

# Down to earth

by [Norman Wirzba](#) in the [November 21, 2001](#) issue

*The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture, and the Community of Life*. Edited by Eric T. Freyfogle. Island Press, 256 pp., \$40.00; paperback, \$18.00.

The migration of millions of people from farm to city during the past 100 years marks an unparalleled shift in human life and experience. Disappearing in this shift is not simply a "way of life" for a few families, but the daily, intimate understanding of humanity's inexorable relationship to the earth and its members, human and nonhuman. Urbanism, claimed as inevitable by some and now becoming the dominant way of living around the globe, represents a shrinkage of the "community of life," a blindness to the blessing, sublimity and demands of God's creation. As city-dwellers we rarely see or appreciate the fact that we are biological beings whose health and well-being are necessarily bound up with the health and well-being of the soil, water and air, the flora and fauna that nurture and sustain us. It is little wonder, then, that the scale of the earth's destruction has reached crisis proportions.

What is a wonder, however, is that few see agrarianism as having much to do with understanding or solving our problem. The perception of many environmentalists is that we need to set aside more wilderness areas that will be off-limits to human activity. Human use of the earth thus becomes equated with misuse. Agrarianism, particularly the agrarianism represented in this collection of essays, challenges this fundamental assumption. To be sure, there is value in preserving wilderness areas because of their ecological significance and because they remind us that we do not live in a purely human world. But we must work with the land and all that belongs to it if we are to secure our own livelihood. The human presence on the land, in other words, is not alien. Through our labor, sympathy and understanding we can develop wholesome relationships with the earth that ensure our sustenance and bring honor to the Creator.

Farmers and small-town dwellers are not usually considered to be in the forefront of innovation or progress. They build on and preserve the memory of past human

successes and failures at living well with the earth. Why, then, the title *The New Agrarianism*?

As Eric Freyfogle, a law professor at the University of Illinois, makes clear in his excellent introduction, the new agrarianism must not be confused with the "green revolution" that has increased food production around the globe. That revolution, founded on agribusiness practices that require heavy, capitially intensive applications of petroleum-based fertilizers and fossil fuels, will be relatively short-lived because it is wasteful and destructive of the soil, water and biotic communities it engages. As Wes Jackson, one of the new agrarians profiled in the book, suggests, "We hammer the soil . . . then put it on life support."

If we want a durable agriculture that will provide us with healthy and safe food for many years to come, and that will protect the livelihoods of people around the world involved in food production, then we need a new cultural paradigm that takes us beyond the competitive, often conflictive and destructive relationship between humanity and the earth. The "new agrarianism" promises an introduction to this paradigm.

David Orr notes that "a true agrarian world is yet to be created." We cannot simply assume that traditional farming or contemporary agribusiness practices are good for us or for the land. The "new agrarianism" represents the creative attempt to better integrate humanity and earth through responsible attention and work. It combines the ancient farming wisdom about the limits and possibilities of particular places with the insights of the scientific ecology that reveals the complexity and depth of biotic interrelationships. It forges new relationships between the country and the city, as in Community Supported Agriculture programs that set up direct links between consumers and food producers. It encourages us to relocate our current economic life within the greater economy of nature and creation, and to live thankfully in the presence of grace freely and lavishly given.

For those interested in preserving the "wealth of nature" (as Donald Worster calls it), and living more wholesomely and peacefully with the whole range of creation, this collection of essays represents an excellent introduction to a distinctively agrarian way of seeing and handling the world. Many of the leading new agrarians--Wendell Berry, Scott Russell Sanders, David Orr, Gene Logsdon and others--are here represented. The essays and stories gathered by Freyfogle challenge us to renew our attachment to the land and to reintegrate our cultural life into the broader community around and within us.