

# Agriculture, Theology and Progress in Biblical Perspective



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## Introduction

Agriculture is at the very heart of rural vitality and human survival. God was the first Agriculturalist. He planted a garden eastward in Eden. Agriculture means literally 'field cultivation' but the word 'cultivation' implies tending as commissioned by the Creator Himself, with an attitude of worship towards Him and of worth towards His creation. Adam (*adama* = earth) was formed from the earth to tend it as regent under God as King. Progress consists in respecting the needs rather than the wants of all members of the creation.

## Agriculture

Agriculture is founded on two great processes of nature – photosynthesis and decomposition. Thus agriculture deals inherently with 'renewables' and 'recycling', the very emergent 'articles of faith' of sustainability in managing the planet. '*One planet farming*' is the chosen slogan of David Miliband, the new Secretary of State for Defra in the UK. It could be just another platitude or, if properly unpacked, it could deliver a suitably Biblical attitude to underpin policy-making for agriculture. This is vital in an age of globalisation. There is increasing global awareness of the finite nature of earth's resources and consequent human responsibility for conservation management of them. Agriculture connects humans to the earth and its care and to the Creator as Provider and Sustainer of all things. It must also connect humans to each other as we share the resources for production and the fruits produced equitably now and intergenerationally for the future. The way we conduct agriculture is significant in terms of both process and place. We cannot, as HRH The Duke of Edinburgh famously said in 1970, 'apply a crude industrial philosophy to agriculture' because 'land is different'. Agriculture is a dynamic and challenging enterprise to be conducted in harmony with God's laws at the very heart of earth's *oikonomia* (economy 'managing the whole of creation for the benefit of the whole of creation'). The Food Chain from soil to plate, from land to mouth needs to be as short and efficient as possible, with food everywhere available, accessible, affordable, appropriate and avoiding risks in its production. 'Local food is miles better' as the UK *Farmers' Weekly* campaign puts it ([www.fwi.co.uk](http://www.fwi.co.uk)) and we need to 'turn the tide' of policy and practice yet further in that direction. Application of a crude industrial philosophy to agriculture, especially during the past 60 years, has delivered food at successively lower prices to some of the world's consumers but the pursuit of least cost production is unsustainable. Sustainability of planet and of livelihoods demands that we pay the real environmental and social costs of food and stop fooling ourselves that it can be obtained at inexorably lower relative prices. It also demands that we address the fact that over 850 million people still go to bed hungry each night and that many farm families are being dispossessed of their livelihoods in face of dire poverty owing to low product prices.

## Theology

The 'Queen of sciences', theology is the study of God in order to seek to understand Him and His ways. Creation theology should underpin our practical efforts in agriculture and development. We especially need the integrated consideration of the following five models for our relationship with creation proposed in scripture:-

### Our Relationship to Earth & Its Creatures

1. Dominion = 'complete authority' - to do what God likes with creation, not to dominate it! (Gen. 1:26-28).
2. Priesthood = the role to let creation express itself in praise to God (Psalm 150:6) and to offer it to God with praise.
3. Companionship = respectful, caring relationship with creatures (Prov. 12:10).
4. Stewardship = accountable, caring management of resources (Luke 16:2).
5. Teamwork = co-workship in team effort, with God (1 Cor.3:9).

### Agriculture & A Theology of Place

Vertical & Horizontal : Roots and a proper connection to the soil symbolise the essence of agriculture. This is part of the vertical connection: God above, creatures below and within the earth beneath our feet. Yet many creatures and humans too have lives characterised by the horizontal dimension. There are nomads, such as the Fulani of West Africa and the Maasai of East Africa. There are migrant birds such as the swallow which – all fifteen grammes of it – flies a round trip of some 12,000 miles from its summer nest in Britain to spend the UK winter in South Africa's summer! The Bible presents us with a creative tension between the settlement and rootedness of 'planting gardens' (Jer.29:5,28; Micah 4:4) and the pilgrimage of the traveller 'passing through' (Heb.11:13-16; 1 Peter 2:11). Most especially, Jesus had 'nowhere to lay His head' (Matt.8:20; Luke 9:58). Yet scripture exhorts order and the concept of 'a place for everything and everything in its place' (e.g.Deut.12:13,14). This is qualified by the prohibition of evil practices in any place, given that 'the earth is the Lord's' (Psa.24:1) even though he has given us the tenancy (Psa.115:16).

Place defined: One NT Greek word for 'place' is *topos*. Although this appears in the English word 'topography' which is often associated with the physical rise and fall of the landscape as a geomorphological concept, *topos* really refers to 'inhabited place' (as in Luke 2:7, 'no room at the inn'). A toponym is a place name and topology is that branch of mathematics concerned with concepts of continuity and limits. Without boundaries and absolutes, civil society crumbles.

Displacement: Factors leading to displacement include various injustices arising from conflict, from greed and from deliberate policies to move people, such as the Highland clearances of Scotland in the eighteenth century and 'ethnic cleansing' today – such as in the Balkans during the 1990s. Migrants, refugees and nomadic lifestyles result. The UNHCR now reckons that 1 person in 130 is a refugee of some kind. Some move owing to droughts and wars – including 'resource wars'. Others are economic migrants, such as the many who have moved from countries such as Malawi and Zambia to work in the mines of South Africa. This contrasts with the Micah 4:4 vision of fearless contentment under one's own trees.

Place accepted: On the whole the Bible encourages us to accept our place in God's order and to fulfil it faithfully. 'Blossom where you are planted'; 'plant gardens' is the message of Jer.29:5,28.

Place managed: It is right that most of the cultivable land be managed in some way or other for agriculture – rotational land use; integrated/multipurpose land use; access to commons; but, again, the earth is the Lord's (Psa.24:1).

Place celebrated: Some ecclesiastical traditions set time apart (e.g. Rogation) to pray for God's blessing on a particular place, celebrating its uniqueness in His Kingdom purposes.

### **Suggested Agri-Theology Principles<sup>1</sup>**

1. God is Creator and Sustainer of the Universe.
2. Human Beings are created in God's Image.
3. All creation is fallen through sin.
4. Creation shares in Christ's salvation.
5. Agriculture is stewardship of creation for food and primary products.
6. Dominion means authority to manage creation in the way God desires.
7. The Kingdom of God is both now and future - creatio continua.
8. The Kingdom of God is global and beyond.
9. Perfect relationship is exemplified in the Triune God.
10. People are designed for right relationships - UP (God), OUT (neighbours), DOWN (earth).
11. Only an integrated person will answer for this (Psalm 86:11).
12. Agri-rural Systems need a (w)holistic approach.
13. Farmers are human stewards intended to be in tripartite relationship.
14. Viable rural communities are desirable objectives.
15. Farmers need to be - sensitive to nature; related to land; decisive operators; well-integrated realists; co-operators with God.
16. Rural development needs to provide capacity to :-  
Care for creation e.g. Prov.12:10 - know one's beasts;  
Share with those who do not have enough;  
Work in harmony with God (I Cor.3:9);  
Be in place - relate locally to land and community;  
Access enough - avoid excessive scale (Isa.5:8).
17. Greed can apply equally to production as to consumption.
18. Christian Ethics are required in agriculture to reconcile simultaneously:- Economy, Ecology, Energy-efficiency, Equity and Employment.
19. Agriculture needs linkage with Christian Spirituality.
20. Agriculture is a vocation; the Earth is God's farm.

'What we need is a holistic theology, a theology that is God-centred and that treats man and the creation in the integrative manner that Scripture does'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Compiled in 1998 at international consultation on Agriculture & Theology, Hohebuch, Württemberg, Germany.

<sup>2</sup> p.88, George Kinoti (1994) *Hope for Africa and what the Christian can do*. (AISRED, Nairobi, Kenya, 99 pp.)

## Some Ethical Dilemmas

GM For and Against: "The government of Malawi will promote the use of modern biotechnology to enhance the conservation of biological diversity and sustainable environmental management and shall facilitate access to and sharing of benefits arising from the utilisation of these natural (water, soil and air) and biological (animal, plant and microbial) resources." (Malawi Formulates National Biotechnology Policy Rebecca Chimjeka, *African News Dimension* 16.8.'06). On the other hand, Zambia shuns GM.

Drug Crops: Farmers cannot make a living from food crops at very low world prices. Latin American farmers are going out of maize into coca. Afghanistan's farmers rely heavily on heroin for income (*Geographical Journal*, August 2006 Feature article).

Growth is not the same as development: "Private sector investment of £1.9 million and a challenge fund grant of nearly £0.3 million have helped the Great Lakes Cotton Co. to provide training and more, better quality seeds. This initiative has helped triple production and raised incomes. The number of casual labourers employed has tripled to over 35,000 and an extra 100,000 smallholders are benefiting" (DFID, UK:- *G8 Gleneagles: One Year On*, 2006).

Unregulated trading conflicts with environmental conservation/sustainable livelihoods: *The Africa Commission* (2005) proposed debt cancellation, action on global climate change and then, a trading 'free-for-all'. While trade equity issues persist and must be addressed, others believe that the removal of all regulation would be suicidal for Africa's environment and livelihoods.<sup>3</sup>

## Progress

Real progress is not equated with materialism and its close cousin, consumerism. *Oikonomia*<sup>4</sup> requires the philosophy of 'enough' rather than excess (Isa.56:11). 'Enough' might also refer to the size of one's family, contrary to the Bemba proverb in Zambia:- *ubukulu bwa nkoko: masako* = 'the size of a chicken is its feathers' i.e. one's greatness in society is measured by the number of one's children.<sup>5</sup> Recent monitoring reveals just how finite earth's resources are – and that we have placed the global ecosystem, which functions as an entity created by God, under inordinate pressure by our numbers and our cavalier behaviour.<sup>6</sup>

Components of genuine progress are proposed as follows:-

1. Vision: Micah 4:4 (Everyone under their vine & fig tree and no-one making them afraid)
2. Fear of the LORD (Psa.111:10) → Prov. 8:22-36 → Micah 6:8 (Justice, Mercy, Humility)

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<sup>3</sup> Wibberley, E.J. (2006) The 'Farming Tsunami': the crisis of farm livelihoods. *Tropical Agriculture Association Newsletter* 26(1) 20-21 ([www.taa.org.uk](http://www.taa.org.uk)).

<sup>4</sup> 'The caring management of the whole creation for the benefit of the whole creation'

<sup>5</sup> I owe this to Joe Kapolyo (*The Human Condition*, 2005, IVP/Langham, The Global Christian Library, 175 pp.)

<sup>6</sup> Lovelock, J. (2006) *The Revenge of Gaia* (Penguin 177 pp.); Houghton, J. (2004) *Global Warming* (CUP, UK).

3. John 14:6 → Phil 2:1-11 → Brokenness → Melting → Moulding → Filling (Eph.5:18)
4. Acceptance → Identity (Status) → Recognition → Achievement (Success)<sup>7</sup>
5. Leadership:- Compassion→Survey→Mobilisation→ Participation→ MMM<sup>8</sup> (Nehemiah)
6. Development:- Isa.58:6-14 → Psa.150:6 → Romans 8:18-39 → joy; 'foot-washing'; grace
7. 'Responsibilities' not 'rights'-based integration of indigenous and modern knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

Integral mission seeks to start with a Biblically focused concept of what constitutes 'progress' and then to apply a Biblically-grounded 'theology' to the everyday reality of food security through 'agriculture' pursued by means which are rooted in Biblical wholism. Christians need to address the issues faced by civil society, central to which is acquiring daily food. As the Zambian National Farmers' Union puts it, 'No Farmers! No Food! No Future!'

## Further Reading

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Wibberley, E.J.(2003b) Creation, Agriculture and Genetic Modification. *The Bible in Transmission* Spring 2003, pp.14-17 (The Bible Society, UK).

<sup>7</sup> Basis of Frank Lake's (1986 – abridged edn.) *Clinical Theology* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 245 pp.); the sequence is AIRA not ARIA – the worldly approach proposes the reverse of the above process...

<sup>8</sup> MMM = Methodical Monitoring Management (c.f. *Cereal Husbandry* Wibberley 1989 Farming Press UK/USA).

<sup>9</sup> Kyeyune, G. (2005) The interface between indigenous and modern knowledge: a challenge to professionals. Pp. 134-145 In *Nkumba Business Journal* V, Nkumba University, Entebbe, Uganda (motto: *I owe you*).

## About the Author

Professor John Wibberley is an agriculturalist and resource management consultant who read agriculture at the UK University of Reading and gained his PhD in agricultural extension; he holds an MTh of London School of Theology and serves in RURCON an otherwise all-African team of Christian Development practitioners established in 1971.

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