

# Reviews

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*Religious Agrarianism and the Return of Place: From Values to Practice in Sustainable Agriculture.* By Todd LeVasseur. State University of New York Press, 2017. 270 pages. \$85.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper; ebook available.

Those who have been researching agrarianism in contemporary culture are well aware of the work of Todd LeVasseur. *Religious Agrarianism* is his most sustained study of the religious dimension of the movement and a major contribution to the study of agrarianism itself. Its importance to religious studies is obvious, but it is also a valuable source for research on agrarianism in other fields, including the social sciences, environmental studies, health and nutrition studies, and public administration. The text builds on LeVasseur's previous publications on agrarianism but far surpasses them in depth and range. At present, it is fair to recognize this book as the definitive study of contemporary religious agrarianism.

Contemporary agrarianism is an emergent movement that is largely unknown to the general public. Although its roots stretch back to the early urban cultures of Greece and Rome, and it has been a feature of American life since the founding of the country, there are marked differences between agrarianism today and its precursors. Perhaps the most dramatic characteristic of contemporary agrarianism is its strong commitment to ecological stewardship, and its equally strong opposition to the industrial food system. LeVasseur positions today's religious agrarianism in the context of (and "in conversation with") environmental agrarianism, properly identifying Wendell Berry as the source for this "strain of agrarianism" (42–43).

Berry is cited often in the text, and so are many other agrarian theorists and practitioners—especially Wes Jackson and (the often overlooked) Liberty Hyde Bailey. In this regard, the bibliography is extensive and exceptional, offering a comprehensive reading list on the subject. On the other hand, the index is rather abbreviated and less helpful than some might like.

In contrast to earlier treatments of religious agrarianism, which were largely theological (e.g. Gary Flick, Ellen Davis, and Norman Wirzba), LeVasseur's work is grounded in religious studies methodology. The text is a good model for studies of contemporary movements with religious features or explicit religious forms. Special attention may be given to LeVasseur's detailed exposition of his methodology: ethnographic inquiry based on Robert Orsi's "lived religion approach," joined with

network theory and grounded theory (6–10). This same approach could be used to research any contemporary social movement—religious or otherwise.

As it pertains to new religions, *per se*, LeVasseur presents case studies of agrarian communities in Christianity (Koinonia) and Judaism (Hazon)—with a chapter on each community. These two case studies, and the three subsequent chapters, exemplify LeVasseur’s methodology. The chapters on Koinonia and Hazon can be used as stand-alone studies of two variations of religious agrarianism. Both are firmly rooted in their distinct traditions but develop new ways of embodying those traditions in response to current ecological, ethical, and social challenges—similar to other new religious movements. The chapters also include valuable historical background on agrarianism in the two traditions. As successful as the case studies are, there might be benefit from considerations of other types of religious agrarianism, both within major religious systems as well as cosmological groups that sacralize the earth, mythologize agrarian life, and ritualize agricultural arts.

Following the case studies and growing out of them, LeVasseur identifies “three tropes that when taken together help define” religious agrarianism (xvi), devoting a chapter to each: *the local*, *health*, and *justice*. The chapters on these tropes are particularly bracing and dynamic. Here, LeVasseur positions religious agrarianism firmly in the tradition of Berry and the new agrarians who celebrate the local and seek to safeguard the earth while critiquing industrial agriculture and the loss of community. He also positions *Religious Agrarianism* in the context of William H. Major’s *Grounded Vision* (2011), which advocates for the development of agrarianism as a critical theory, akin to the now popular ecocriticism.

Although Major is not cited in *Religious Agrarianism*, the text is one of the best examples of what Major proposes. For LeVasseur, religious agrarianism exists in active opposition to contemporary culture’s “tyranny of mobility” (111) and the “industrial food system [that] is doomed to failure” (179). The power of agrarianism to challenge the status quo of industrial culture is significant and taken seriously by LeVasseur (just as it is by Major). For LeVasseur, the key to its power is its religious dimension: the articulation of a sacred vision of life and land, together with a collection of embodied practices that critique the unsustainable present and offer tools for constructing a sustainable future.

As he states at the outset: “What is at stake? Everything. These stakes must be recognized in our scholarship and our writing, regardless of field of study” (3). They might also be recognized when we teach, just as they are for LeVasseur in his classes, where (as he tells us) “I often encourage my students to think about course content through the lens of asking ‘What is at stake?’” (196). We know Todd LeVasseur’s answer to that question, and in this fine book, we learn much about a movement

that offers a religious response to the question—a response that is both new and unexpected but also as old as agriculture itself.

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*Imagining the Kibbutz: Visions of Utopia in Literature and Film.* By Ranen Omer-Sherman. Penn State University Press, 2015. 352 pages. \$84.95 cloth; \$39.95 paper; ebook available.

The idea of the kibbutz came hand in hand with the rise of the Zionist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. An experiment to create a socialist utopia, there would be no private property and all goods would be shared. Kibbutzim (the plural of kibbutz) were established as agricultural communes in Israel, with no more than several hundred members in each colony. And much as the Soviet attempt has failed, so did that of the kibbutz. Although there are more than 300 kibbutzim in Israel today, almost none of them follow socialist values. During the early days of the State of Israel, kibbutz members were considered the Zionist elite. With the change of power from Labor to Likud in 1977, there has been a constant decline in the status of the kibbutz that accompanied the movement toward a capitalist orientation.

Ranen Omer-Sherman's *Imagining the Kibbutz: Visions of Utopia in Literature and Film* is an attempt to tell the story of the transformation of the kibbutz. A professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Louisville, the author reviewed novels about kibbutz life during different periods—constructing the rise and fall of a prophetic vision—by authors such as Amos Oz, Amir Shaham, Batya Gur, Eli Amir, and more. He narrates the ethos of the pioneers, the great ideas and much-required sacrifice by true believers, the zealots' fervor, the fissures of ideology, the victims of zealotry (mostly the children), the disillusionment, the fall, the sell-off, the crimes, the despair, and the hope. The book is well written while the narrative is illuminating and intriguing, adding to our knowledge of Israel's social history and Israeli literature.

Why did the experiment fail? According to Omer-Sherman, there is one major villain in this sad story—Menachem Begin, Israel's sixth prime minister and the leader of the Likud's political upheaval in 1977. Begin targeted the kibbutzim as the people's enemy, and when a number went bankrupt, his government was slow or unwilling to bail them out. As a result, many kibbutzim had to sell property and move from agriculture into manufacturing. In this process, a new goal developed: "privatization," which means a transition from the communal values into a more individual lifestyle with private property and scale salaries.

The social flaws, described so vividly in this book, contributed to the fall as well. Children that were born in kibbutzim were treated almost as