[*JSRNC* 12.2 (2018) 228-229] JSRNC (print) ISSN 1749-4907
http://doi.org.10.1558/jsrnc.34941 JSRNC (online) ISSN 1749-4915

Book Review

Todd LeVasseur, Pramod Parajuli, and Norman Wirzba (eds.), *Religion and Sustainable Agriculture: World Spiritual Traditions and Food Ethics* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 394pp., $50.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-8131-6797-8.

Ever since Wendell Berry explored Native American, indigenous Andean, and Amish-Mennonite agricultural traditions and their spiritual dimensions in *The Gift of Good Land* (1981), there has been both a scholarly and practical need for a more comparative reflection on how spiritual traditions shape agricultural and food ethics (and perhaps, vice-versa). The scholarly need for such dialogue among theologians, ethicists, and scholars of sustainable agriculture has been hampered if not altogether stifled by the divergent methodologies and ideologies of these various disciplines. In fact, their esoteric vocabularies have diverged so much since World War II that one might argue that the scholars are speaking altogether different languages in the inquiries of 'caring for creation' through 'caring for the land' and 'caring for the hungry'. In a practical sense, we must remember that the vast majority of traditional farmers both in the United States and in other countries are members of cohesive faith-based communities and do not necessarily farm as a secular act. And yet, there have been few interfaith dialogues among farmers that allow them to join together to defend and celebrate the vitality of their agrarian traditions, because they too often lack a common vocabulary and a common platform for political action. A particularly gaping rift is between the declining number of indigenous farmers who remain in their homelands, and the ever-expanding number (upwards of two billion) of political and economic refugees from war-torn and drought-stricken landscapes who are now forced to work as farmworkers or indentured servants on lands owned and managed by multinational corporations.

In this light, the fifteen essays brought together by the three very capable editors of this volume go a long way towards bridging this historic gap and providing fertile ground to cultivate future dialogue. The essays include reflections on farmers in many different cultural and faith traditions around the planet, although the coverage is by no means exhaustive. The only risk of having a few 'representative' agrarian cultures in the spotlight is the danger of presuming that a description of one Native American culture's spirit-based farm and food traditions is emblematic of the rich diversity of hundreds of indigenous farming traditions in the Americas. Despite the risk that readers might essentialize ethical precepts of one culture and extend it to all cultures on the same continent or of the same faith, this anthology avoids most pitfalls of comparativecross-cultural analyses. To the credit of the editors, they largely selected

authors who are *of* the faith and culture being highlighted for each chapter, even when they could not invite a farmer-scholar of that same culture to elaborate her or his own views.

With these necessary cautions in mind, much of this anthology is a sheer delight, if not a true blessing to behold. Readers will be further humbled by and grateful for both the diversity of perspectives and the deep wisdom that infuse the farming and food preparation traditions associated with faiths and place-based cultures. We see commonalities that have formerly escaped our eyes. We feel the vulnerability and the inherent resilience of these cultures in the face of neo-liberal globalization and secularization. And we are left pondering that miracle that in the face of so many economic, political, social, and military insults and challenges to their continued existence, these deeply spiritual agrarian cultures have survived and persisted into the new millennium. We can only hope that the number of young farmers, food procurers, and cooks in these cultures have both the land and faith to continue to practice these traditions.

If anything emerged as a single take-home message for me with regard to the scholarship in this book, it is that the auto-ethnographic approach of ethnic farmer-scholars, cook-scholars, vintner-scholars, herder-scholars, priest/shaman-scholars, and the like will be the most productive means of continuing this dialogue. We need to hear from those whose hands get dirty every day, not those who sit back in an office and extract unifying principles from other people's work. Because field ethnographies are a means of describing what is happening 'on the ground' that are shared by students of anthropology, religious studies, and rural sociology, they can be the threads to weave together a broader and more inclusive tapestry celebrating spirit-infused agricultural traditions. I am grateful—and perhaps you will be too—to Wirzba, Parajuli, and LaVasseur for not only opening but vastly broadening the dimensions of this discussion.

Gary Paul Nabhan
Center for Regional Food Studies,
University of Arizona
gpnabhan@email.arizona.edu

Reference

Berry, Wendell. 1981. *The Gift of Good Land* (Berkeley: Counterpoint).