* and *place*. God chose to be fully present in the world. Walter Brueggemann succinctly draws this point out when he writes,

In the Old Testament there is no timeless space but there is also no spaceless time. There is rather a storied place, that is a place which has meaning because history is lodged there...(God) is Lord of places as well as times.<sup>7</sup>

Martin Luther also points to this "spatial" contribution to human meaning in explaining the first article of the Apostles' Creed in his *Large Catechism*. Luther writes,

We should emphasize the words... "maker of heaven and earth"... he makes all creation provide the comforts and necessities of life—sun, moon, and stars in heavens, day and night, air, fire, water, the earth and all that it brings forth, birds and fishes, beasts, grains and all kinds of produce... Thus we learn from this article that none of us has life of himself...<sup>8</sup>

In seeking to exercise "dominion over the earth," to paraphrase the Genesis writer, Western societies have sought ways to place themselves *above* nature. In ever more imaginative ways through our technological abilities the human community has often successfully sought to *escape* or be *rescued* from nature. However, in our success, the human community may also have succeeded in seriously limiting our encounter with the Creator.

In the current modern social context, the human pursuit has sought to discover meaning in time, through the marking out of important moments, without realizing the importance of place (creation). The danger for Christians is that this focus on the "world to come" spiritualizes religious experience and fails to grasp the extraordinary reality that God entered creation and uses the "land/earth" as the ground where faith can take root. This failure is evident when farm families are forced from the family farm of three generations. Decisions are made on

“economic” grounds which overlook the fact that the farm in question is a “storied place.”

### Justice: Apex or Opening?

In the last 20,000 years human societies have moved from a hunting nomadic lifestyle to one that is more settled. This more sedentary life of crop and livestock cultivation in turn led to the evolution of more complex social institutions. With the industrial revolution the economic base of society shifted from agriculture to manufacturing and technology. In more recent times the agricultural sector has become more industrialized, relying on large amounts of capital and technology. In short, down through history urbanization, increasing population levels and the insatiable press of rising expectations have placed a relentless pressure on the environment. At this point in history the question therefore emerges, “Can we expect to extract even more from the environment?” Have we reached a peak in our ability to exploit nature or will increased growth be able to continue for the foreseeable future?

The answer seems self-evident for many. The global human community cannot continue in the expectation that technological innovation, increased economic growth, and the popular assumption that “bigger is better” and “more is right” can offer the human family a usable future. In 1983 the United Nations established a “World Commission on the Environment and Development” chaired by the Norwegian Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland.<sup>9</sup> This independent commission travelled the world listening to people and assessing what they heard. In their final report, the commissioners noted,

Nature is bountiful, but it is also fragile and finely balanced. There are thresholds that cannot be crossed without endangering the basic integrity of the system. Today we are close to many of these thresholds...<sup>10</sup>

This conclusion of the Brundtland Commission is a warning to industrialized societies across the world. The reliance on a political-economic model of ever expanding use of limited resources is dangerous. To continue on this path is to set the stage for a future of ecological disaster and unnecessary human suffering.

This warning is reinforced by the noted author Jeremy Rifkin when he observes that our world is governed by the



“Law of Entropy,” the second law of thermodynamics. This basic law of physics states that the amount of energy available in the universe is fixed and can only be transformed from one form to another.<sup>11</sup> In light of this principle, Rifkin suggests that our evolutionary assumptions about an ever expanding and developing progression for life may need to be questioned.

The Entropy Law says that evolution dissipates the overall available energy for life on this planet. Our concept of evolution is the exact opposite. We believe that evolution somehow magically creates greater overall value and order on earth. Now that the environment is becoming so dissipated and disordered that it is apparent to the naked eye, we are for the first time beginning to have second thoughts about our views on evolution, progress, and the creation of things of material value.<sup>12</sup>

Rifkin's conclusion is that an apex has been reached. What is required is a “second Christian Reformation” that puts forward a “new stewardship doctrine” that helps people address this entropic crisis.<sup>13</sup>

The current crisis facing many farmers across Canada, in other industrialized nations and in the two-thirds world, is ample testimony to the need for a re-thinking and re-evaluation of our perception of *how* the world (creation) includes the human community. We are often inclined to think of a “crisis” as a disaster. However, the English word for crisis is derived from the Greek verb, “krino,” which means “to decide.” The quiet dislocation and suffering of rural people can provide Canadians with an “opening” to decide and make some choices about our common future.

The fundamental challenge facing us is not one of *production* but rather is one of *distribution*. Dramatic increases in commodities and products for consumption will not solve the current crisis. The distribution of resources and the power to decide the use of those resources is the critical challenge facing the global community. Bishop Remi De Roo aptly observes,

Hunger is not an isolated problem that we can simply deal with by technical solutions or massive food aid. Hunger results from inadequate or distorted relationships. Hunger is due to social, cultural, economic, and political factors. And the most decisive factor is power. Hunger is the ultimate product of powerlessness.<sup>14</sup>

The reality of “powerlessness” is common to both the Canadian family farmers and the “hungry” throughout the world.



The distribution of power is an area which Christian theology can cogently address with its understanding of justice as the "form" that love takes in the world. More specifically, such an understanding of justice suggests at least four ways in which a more just society might be pursued: regionalization, generalization, diversification, and concentration.

Past patterns of economic relationships have emphasized centralization. Urbanization, which has seen large numbers of people move into cities and suburbs, is one example of this centralization. One product of centralization is the emergence of large organizations that are impersonal, alienating and in many cases inefficient. In the face of this reality attention needs to be paid to providing smaller and more personable, responsive forms of social organization. Regionalization, with smaller communities and organizations, is an effective way to achieve the needed more humanized environment.

With centralization has also come "specialization." In the area of farming this takes the form of large farms producing one or a very limited number of crops. Such an approach to farming has some real benefits insofar as it enables the farmer to concentrate his or her expertise and machinery investment in a particular direction. However, this approach also brings with it a serious vulnerability. For example, if a farmer (or a country) relies on one "cash crop" for survival and well-being, and that crop fails or the price falls, disaster ensues. The development of a broader range of farming skills and products, that is generalization, will help buffer this vulnerability and its attendant price in human suffering.

Diversification of decision-making is also important in the pursuit of a more just farm sector in particular and society in general. Social organizations today must involve people significantly at all stages/levels in the decisions that are made which affect their lives. The present drift toward concentrating decision-making in the hands of fewer and fewer persons, be they farm producers, industrialists or politicians, must be arrested. Stewardship is a responsibility of all persons and not just a few.

Lastly, the present emphasis in economics that places tremendous faith in "economies of scale" and the "trickle down" distribution of benefits needs to be modified. The inefficiencies and inequities that result from large scale (bigger

is better) mega-patterns of economic organization are not necessary evils that must simply be tolerated. Rather, in their place the emphasis should be shifted to matching the patterns of economic organization to those levels of production which will provide a useable, sustainable, fulfilling heritage for future generations. This will mean more attention will have to be given to the development of "intermediate technologies," in the tradition of E.F. Schumacher.<sup>15</sup>

What is happening to farmers and rural communities is a "warning light" for our society. While there is a temptation to romanticize life on the farm, the present crisis should not be cause to call for a return to the "good old days" (which were not always that good, anyway). There have been many developments which have enhanced the quality of rural life. The task is not to retreat into an unrecoverable past, but to take this opportunity to be led by a vision of justice that offers new and more fulfilling patterns of economic, social, and political life. Rural people have a contribution to make in framing that vision and shaping a more just future. As John MacDougall so aptly wrote in 1913 in his classic study *Rural Life in Canada*,

The whole people should understand that it is vitally important to stand behind the rural church and to help it become a power in developing country life ideals. It is especially important that the country church recognize that it has a social responsibility to the entire community as well as a religious responsibility to its own people.<sup>16</sup>

The question that now faces the church community is what steps need to be taken to pursue this "opportunity to decide." It would seem that there are at least three places to start, stemming from the need to address the creative tensions between covenant/land, incarnation/spiritualization, and apex/opportunity. The first effort should be to create a "development strategy" for Canada. The churches have had a very effective impact in the two-thirds world in developing appropriate strategies that focus on self-reliance. Church programs have been at the forefront of the effort to enable people to produce food for themselves and make those decisions that affect them. A similar strategy may now be needed in Canada. How can we look at rural communities/areas and develop a vision for the future that is just for rural people, allows them to participate in decisions that affect their future, and sustains

our food requirements and involves responsible stewardship of creation.

Secondly, we need to consider the "devolution of political and economic power."<sup>17</sup> Farmers and rural people have been decreasing in number. Decisions affecting them are often made in distant urban centres. The lack of political/economic power has meant a disenfranchisement by many in the rural community. The church is one of the few remaining social institutions which can help rural people and the farmer to organize and thereby enable their voices to be heard. It will mean that church leaders, pastors, and church members will need to stand with farm organizations in their efforts for just change. It will also mean that the church will need to commit increased resources of time and energy to understand the powerful currents of change in rural Canada.

Thirdly, the church has always perceived itself as a caring and compassionate community incarnating Christ's mission in the world. Many of the marks of the church community are also those that have been associated with "rural communities." In the face of the increasing erosion of "community," the church can help to generate a renewed appreciation of this vital element. This will mean that it will need to take the perspective of those on the outside of the church searching for meaning. For the rural community, the church will need to work at trying to develop an increased understanding of the view of community that is being lost. This may mean exchanges between urban and rural congregations. This will also mean training clergy, many who are from urban settings taking first "calls" to rural areas. It will also mean an increased sensitivity to those facing the prospect of being moved off the farm.

While the church and theology may have a limited contribution to make to the technical side of the farm crisis, there needs to be a challenge by the church to those who would claim that this is a purely business/economic/political matter. Fundamentally, those who grow food in a modern industrial society can provide an important connection to a Creation-ethic that has much to contribute to addressing the vast array of complex social problems we face. The popular religious writer Frederick Buechner probably said it best when he wrote,

Man does not live by bread alone, but he does not live long without it. To eat is to acknowledge our dependence on food and each other.

It also reminds us of the other kind of emptiness that not even the "blue plate special" can touch.<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Carl E. Braaten, *The Apostolic Imperative* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985) 7.
- <sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Earth: A Theology of Earth and Land," *Sojourners Magazine*, October 1986, 28-32.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 29.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 32.
- <sup>5</sup> Gregory Cusack, "A Theology of the Land," *Fellowship*, April/May 1986, 11.
- <sup>6</sup> Comments by R. Alex Sim in discussing his recent book, *Land and Community*, with the Ecumenical Farm Caucus.
- <sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) 185.
- <sup>8</sup> Theodore Tappert, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) 412.
- <sup>9</sup> *Our Common Future—World Commission on the Environment* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987).
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 33.
- <sup>11</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *Entropy—A New World View* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980).
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 55.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 234-240.
- <sup>14</sup> Bishop Remi De Roo, "Agriculture, Agribusiness, Agripower," *Fighting the Farm Crisis*, ed. Terry Pugh (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1987) 116.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful and Good Work*.
- <sup>16</sup> John MacDougall, *Rural Life in Canada* (Toronto: Board of Social Services and Evangelism, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1913) 244.
- <sup>17</sup> R. Alex Sim, *Land and Community* (Guelph: University of Guelph, 1988) 145.
- <sup>18</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 12.