

The Spirit of Agriculture

edited by Paul Hanley. Oxford: George Ronald, 2005. George Ronald Bahá'í Studies Series. 226 pages. Available at [George Ronald](#). reviewed by Arthur Lyon Dahl in *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1-4 (2005)

Agriculture and religion are two subjects which are not immediately associated with each other, especially in the industrialized countries and in more intellectual circles, where both are considered to have lost much of their relevance in the modern world. Yet they are reemerging separately as topics of concern: agriculture with respect to the sustainability of future food supplies, and religion because of its implication in the rise of fanaticism and intolerance and in a renewed search for meaning in life. The originality of *The Spirit of Agriculture* is that it brings the two together in a unique way, drawing on the high place given to agriculture in the Bahá'í Writings.

What can a spiritual perspective contribute to something as practical as growing our food? While only a tiny fraction of the population is involved in agriculture in Western countries, it is still the dominant activity in most of the developing world, and in all rural areas, where it is deeply implicated in the structure and function of communities. Also, our attitude toward agriculture and the attention we give it will be critical in the years ahead, because it is a subject of the utmost importance for the future of civilization.

The mechanized and industrialized large-scale agriculture of today is facing a series of crises that threaten its future. The rapid exhaustion of oil and gas reserves will leave agriculture without cheap fuel for its machinery, feedstocks for fertilizer and pesticides, and transport to take its products to distant markets. The heavy overuse of water reserves will push many important agricultural areas into crisis. Over-intensive use leads to rapid soil degradation. Commercial imperatives are forcing a severe narrowing of the genetic basis of most crops, leaving the most productive varieties increasingly vulnerable to changing environmental conditions and emerging diseases. Climate change also threatens to force expensive transformations in what, and where, crops can be grown. For the moment the subsidy represented by cheap fossil fuels and the drawdown of agricultural capital have allowed food production to keep up with population growth. But how much longer will that continue?

As we exhaust the nonrenewable resources of this planet, we shall be obliged to turn more and more to the renewable resources represented by agriculture, forests, and fisheries not only to meet our essential requirements for food and materials, but also for energy. It will be necessary to cultivate the planet not only to produce things, but also to absorb and recycle our wastes and to maintain the ecological balance of both the natural and human environments. This agriculture will have to go far beyond the unstable monocultures of today to become integrated multispecies systems, and as our biological wisdom increases, we shall have to learn how to engineer complex ecosystems, of which human society will be an integral part. A first challenge will be to

restore the fields and forests degraded by our short-term profligacy to sustainable productive use.

Agriculture is also on the verge of a technological revolution driven by our deepening understanding of genetic control systems and biotechnology. Are we opening a Pandora's box of environmental catastrophes and threats to human welfare, or preparing for a productive future of new products and materials to meet every human need? This debate is as much about ethics and values, and the driving forces in our economic system, as it is about agriculture and science.

For a subject of such importance, there has long been a need for a book that would pull together broader perspectives than just a discussion of the technical issues. Paul Hanley has now prepared such a book, drawing on a wide variety of approaches and practical examples from many countries. The surprising range of its chapters shows the richness that can come from addressing a topic from widely divergent perspectives and specialities: science and religion, economics and architecture, from the steppes of Mongolia to the coral reefs of the Pacific Islands. The book is explicitly Bahá'í in orientation and tends to assume a Bahá'í readership, although it would be of great interest to others who are open to a Bahá'í perspective.

As editor, Hanley sets the stage with an excellent opening chapter on the unity of agriculture and religion. He emphasizes the need for a radical transformation in agriculture (as one would expect from a specialist in organic farming), and presents the guidance that the Bahá'í teachings can provide in effecting that transformation. This broad introduction to the topic is followed by a contribution from P. J. Stewart, reflecting on agriculture in the world's religions, another by Hanley, surveying the Bahá'í Writings on agriculture, and a third by Iraj Poostchi describing the involvement of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith in agriculture. These chapters show the richness of the Bahá'í approach to this topic.

The second section of the book provides more technical and social analyses of food, agriculture, and rural development. Paul Fieldhouse provides a broad perspective on food as it relates to religion, culture, and health. Michel Zahrai looks at small rural businesses as alternative income-generating activities for rural areas. Gary Reusche reconsiders the village as a social unit and explores the implications of the Bahá'í teachings for future village life in a more rural and spiritual society. Paul Olsen comments on the genetic modification of crops, primarily from a North American perspective.

The final section of the book offers case studies of these Bahá'í perspectives in practice around the world in such widely diverse countries as Nigeria, Colombia, Fiji, Mongolia, Bolivia, Tanzania, Honduras, Wales, and the United States. It concludes with the significance of the Bahá'í gardens in Haifa, Israel, as a model marriage of nature and art to express a spiritual ideal. The authors bring to bear on their subject broad international experience, reflective of the Bahá'í community as a whole. In general, the book is well

balanced, with only Paul Olsen's chapter on GMOs taking a more limited view of a very complex topic.

Unlike much of the current literature, this book weaves spiritual, scientific, and social dimensions seamlessly together, providing something for everyone, in an accessible and readable form. For those of a more religious orientation, it demonstrates how spiritual principles can have important practical applications. For those approaching the topic from an interest in agriculture, it sets their field in a broader and deeper context, essential for its future development. For the general reader, it shines new light on two important and neglected aspects of our society. Hopefully it will also inspire many young people to consider careers in agriculture, a field with an exciting and challenging future, vital to our survival on this planet.

George Ronald is to be commended for publishing such an insightful and rewarding overview of a long-neglected topic in its Bahá'í Studies Series. This subject is one which will be increasingly important in the years ahead, and there must be other fields that are now ripe for similar treatment.