

CHAPTER ONE



SUSTAINABLE RELIGION, SUSTAINABLE ETHICS?

TAKING STOCK: WHY THIS PROJECT?

In this book, I investigate an emerging North American (specifically US) religious agrarianism. I argue that a growing number of religious communities in the United States (with hemispheric and global interconnections¹) embody many contemporary ecological agrarian practices and values. Three constellations of such values and practices create the foundation on which religious agrarianism is built. These are fidelity to the local; concern for health, including physical, religious/spiritual, societal, economic, and ecological metrics of health; and a deep concern for justice. Although I devote considerable attention to two religious communities—Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, and Hazon, a predominantly national Jewish food group with statewide chapters, including in Atlanta, Georgia, and Gainesville, Florida—where I carried out the majority of my ethnographic research, the trends I discovered in these groups are also found in other religious communities. Given many years participating in and studying alternative food movements, I am confident in predicting that these trends suggest that religious agrarian values are becoming more nuanced and sophisticated. Such development over the past twenty years is leading to exciting new food-based practices in religious communities where such practices are concerned with local places, various types of health, and an abiding concern for justice.

Although other fields of inquiry have either historically or more recently begun to devote sustained attention to the study of agriculture and food, and

despite a historic interaction between religion and agriculture, the professional field of religious studies has been slow to come to the table. The result of this foot dragging is that theoretically, the intersection of agrarian and religious beliefs and teachings, coupled with the interaction of their respective values and practices, is an understudied phenomenon of a slowly greening US religious landscape.² In this book I take as my starting point this interaction and intersection. This dual focus on agrarianism and religion shapes the following pages, where I analyze and investigate how ecological/environmental agrarianism is combining with and influencing religious beliefs and practices to create an emergent North American religious agrarianism.

RELIGION, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND THE UNITED STATES

Some elements of religions, and especially some religious groups, are undergoing and generating what some scholars call an “ecological reformation.” From attending global meetings about climate destabilization to changing to more efficient, eco-friendly light bulbs in places of worship and practice, practitioners of religion are rapidly becoming involved in sustainability initiatives and projects. Such growth appears to be more than a fad and is generated both horizontally from the margins of religions and vertically via institutional creeds and executive decisions. Evidence suggests that there has been tremendous growth in some subsets of various religions in cultivating environmental concern. Much of this growth has occurred over the past ten to fifteen years, as seen for example in June 2015 when Pope Francis released an encyclical about anthropogenic climate change.³

Given these recent phenomena, an increasing number of scholars claim that the future landscape of religion will be more decidedly “green.” Within this “greening,” much is being shaped by post-Darwinian insights about evolution as well as by taking seriously findings from natural and environmental sciences (Taylor 2004).⁴

Such activity has prompted one religious scholar to opine, “No understanding of the environment is adequate without a grasp of the religious life that constitutes the human societies which saturate the natural environment” (Sullivan 2000: xiii). Although partly an essentialist normative claim, this scholar, like many others, recognizes the role “religious life” plays in the natural environment within which humans are embedded.⁵ Because humans are embedded with both religion and with metabolizing bodies that need calories to survive,⁶ how we grow, harvest, and consume such calories becomes an activity that takes

on religious overtones and religious attributes of its own. It is also an activity that can be influenced by religious beliefs, customs, and practices. Therefore, the role of farming, specifically the worldviews behind agricultural technologies and types of farming methods, becomes a topic about which religious environmentalist values, beliefs, and practices are inherently concerned. Religious agrarianism is partly found within this nexus of sustainable food production and religious environmentalism where concerns about the local, health, and justice figure prominently from local to global levels.

As a scholar I accept the growing consensus that future religions (including those in the United States) will most likely be greener, and I couple this acceptance with the recognition that to understand our environments, we must understand our religions. Given that the most recent and emergent US version of agrarianism is largely about the human relationship and interaction with the environment, it is important to understand what religious attributes, emotions, norms, and values attend to this relationship. It is also important to investigate if and how these religious attributes are green, and how these green attributes might be contributing to a larger greening of US religions. It is also important to analyze if and how religious agrarian beliefs and practices are influencing the beliefs and practices of more mainstream religions in the United States.

What is at stake with how we grow, transport, and consume our food? If we as a species are united by the evolutionary dictate of needing calories and living within the laws of thermodynamics, and if we care about issues like justice, equality, biological carrying capacity, climate change, and social power, then with food, everything is at stake. But this daunting list doesn't entirely capture what is at stake. Given tipping points triggered by fossil fuel-based lifestyles, within which industrial agriculture is playing an overly determinant role in anthropogenic climate change and species-wide patterns of land use, our very survival as a species (let alone almost all the others) is now, sadly and scarily enough, at stake.⁷ Throw in the tinderbox of failed states, climate refugees, peak oil, epidemics, ocean acidification, nitrogen deposition, and mass starvation and the stakes only get more pronounced. Unfortunately, this is a very real scenario for the immediate future, not to mention decades from now for our children.

I repeat, with this refrain framing my exploration in this book: what is at stake? Everything. These stakes must be recognized in our scholarship and our writing, regardless of field of study.

Since everything is at stake, it is imperative for us as scholars and embedded biosocial creatures to understand what motivates people to produce and consume foods in certain ways. This holds for unsustainable and unjust methods

of food production, but also especially for methods of production that can lead to both biological and cultural resilience. The stakes get more dire and important as we enter deeper into the Anthropocene age, or what Paul Gilding calls “the great disruption” (2011). Data from the present and as we look outward a few decades suggest we will pass sobering tipping points, with most caused by human lifestyle choices, where agricultural choices play an overdetermining factor. Such tipping points range from global concentrations of atmospheric gases to the continued loss of soil fertility to decreasing supplies of fresh water to peak oil. All of this and much more will affect the global art of agriculture—and thus the production of religion.⁸

Yet if agriculture is global, why focus on the United States? This is because from the standpoints of biological materialism and the quest for sustainability, the United States currently has about 5 percent of the world’s total population of humans, yet as a country consumes 25 percent of the planet’s total resources.⁹ From the perspectives of environmental justice and the need for humans as biological organisms to live within sustainable limits, this is clearly a problematic figure. The political, moral, and ecological implications suggest that US citizens have a profound duty to ameliorate such discrepancies.¹⁰ In claiming this, I must be cautious of engaging in neocolonialist discourses of ecology, so we must clearly recognize that the imperial eco-footprint of the contemporary United States and its unique history of environmental movements is embedded within and constructed by issues of power, justice, complexity, and essentialism (Roos and Hunt 2010; DeLoughrey and Handley 2011).¹¹ Such baggage may also accrue to narratives about sustainable agriculture and religion in a US context, and this reality must be remembered when talking about issues of food and cultural fluidity.

That said, there is an equally articulate, sustained, and active history and contemporary environmental movement, or rather movements, within the United States.¹² The books and articles devoted to this aspect of the US gestalt are legion and growing. Also growing is the consciousness within the populace of the states about environmental issues, ranging from climate destabilization to sustainable agriculture (van Wormer et al. 2007). It is foolhardy for scholars of North American/US religion, religion broadly, and the environmental humanities, as well as activists and policy makers to disregard this history. It is as foolhardy for scholars to disregard the growing impact such environmentalist beliefs and values play in US religious production: past, present, and especially the foreseeable future.

Because religions are in large part reified social constructs that have fluid, changing, and contested concepts of what qualifies as sacred, holy, and/or

legally obligatory relationships and duties, it becomes the job of religion scholars to study how and why these concepts and categories are changing. Given what is at stake, scholars must pay close attention to how religious concepts and categories relate to nature and environmental issues.¹³ One area of human/nature relations is the human (and thus religious) relationship to food and how food is produced and consumed. Given the material environmental dimension of food production; the value-laden social, political, and ecological goals and normative claims of agrarianism (and of industrial agriculture; Sanford 2012); and how these relate to sustainable food issues (which are part of a larger sustainability milieu) that some religions/religious bodies are becoming cognizant of, then the study of this emerging environmental dimension of US religions becomes an area of concern and study that scholars are beholden to engage. I hope this book helps us better understand the values and norms that entail to this environmental dimension of US religions and to the sustainable farming practices in the United States. Furthermore, I hope it adds to the growing body of work that clearly spells out what is at stake with our food choices given the social and environmental impacts of food production, distribution, and consumption.

A further reason this book chooses to study religions in the United States is because of the lengthy historical role US religions have played in politics. With this dynamic and rich past, parts of this book explore this legacy of US religious history, helping shed light on religio-political interactions at the intersection of agriculture and sustainability.

Last, compared to other Western nations, religious identification and belief still constitute a large part of the identity of the vast majority of the US public. Various polls report that nine out of ten US citizens believe in God or a higher power, and others suggest that over 70 percent identify with some variety of Christianity. Coupled with the aforementioned polls about environmental values and concerns within the US public, it behooves scholars to investigate the interaction of religious belief and environmental behavior in the United States. This does not necessarily mean there is a causation between religious belief and environmental practice, but that such study should be undertaken to help the community of scholars understand if such links exist and, if so, how pervasive and effective they actually are.¹⁴

For example, religion and nature scholar Anna Peterson comments that “changes in values lead[ing] to changes in behavior [is] an assumption supported by little if any empirical and historical evidence. The paradox of modern environmentalism is that while pro-environmental values have become mainstream in the US and many other parts of the world, anti-environmental practices

continue to escalate” (2006: 376). Despite this gap in knowledge, she continues, “Religion is indeed the way many people think about important moral and intellectual issues, and an expansion of environmental ethics to address religious traditions and ideologies is an important and necessary step” (ibid.: 378)—if true, then this is a step to which religious scholars must pay attention. Of course, such debates about religious belief and action toward the natural environment date back to Lynn White Jr.’s (1967) epochal article that blamed Western Christian beliefs, and thus actions based on those beliefs, for the world’s environmental problems. By focusing especially on the iterative and reinforcing interaction of religious values and agrarian praxis, an understanding of religious agrarianism adds to this growing body of knowledge about religious belief and practice regarding environmentally centered behaviors. If a key goal is to understand this iterative and reinforcing interaction, then it is important that I use appropriate theoretical and methodological tools that help the process. I briefly outline these choices in the next three sections.

THEORY AND METHOD: LIVED RELIGION

Readers will notice that throughout the book I adopt various scholarly methods and analytical views. Of these, the two key poles are a sociological point of view (how do religious agrarians act as a group, how do they organize, and how do they make sense of their standing in a plural society?) and an ethical point of view (what specific views about appropriate treatment of the natural world do religious agrarians hold, how do they embody these, and how are they informed by religion?). To dance between these poles, I weave together ethnographic findings,¹⁵ historical sleuthing, and constructive ethical building. This syncretic approach mirrors the interdisciplinary *raison d’être* of religious studies and recognizes that there are multiple approaches to better making sense of real-world data (Strausberg and Engler 2014). Because religious and environmental values are so central to an understanding of religion and nature issues—and sustainable farming in particular—it is important to pay attention to how these arise, are shaped, and are formed. I have found that a “lived religion” approach best makes sense of how religious subjects shape religious beliefs and values, and in turn are shaped by the larger networks in which they reside.¹⁶ Even more important, this approach allows scholars to see how nonspecialists shape their own religious worlds, at times in concert with and at times at odds with the larger top-down traditions in which they are participants.

This is because a lived religion perspective takes the symbolic, material, ideational, affective, and emotional worlds that lay religious practitioners create and privileges these worlds as being worthy of study. Rather than privileging the religious teachings, theologies, and institutions of elite experts, lived religion scholars head to the street, literally and figuratively, to see how the average person within a religion is creating a meaningful religious world that works and makes sense for them and their needs.

Robert Orsi's *The Madonna of 115th Street* (2002) remains the standard-bearer of lived religion scholarship.¹⁷ Orsi's introduction to the updated version contains some of the key theoretical insights and methodologies of a lived religion approach, most importantly recognizing that

The study of lived religion situates all religious creativity within culture and approaches all religion as lived experience. . . . Rethinking religion as a form of cultural work, the study of lived religion directs attention to institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals, practice *and* theology, things *and* ideas—all as media of making and unmaking worlds. . . . Religion approached this way is set amid the ordinary concerns of life as these are structured at various moments in history and in different cultures, at the junctures of self and culture, family and social world, and on those occasions when the religious imagination . . . takes hold of the world [and] as it is taken hold of by the world. (2002: xix–xx)

Many of Orsi's claims and insights are reflected in my approach to studying religion and thus to my interpretation of religion and agriculture. For example, my ethnographic research with members of Hazon/CSI and Koinonia only makes sense situationally, including within larger debates and ideologies about agriculture, politics, and sustainability. These concerns are reflected in the practices and values, religious and secular, of these Jewish and Christian religious agrarians as they attempt to live out their religious agricultural sensibilities. Their attempts highlights what Orsi calls "religion-in-action," which is "religion-in-relationships between people, between the way the world is and the way people imagine it to be" (Orsi 2002: xx). It is essential to recognize, at least for religious agrarians, that this also includes religion-in-action with the larger biological world, of which agriculture is one important aspect. Thus, joining a community-supported agriculture (CSA) farm, planting a row of nitrogen-fixing legumes, humanely raising a pig—all have the potential to become embodied

religious acts within a lived religious agrarian worldview and help signal the reemergence of place within the religious agrarian milieu.

Moreover, religion-in-action is always transforming, is influenced by and representative of relations of power and gender, affects culture at large, and is also affected by culture at large. This is why for Orsi “the study of lived religion vividly opens out the tremendous creativity of religious practice and imaginings as it uncovers the limits of them” (2002: xxiv), leading to what he calls a “hermeneutics of hybridity” (1997: 11). I argue that the lived religious landscape of the contemporary United States is generating tremendous hybridity, creativity, and imaginings in regard to a plethora of environmental issues—and at the same time, this creativity has its limits when the harder work of translating values into practice becomes evident. Agricultural landscapes thus become a central focal point where religious environmental imaginings and practices are lived out and transformed, bringing with it ripple effects throughout the larger US cultural, religious, environmental, and political landscapes.¹⁸

In concluding this section on lived religion, I make clear that my own interpretation of the religious agrarians I interacted with and the research data I generated is thus influenced by my training in religion and nature and US religious history; by my personal experience living and working on organic farms and in natural food stores in South Carolina, California, Washington, New Hampshire, and Scotland; and by being exposed to sustainability subcultures via this history and studying ecovillages, soil and society, and ecophilosophy in Scotland, England, and Australia (and by being a Willing Workers on Organic Farms volunteer in Greece). My interpretation, and indeed this whole book, is not to be reified but should be read as a sighting from a site (see Tweed 2006: 13)—including the physical sites (congregational buildings, monastic campus, conference centers, telephones and computer, urban cityscapes and rural landscapes, shopping centers and grocery stores, and farmlands) where my research was undertaken.¹⁹

THEORY AND METHOD: NETWORK THEORY

Because food items, sustainability discourses, and religious institutions are now global in their flows, I use a network approach to studying religion and nature issues. This approach works in tandem with a lived religion approach, as the network approach is “attentive to ways in which local, grassroots, official, national, and transnational actors continuously and creatively construct, transgress, and appropriate the boundaries between specific religious and non-religious

practices and discourses. These multiple situated perspectives (which often lead to contested canons, traditions, and orthodoxies), in interplay with the researcher's own personality, determine religious studies' proper subject matter" (Vasquez 2005: 237).²⁰ I echo this statement and urge religious studies to actively take as its subject matter biological flows of food (and other material objects) and the religious environmentalist values, discourses, and practices that these flows help create.²¹

Vasquez builds on his claim, writing, "Within and through networks, actors carve out spaces to dwell, itineraries, and everyday routines, drawing from religious symbols and tropes to reflect on and orient their own praxis and to 'sacralize' nature and build environments. Networks also embody and produce moral geographies" (2008: 168–69).

Given this insight, what I am calling a "lived-network" approach allows us to make sense of the ways religiously and environmentally concerned US citizens are sacralizing nature, building agricultural environments, and constructing and participating in sustainable agriculture networks that are local, national, and international. Importantly, for political, ethical, economic, and biological reasons, these networks also help produce moral geographies. As David Chidester and Edward Linenthal write, "the 'pivoting of the sacred' that occurs through the work of ritualization and interpretation allows virtually any place to become sacred . . . sacred meaning and significance, holy awe and desire, can coalesce in any place that becomes, even if only temporarily, a site for intensive interpretation" (1995: 14). If they are correct, and if we take Vasquez, Orsi, Tweed, and others seriously, then the sustainable agricultural landscapes, farmers' markets, and religious networks that support and advocate for these "sacred" sites become a product of US religion that needs to be studied. They also become sites where the power-laden, religion-in-action, lived praxis of making place sacred occurs.

THEORY AND METHOD: GROUNDED THEORY

As this is a study of lived religion, I use ethnographic methods that help capture the complexity and vibrancy of religion-in-action that emerges via religious agrarians navigating and shaping complex, interrelated networks. These networks reflect and construct environmental, religious, and agricultural worldviews and material landscapes. My research is therefore guided by the following sentiment expressed by Emerson et al., who write, "The ethnographer's central purpose is to describe a social world and its people" (1995: 68). This means that during the fieldwork for this book, I was motivated by the

following research questions. Who are the key actors in the social situations that I am witnessing and in which I am involved? What concerns are expressed or glossed over in the various interactions of my interlocutors in the (religious) social world they shape and are shaped by? What interactions with the natural world are occurring, and why? Last, what worldviews and ethical and affective and emotional concerns help shape the varied human behaviors toward the natural world in the social situations I observe?

I am also motivated in my ethnography and fieldwork by the following claim from Borneman and Hammoudi, who write that the “fieldwork experience . . . provides an opening to dilemmas in the contemporary world” (2009: 18). Sustainable agriculture issues are indeed a mounting dilemma of the contemporary world, especially given what I outlined earlier about what is at stake when it comes to food production. The social world of religious agrarians is able to offer insights into how some members of various religions in the United States are responding to this dilemma of how to sustainably meet our caloric needs while contributing to social and biological resiliency.

Besides undertaking ethnographic fieldwork based on a variety of means of recruiting participants and that lead to semi-structured interviews and biographical sketches (see the Appendix), I used grounded theory methodology to help learn about the social, religious, and ethical worlds of religious agrarians. Grounded theory is a subset of qualitative research and is an inductive approach to generating knowledge about social worlds used to generate theory by interpretation of collected data. Qualitative research investigates “words rather than numbers [and has] an epistemological position described as interpretivist, meaning that, in contrast to the adoption of a natural scientific model in quantitative research, the stress is on the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants” (Bryman 2001: 264).

Grounded theory is the “discovery of theory from data” (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 1–3), versus discovering theory from a priori assumptions. Glaser and Strauss call grounded theory “theory as process” (*ibid.*: 32), meaning the social world described by it is never claimed to be complete and does not offer one-size-fits-all claims. Rather, grounded theory is open ended and as more research is carried out over time, with reengagement with those being studied and observed, theory is built on, changed, and developed. Such an approach is consistent with the lived-network theoretical lens I adopt for my research—because the values, practices, beliefs, and networks of those I researched are fluid, grounded theory provided me with methodological tools to capture this fluidity. It also allowed me to develop a more nuanced understanding of the various

discourses, rationales, and relationships that enter into shaping the value-laden and fluid religious, biological, and social worlds of religious agrarians.

By using grounded theory, I developed my own trope and category of “religious agrarianism,” which I more thoroughly explain later in this chapter. Next I give a brief history and overview of the two key communities I engaged. This is followed by a brief summary regarding the importance of religious values and then a turn to exploring sustainable agriculture. The chapter concludes with an exploration of food, agriculture, and agrarianism, focusing especially on the latter’s development within the United States.

RELIGIOUS AGRARIAN COMMUNITIES

Within the context of US agrarianism to be outlined here, and especially US religious history, I have chosen two faith communities to serve as case study exemplars of religious agrarianism. Chapters 2 and 3 give greater detail about these communities so I only give a brief introduction to each here.

One is a historically Protestant lay-monastic community called Koinonia Farm. Koinonia is a 501c3 profit-sharing intentional community that is located on an approximately 600-acre campus. The community consists of about twenty full-time members and others who live on site as interns or as guests in residence to see if they would like to become members. Clarence Jordan (1912–1969) founded Koinonia outside of Americus, Georgia, in 1942 when Jim Crow racism was still rampant throughout the region. Dallas Lee, biographer of Koinonia, writes that Jordan “was a dirt-farming aristocrat, a good ‘ole Georgia country boy with a doctor’s degree, a teacher with manure on his boots, a scholar with working clothes on his mind” (1971: 1). Jordan began Koinonia as an experiment in interracial living, inspired largely by his doctorate in Greek New Testament from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He also earned a degree at the Georgia State College of Agriculture at the University of Georgia, Athens.

Jordan’s vision was to unite the races in a voluntary life of simplicity—in effect, a religious experiment (drawing especially on the book of Acts²²) based on shared farming responsibilities. Jordan and his wife named the community Koinonia, from the Greek term *koinonia* being translated into “fellowship” and “communion.” In the summer of 2009, I spent two weeks living in residence at Koinonia, conducting interviews and participating in farm duties with the members and interns of the community. Along with repeated follow-up phone and e-mail interviews and return trips, including for a 2010 permaculture

training, this experience is the basis for my analysis of Koinonia's approach to what I argue is partly a continued experiment in intentional Christian agrarian living.

The other religious community that features prominently herein is Congregation Shearith Israel (CSI), an egalitarian Conservative Jewish synagogue in Atlanta, Georgia. CSI is partnered with Hazon, a recently formed (circa 2000) US progressive Jewish food group with key offices in New York City and San Francisco. Hazon works with various Jewish temples and synagogues around the nation and helps them find local community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms that synagogue members can join. My research for this case study exemplar consists of repeated visits to CSI, visits to Riverview Farms in northwest Georgia (the CSA that CSI partners with), interviews with the rabbi and various members of the synagogue and those responsible for organizing the CSA-CSI partnership, and participation in two of Hazon's annual food conferences.²³ I also interviewed members of B'nai Israel, a synagogue in Gainesville, Florida, that began a partnership with Hazon in late 2009. Together, this fieldwork allows me to speak about Hazon broadly and the two Jewish communities in particular.

Jewish and Christian communities are the two predominant types of religious groups in the United States.²⁴ This especially holds in terms of membership for Christianity and in terms of the social and financial networking maintained by adherents of both religions. Meanwhile, followers of certain branches in these religions are extremely active in lobbying the US government, and this political capital is a potential resource for religiously motivated political concerns pertaining to agrarianism. This religion-government interaction is built on a unique history where Judaism and Christianity (and especially appeals to the Hebrew Bible and New Testament made by citizens within these religions) have contributed more than any other religions found in the United States in advocating for progressive social change. My research shows that parts of this legacy are now advocating for progressive agrarian and environmental change via modern religiously based agrarian and religious environmentalist values.

Yet this agrarianism is similar across Jewish and Christian religious identities, while at the same time being distinct for members of both. Understanding such similarities and differences will help scholars understand emerging concerns and motivations that attend to US religions and how these religions interact with and are shaped by environmental issues. However, it should be made clear that I do not speak as an insider for either Hazon or Koinonia, let alone the many other nuanced varieties of religious agrarianism in US Christianity, Judaism,

and other emerging forms of religious agrarianism. Clearly there are other Christian and Jewish religious agrarian groups in North America, who will be similar and different to those in Koinonia and Hazon, and further studies are needed to help tease out such data.

Finally, despite the migration of ideas, bodies, seeds, and pollutants throughout the United States, there are regional differences when it comes to culture, history, and environment (Cowdrey 1996), and this is also true for religious agrarianism.²⁵ This book uncovers and lightly sprinkles in some of this regional flavor.

WHY RELIGIOUS VALUES?

We will see shortly how any kind of agriculture involves religious, ethical, normative, affective, and value-laden claims that reflect a worldview. For religious agrarians, the values that permeate their view inspire and motivate them to actively participate in sustainable farming practices. This is because religion structures people's lives in many different ways. A religion may be operationally defined as a contested yet systematic set of narratives, values, practices, teachings, doctrines, experiences, social grouping, material items, and myths that are maintained and passed on by charismatic figures and institutions. The latter typically put forth a cosmology that is tethered to a belief in some sort of supernatural being/s, agent/s, and/or realm.

Religious beliefs and identities offer sanctuary in times of need, inspiration in times of hope, and a sense of grounding in today's wayward, fractured, sped-up world. Religion also has many functions in peoples' lives. Belief and membership in a religious community can provide stability and a sense of purpose. The myths, narratives, and practices within a religion also provide rituals and influence practices like pilgrimage and prayer. They also offer a code of ethics to live by and an annual calendar of activities in which a person can participate. Religion (or rather, religions) also help people generate and codify values so they can attempt to live a life in line with the ideals and teachings of their faith and with their own personal ethics (which for many are largely shaped by the religion to which they belong or were raised in). Religious values also help those in the United States navigate a contentious political system and a diverse religious landscape (Eck 2001).

Religion is also importantly about difference, negotiation, and conflict. This can occur over competing conceptions of the sacred, beliefs and doctrines

about where and how the sacred manifests, to competing values and ethics, to differing interpretations of felt experiences. According to Ninian Smart (1998), such conflict results in the formation of subtraditions within larger traditions. This conflict leads to the development of new religions or bricolage between existing subtraditions, resulting in very real power-laden issues of authenticity (Martin 2012; see especially chapter 7).

This history of religious conflict is also true in regard to conflicts over value-laden food choices. Here choices include those that explicitly support sustainable agriculture, as well as those that by default gloss over any understanding of how food is grown so that this distancing is itself a subconscious (or even conscious) normative position. Given that “religion is the most volatile constituent of culture” (Prothero 2007: 5), it is important to develop religious literacy. One area where this literacy is lacking is what groups within a religion have had to say about food and agriculture. This refers to the past and the present. Religious values around food choices are especially important to understand given the current ecocrisis, including specifically the values that underlie decision-making regimes related to food production and farming methods. This book is one corrective offered from the field of religious studies that can help us better understand this interaction between religious values and food/farming choices.

Furthermore, in a highly religious country such as the United States, religion and religious values play central roles in many domains: political, ethical, economic, institutional, and increasingly environmental.²⁶ Because values are central to discourses about sustainability and thus sustainable agriculture, it is important to be clear on what we mean when we talk about values.²⁷ It is equally important to be clear about what we mean by “religious values” and how these relate to the values of sustainable agriculture.

Many values held by US citizens are religiously based and/or affected, such that “The clue to American values, including religious values insofar as they can be separated, must . . . be sought in the American revolutionary tradition. The fundamental elements in this libertarian social system were . . . the security of property [and] a body of thought whose most relevant origins can be traced to the leading Puritan theologians and social thinkers” (Van Allen 1978: 20). Max Weber’s (2003) thesis on Protestantism and the rise of market capitalism in the United States is also relevant here. If Weber and Van Allen are correct, then one of the underlying bedrock values of the United States (secular and religious) is a right to private property and the right to do with this property as the owner pleases.

Some environmentalists criticize this claim, arguing that market forces (especially subsidies) only reinforce the unsustainable abuse of US ecosystems. This includes the “productionist” industrial agriculture model, where corporate behemoths are fiscally rewarded by the right of farmers to do what they please on their privately owned lands.²⁸ Many who make these arguments, even if they acknowledge that the US Department of Agriculture and other governmental regulatory agencies adequately monitor industrial farming practices (including the use of toxic chemicals), claim that nonetheless the government is beholden to agro-corporate interests and that these regulatory mechanisms are unsatisfactory and weakly enforced. This debate is central to the sustainable/industrial divide, and it exemplifies the politically contested landscape of agriculture and its underlying values in the modern United States.

Such a historical understanding of values (and rights) has led to an extreme individualism that has become the de facto dominant value of modern North America (Bellah et al. 1985: 22). Many today add that this privileging of the individual does not lead to the development of sustainable environmental values or environmental success—in fact, one of the insights of ecology is that all life forms (and all systems) are interconnected. When one life form becomes privileged in nature, it tends to eventually encounter limits that lead to its demise or systemic processes bring it into balance with the rest of the system. This argument holds that privileging individual, rational economic man [*sic*], and the value system based on this view of humanity, is one of the key contributors of the current ecocrisis.²⁹

The communities I study provide an alternative understanding of what it is to be human. This is one reason we should study religious institutions in general: religious institutions are sites of value creation and maintenance, including possibly deviant values, especially compared to the extreme individualism of US society.³⁰ Scholars can also investigate if the values held in religious communities temper the individualism of modern North America or if they reinforce this individualism. One clear example of this is seen in the “health and wealth gospel” of some Pentecostal churches.

However, there often exists a gap between the ideal of a professed value and the reality of putting it into practice. This holds true for religious ethics and values, ranging from religious values that guide a marriage to those that guide a parent–child relationship. Such a gap is especially true for environmental values, which may be restrained from being put into practice by competing internal interests, values, and desires and especially by systemic limits within our larger political and consumer systems.³¹

Regarding specific values and practices related to food, Anna Peterson writes, “Consumption and food issues underline the gap between what we say we care about and how we act. In no other sphere of life, perhaps, do people contradict their own values so regularly” (2009: 108). This quote highlights the complex, contested internal and external nature of trying to align religious and environmental food values with practices that enable these values to be realized. This is made even more difficult when we recognize that “Until recently, Western virtue ethics has never recognized a nature-focused virtue. . . . Unfortunately . . . a capitalist, consumer culture such as that of the United States . . . presents a variety of obstacles to successful inculcation of any new environmental virtues” (Fairbanks 2010: 80).

However, values do not adhere only to individuals. A group can also express them, and they are equally shaped and challenged by other groups and/or membership within a group. As can be imagined, this process is loaded with power struggles and politics. It is also influenced by gender, levels of education and income, and prestige awarded to certain members. This process of value emergence occurs in groups (kin, sport, political, institutional, religious) and all group members participate in it. Because putting sustainable agricultural values and their varied motivations into practice is so difficult, it might be easier to embody and practice them in a group setting. This group setting can be a food co-op, a CSA farm, a farmers’ market, or an intentional religious community that practices sustainable agriculture. The various religious agrarians highlighted herein are all members of some type of these group settings. Even more central to my argument is that many join precisely because these group settings enable them to practice their sustainable agriculture, religious environmentalist, and religious agrarian values.

A corollary assumption follows: most people are used to the values of cheap and abundant food. These values are inculcated in the United States by the ubiquity of fast food chains and omnipresent food advertising and marketing. These values are a default result of the cost of food remaining relatively constant despite inflation in other areas of the economy. Here we can think of Bellah’s laments about hyperindividualism in the United States—the right of individual consumers to buy food shipped around the world for a low price is a pinnacle of individual choice, one that externalizes the ecological and social footprints that adhere to this value-laden choice.

Data suggest that there is a shift occurring in the United States when it comes to values related to food choices and to food choices themselves. This shift is part the result of the interaction of politics and values, economic incentives, and people’s social standing and values. Such interaction is already under

way in religious agrarian communities. Such a vanguard position means religious agrarian groups have the potential to shape the values of individuals and, through those individuals and their involvement with larger society (through economic transactions, volunteering, and political lobbying), the values of society. This ripple effect will shape agricultural farmlands, soils, waters, and animals.

Attitudes within religious agrarian groups coalesce around a “value orientation” (Van Deth and Scarbrough 1995: 22) so that religious agrarian “values are distinctive not only because they are desirabilities, but, more importantly . . . they are *desirabilities in matters of action*” (ibid.: 29-30; emphasis in original). As will be seen, the people in the South and around the country with whom I interacted translate their desires (or more accurately, their value orientation) into practice by engaging in the actions and habits of sustainable agriculture. By putting matters of values into action they are creating what I call religious agrarianism. The value orientation of religious agrarians is explicitly grounded in religious environmentalist concerns. These concerns affect the values and thus actions of religious agrarians.

In terms of food choices and values related to them, Tina Huey argues, “Perhaps the most visible topic of contention in the globalization of capital, aside from the labor practices of branded clothing manufacturers, is food” (2005: 125). Food (and thus farming) is again seen as a globally contested trope—one imbued with values and with a concomitant growing religious discourse about specific sustainable food values for a growing number of practitioners.³² Her study concludes by arguing that “local solutions are not privileged in the debate about food in the North” (ibid.: 135). I challenge this conclusion. Rather, I argue that this perceived lack of privileging local solutions is changing. Local solutions are becoming privileged. I argue that religious values are playing a role in this process as religious agrarians embody and bring to the fore local, place-based solutions that are becoming more central to the debate, especially to the solutions proffered, of food issues. Further insights into values and how these relate to food choices are seen in a study by E. P. Koster, who uses food choice methodology to analyze “the central question in food choice research: ‘*Why does who eat what, when, and where?*’” (2009: 70; emphasis in original). Koster’s research highlights the many variables and factors that contribute to what we eat, where, when, how, and why, from biology, physiology, and decision psychology to marketing, economics, and learning psychology (ibid.: 70–71). Religion and religious values are two of these variables, and important ones. Koster posits that “with respect to food habit formation and change much depends also on so-called sensitive periods in life. Thus, most of our basic food habits are formed in infancy and early childhood and these

are hardest to change, but periods like late adolescence when people start living in pairs and form their own ‘traditions’ and other major re-orientations in life such as divorce or retirement are good moments for changes in food habits as well” (ibid.: 75). Tellingly, there is no mention of religion (although there is mention of “traditions”), whether religious ethics, taboos, customs, or rites of passage. Yet religious communities to which people belong tend to influence their members throughout their lives. This includes when people enter into a new community or when a community attempts to embody new values, all of which have the potential to affect food habits.

While for Koster, “food choice is a learned behavior” (2009: 75), it is heavily influenced by values and social peer groups. The influence of peer groups is a determining factor for religious agrarians throughout North America who support sustainable agriculture practices precisely because they do want to influence the diets, health, lifestyles, and values of their children and those in their respective religious communities. Hazon specifically wants to change the food practices of North American Jews, and Koinonia hopes to affect the food choices of those who visit their campus. Both groups are united in that they would like the agricultural choices of governmental policies to change as well.

Finally, regarding environmental values more broadly, including concern about sustainability, polls suggest that a vast majority of citizens are concerned with environmental issues ranging from climate destabilization to species extinction to pollution. Kempton et al. point out that this concern “is not strongly related to social elites,” (1995: 7) but permeates many sectors of US society.³³ Furthermore, Wall (1995) and Taylor (1995) provide arguments which claim that people tend to be motivated to care about the environment when they perceive risks to their health or the health of those they love.³⁴ Such an anthropocentric value system need not be at odds with environmental protection, but suggests that many people are motivated to care for the environment because of values and genuine concerns related to personal health, safety, and aesthetics. The research summarized in this book challenges and supports this argument, as will be explained.

What is important to note is that the aforementioned studies avoid discussing religion directly. In comparison, I argue that we cannot understand agricultural systems and practices without attending directly to religion. These studies nonetheless tell us important things about general food values. What they suggest is that food choice decisions are multifaceted, and peer groups and social values play a key role in such decisions. Furthermore, any understanding of food and farming in the United States and of environmental problems

and movements generally must address religious values. Religious agrarianism provides an excellent case study for exploring the intimate biocultural connections between and mutual shaping of religion (values, practices, institutions, politics, and teachings) and the environment.

WHY STUDY FOOD?

Mammalian bodies need calories to survive. Humans consume and imbibe liquid and food items, which are then metabolized so that our cells, muscles, tissues, organs, and blood receive nourishment so we can move, work, play, engage in religious practices, reproduce, think, and contribute to society. Given that eating food is a central act in which humans participate, coupled with another pan-human universal, religion (Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; King 2007; Counihan and Van Esterik 2008), as scholars we need to dedicate more attention to the interplay between the two.

In regards to US religion—in particular its historical relation with food—Daniel Sack writes, “Food carries a moral value in America. In this culture, a particular foodstuff is not only good or bad for your body but also can be good or bad for your soul. Whether based on popular culture or on scientific studies, personal food choice becomes an ethical calculation” (2000: 185). A key argument of this book is that food indeed carries a moral value for religious agrarians. Even more food choices carry explicit religious values and reflect ethical deliberations that are environmental in calculation.

This religious-ethical turn means that how we get our calories becomes an exercise in value reasoning and deliberation, with menus and plates becoming loci of meaning making. As Jeremy Benstein, founder of the Heschel Center for Environmental Learning, states, “few acts are as imbued with as much religious symbolism and stricture as eating” (2006: 150). The meaning making of food choices has even led one advocate of sustainable farming to claim that “Food may be the primary arena where we humans sort out our values” (Holthaus 2009: 258).

Debates about religion-values-ethics-practices and how these relate to food and the environment provides a major context for this book. This is because it is in the realm of the meaning-making, value-laden power of food choices, and the role religion plays in these choices, that religious agrarianism in large part manifests. My findings are clear in suggesting that religious-based values and ethics do indeed motivate people to put into practice sustainable, environmentally friendly behaviors (itself a problematic concept). For religious

agrarianism, food is an important marker of value, identity, and custom as it has been in almost all human cultures. Furthermore, food is a point of contention in our current US consumer culture and in our socially constructed religious systems. Although food can be fiber that is sweet, bitter, salty, and sour, it can also be a polysemous material item that becomes a site of contested religious meaning making (Chidester and Linenthal 1995; McDannell 1995; Tweed 1997). Finally, via food aid and governmental subsidies, food is a contested political object, and via genetic engineering, it is a contested scientific object (Kent 2005; Bello 2009; Nützenadel and Trentmann 2008). Given the production of religious, ethnic, political, and material meanings that entail to food and our physical need to consume it, it makes sense to use food as a lens with which to analyze issues related to both religion and nature and US religion.

While studies like Sack's (2000) look at the role of food in US religious history, or those like Shortridge and Shortridge (1998) look at food in a religious context and how it acts as a boundary or marker of ethnicity, my study looks at food in a US context of heightening environmental awareness. Food is not only an environmental issue but also a religious environmental concern.

WHY STUDY FARMING?

The evidence for this turn toward food as a social and environmental issue in contemporary US religions becomes clearer once we look at the material actions, implications, and goals of both conventional (i.e., industrial) and sustainable farming. To help articulate these goals, I give a brief history of what the term *industrial agriculture/farming* means and then contrast this with sustainable agriculture/farming. This history helps highlight how farming and growing food becomes a central ingredient in understanding religion-environment-food issues in the modern United States.

INDUSTRIAL AGRICULTURE/FARMING

Over human evolutionary history, we have adopted various approaches to procuring food calories, including foraging, hunting and gathering, nomadicism, fishing, pastoralism, swidden agriculture, and settled industrial agriculture. Most people in the United States obtain their food from the modern industrial farm. Such a farm is based on a monoculture of a commodity crop—typically corn, cotton, or soybean—planted at scales in the hundreds to thousands of acres.