

Article

From New Agrarianism to Rewilding Agriculture in the Anthropocene: Syntropic Ecospirituality of Family Farming in California

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Abstract

Agriculture is hypothesized by climate scientists as being the earliest contributor to the emergence of the Anthropocene—the human-induced geological epoch—due to related greenhouse gas emissions. The environmental effects of industrial agriculture since the eighteenth century support this hypothesis; however, when agriculture is understood in the context of family- and community-based farming in culturally and geographically specific places around the world, many of its regenerative approaches can be seen as land stewardship rather than as a cause of Anthropocenic climate change. Writing as a scholar-farmer, the author discusses the typically Christian religiosity found in the new agrarianism spoken through the works of Wendell Berry but finding its root in the Jeffersonian agrarian movement. The center of the discussion is on whether this Christianity-based religiosity is related to regenerative family farming in contemporary California. Walking with the reader through the Anthropogenic conditions of industrial agriculture from Europe to California and through the current state of religion and ecology, this article presents this case of family syntropic farming as a co-creative process with nature. It demonstrates that, in the multicultural and multi-religious context of California, it is challenging to adopt a single religious ecological knowledge from a single religious tradition. It concludes that advancing the farmers' literacy of nature's animacy is rather the foundation of the agrarian ecospirituality in the ethnically and religiously diverse California in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: new agrarianism; syntropic farming; nature's animacy; naturing; rewilding agriculture



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1. Introduction

The hypothesis of the Anthropocene has been rigorously debated among scientists since its inception; however, it has been accepted by many social scientists, scholars, policymakers, and influential public figures as a planetary fact that the climate, geology, and ecology of the Earth are severely altered by modern humans (Wilkinson 2005; Chakrabarty 2018). The public discourse of the Anthropocene is unstoppably forging ahead, tackling human-induced climatic and environmental changes across the world. In it, the voices from religious communities are globally audible, expressing ethical concerns over, and offering faith-based solutions to, environmental degradation, and working toward sustainable living in the Anthropocene (Francis 2015; United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) (2021)). The academic field of religion and ecology is demonstrably an engaged interdisciplinary emerging from and shaped by the environmental engagement of diverse religious

traditions (Tucker and Grim 2001). Over the last three decades, the alliance of religion and ecology has contributed to the diversification of scientific and humanities-based studies of environmental conservation as well as to the growing public awareness of the scientific relevance of religious/spiritual knowledge of the environment. What is more important is that agrarian writers, such as W. Berry (2015), Carlson (2017), and Freyfogle (2001), are bridging the agrarian, academic, and policy worlds by offering their insights about the mutual embodiments of the farmer, nature, and divinity.

Writing as a scholar and a farmer from the interdisciplinary field of religion and ecology, I share with readers my and my family members' experiential understanding of the new agrarianism in the U.S. The 1970s is commonly taken as the starting point of the new agrarianism centered on leading agrarian writers such as Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, and Gene Logsdon, and rooted in the Jeffersonian agrarian movement of the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries (Carlson 2017; Freyfogle 2001). Thus, the lineage of agrarian thinking threads together a series of human responses to the human-induced geological epoch commencing with the Industrial Revolution in the late 1700s (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000).

Recognizing the mutual influence of religious (primarily Christian) and scientific knowledges of the environment in this new agrarianism, this article is part of a conversation about the intersection of earth sciences and earth spirituality, and of the animacy of nature, and the regionally varied religiosities born out of the new agrarianism. In particular, when ecology is enacted as a relationally understood biological science, it finds a common ethical ground with the religiously affirmed and/or spiritually felt livingness of the earth incarnated in land, water, air, and life.

Taking my multigenerational and multicultural farming family as an example, this article presents a case of the principle of mimicking nature in syntropic agriculture (also known as syntropic agroforestry) at an experimental level on a small farm in contemporary northern California. It discusses the interfaith and practical limitations of single religious ecologies based on single religious traditions. It walks the reader through how this case of syntropic farming concurrently entails a locally contextualized, scientifically understood rewilding agriculture and an accompanying syntropic ecospirituality grounded in the animacy of nature. Actions informed by ecology, biology, and other life sciences are embedded with a conservation intent to concurrently revitalize the once vibrant local ecology and provide the family with subsistence needs, and support an ecospiritual celebration of nature's animacy and innate ability to foster mutual aid among diverse organisms. Given the family members' modern educational backgrounds, this article shows that the convergence of different religious-spiritual traditions and modern science in a farming family promotes an earth spirituality that is unitive of matter and spirit and does not anchor itself in one particular religion. This broader agrarian spirituality is centered on the animate intelligence of the earth and inclusive of indigenous knowledge.

Throughout the article, the first-person singular and plural pronouns speak respectively of my research from the field of religion and ecology and of the farming experiences of my family members, relatives, and friends.

2. Anthropogenicity of Industrialized Agriculture from Europe to California

The hypothesis of the Anthropocene is rigorously debated among natural scientists, not least concerning its dating. Centered on the anthropogenic impacts of the Industrial Revolution, Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) propose the late 1700s as the starting point of this human geological epoch. The widely known counterargument comes from Ruddiman (2003), whose "early anthropogenic hypothesis" pushes the date back to seven thousand years ago. Ruddiman pins down agriculture as the earliest anthropogenic basis of the

Anthropocene. Both sides offer convincing evidence for their respective dating approaches. In comparison, Ruddiman's paleo-physical geographic evidence mostly comes from China and Europe, while Crutzen and Stoermer's is globally assessed given the worldwide export of the Industrial Revolution from Europe. The former is more anthropogenically case-specific than the latter, largely as an abstraction from the global anthropogenic consequences of the Industrial Revolution. However, when agriculture and industrialization, as the bases of the two different arguments, are understood in the same energy field of the fossil fuels that power them, they can be complementary to one another for a fuller understanding of humankind as a geological agent.

When the use of fossil fuels became a worldwide phenomenon, the modern transformation of agriculture quickly followed suit, setting the tone of agricultural industrialization, and generating observable climatic and environmental impacts in the air, on land, and in water. In the early phase of industrialized agriculture, fossil fuels were quickly and widely used to power farm machines, beginning in Europe. Their use accelerated the consolidation of small family farming plots into large landholdings, increased food production, and brought about unprecedented population growth in Europe (Deschacht and Winter 2015; Baudin and Stelter 2019). Fossil fuels catalyzed rural-to-urban and intercontinental migrations linking Europe with "Neo-Europe" (Crosby 2004), the European settler societies in the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and Southern Africa.

The same industrialization pattern thus shaped the modern agriculture of the United States, causing the loss of the rural population to urban centers, the replacement of manual and animal labor with machines, and the introduction of chemical-based fertilizers and pesticides. The country, which started out as an agrarian society, rapidly underwent industrialization, urbanization, and commercialization. California was no exception, and was at the forefront of agricultural industrialization as soon as it was formally established as a state in 1850.

In retrospect, agricultural industrialization has led to the current environmental conditions of California, with vast numbers of acres converted to monocropping, and with resulting soil erosion, groundwater depletion, chemical pollution, salination, and subsidence (Borchers and Carpenter 2014). Inherited from the Spanish-Mexican land tenure system, the size of the initial agricultural land holdings varied from two thousand to five million acres each (Liebman 1983). Known as "bonanza farms" (Moody 1883) and "factories in the field" (McWilliams 1935), California's farms were not owned by yeoman farmers like those of Jefferson's time and place, but rather by the likes of railway companies and a few wealthy individuals who traded land ownership as speculative investments.

The once ecologically diverse Central Valley, for example, was transformed into wheat fields from the 1850s to the 1880s by the combined forces of modern machinery and human labor, which changed successively from Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos to Mexicans (Liebman 1983). The current demographics of land ownership reflect the state's history, "In California today, white producers operate over 94% of farms (66,439 farms) and own over 97% of farmland (23,801,206 acres), compared to 15.6% and 12% for Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish [speaking] producers, 6.6 and 3.2 [%] for Asian producers, 3% and 2.5% American Indian. . ." (Kennedy and Frazier 2024). These single race-based statistics do not show the interracial nature of family-owned farmlands; in reality, 17% to 20% of Californian families are built on interracial and intercultural marriages (Gest 2022; Tong 2023), a number that is likely also reflected in the state's agricultural families. It is also important to note that the average farm size in California is 378 acres, a number that does not indicate the size of the farms owned by individual members of the respective racial groups (California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) (2024)).

With this said, the author's farmstead bears the effects of the political and anthropogenic conditions reported thus far. First, our multigenerational family nonetheless mirrors California's agricultural ethnic diversity with its Asian, European, and Mexican lineages. Second, our small parcel is an anomalous five acres surrounded by farms four to one hundred times larger. Third, the county in which the farm is located hosts an agricultural-focused land-grant university that is the seedbed for mechanized- and industrial-farming methods and processes. Among its claims to fame is the "square" tomato, a processing tomato that can withstand the rigors of the machine harvester that was also invented here (Carlisle-Cummins 2015).

So, the industrialization-induced Anthropocene is not a hypothesis but an environmental reality in which we live and farm, with a history traceable to the spread of industrialization worldwide.

3. Religiosity of New Agrarianism from Thomas Jefferson to Wendell Berry

Critics of new agrarianism deem it a myth fueled by nostalgia (Conn 2023), a "rural utopia" (Aubrun and Grady 2003) or "a literary idea" (Hofstadter 1955). In spite of the fact that currently less than 2% of the U.S. population comes from a farming background (Munch 2024; Endress 2022), the collective memory of the country as an agrarian nation has been well preserved and retold. For example, the Grange, Patrons of Husbandry, the oldest American agricultural organization, was founded in 1867 and was deeply influenced by the Jeffersonian agrarian reality. Continuously recounted, this "myth" arose as a result of the factual conditions of the historical foundation of the United States. Meanwhile, the current demographic reality of so-called agrarians consists of a very small number of practicing agriculturalists and a large appreciative audience of landless readers, gardeners, and dreamers desiring to be homesteaders of small farms and agrarian land stewards.

The liveliness of the new agrarianism, as an enduring idea, lies, perhaps, in its religiosity rooted in the farmsteads of the past and present, and expressed in contemporary poetry, literature, academic research, YouTube videos, and public discourses. This unconventional religiosity can be characterized as a civil religion, or an agrarian Christianity. Many agrarians approach their work with the land as engaging with a personalized and embodied divinity, with an inherent earthly sacredness, and with an openness to the animacy of the earth mostly within a broad Christian framework.

Beginning in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Jeffersonian agrarianism sanctified the common agrarian majority as the foundation of the young republic. Jefferson said, "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue" (Jefferson 1955) and "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds" (Jefferson 1955). What he said is widely referenced in the texts of diverse scholars and new agrarians, including those who research the ideological and popular bases of Jefferson's modern agrarianism (Phillips 2010; Krall 2002), who discuss Jefferson's rejection of industrialism and preference for building the United States as an agrarian republic (Holowchak 2011; W. Berry 2015), and who endeavor to revive an agrarian America with a balanced relationship with the modern economic system (Longman 2008; Olson 2021).

Seen from an Anthropocenic perspective, Jeffersonian agrarianism was a reflexive national response to the effects of the industrialization brought from Europe. From 1800 to 1900, the percentage of Americans farming dropped from eighty-three to forty percent as industrial agriculture advanced (Digital History 2016). As a reflection of the early agrarian

consciousness, the majority of that original eighty-three percent were small farm owners. Eventually, though, agricultural industrialization and expanding urbanization would drain over half the population of rural America into urban centers and into non-agricultural livelihoods. Farmers left their farms and farmlands were dispossessed and consolidated into larger industrial agricultural complexes, a phenomenon that has persisted into the twentieth century. The prime example in this area is the aforementioned invention of the square tomato harvester that led to 4428 of 5000 tomato growers going out of business and 32,000 farm workers losing their jobs (Carlisle-Cummins 2015).

The Jeffersonian agrarianism emerged to uphold democratic values of liberty, equality, and justice, and to cherish the land as a gift of God. It was well expressed in the image of the “yeoman farmer,” the demographic majority who were small, independent, self-sufficient farm owners relying on family labor, and who were the political ballast of community and national stability (Dalecki and Coughenour 1992; Gould 2005; Smith 2020).

Today, this farmstead-based national identity is no longer supported by the country’s farming demographics; however, its yeoman legacy continues to exist in contemporary agrarian literature and academic discussions. As Phillips (2010) puts it, “the most consistent and elegant torchbearer of Jefferson’s yeoman farmer is not a politician but a writer—Kentuckian Wendell Berry.” To add, Berry is foremost a farmer, as he says, “I have farmed as a writer and written as a farmer” (W. Berry 2010). Interestingly, the history of his family farm traces itself to the time of Jefferson.

Berry’s agrarian religiosity inherits the anti-industrialization fervor of Jefferson and the biocentrism of Liberty Hyde Bailey, the renowned horticulturalist and author of *Holy Earth* (Bailey 1916). The intertwining of divinity, nature, and humanity in Berry’s own writings has prompted scholars to initiate studies of “religious agrarianism” (LeVasseur 2017), of “the Bible through agrarian eyes” (Davis 2009), and of “God in the Work of Wendell Berry” (Shuman 2009). These Christian frameworks are relevant for the case studies of Jefferson, Bailey, and Berry. Beyond these Christianity-based agrarian practices and thoughts, contemporary agnostic or non-Christian agrarians appreciate the new agrarian tradition as both a civil religion and an agrarian nature spirituality. I will elaborate on what both entail two sections down, but in short, the former pertains to equitable ownership of or access to farmland and the pursuit of farmstead-based livelihoods, and the latter is an expansion of the Christian interpretation of divinity as being embodied in biologically and ecologically understood nature. As the notable new agrarians variously express, the agrarian hears “the universal voice of nature” (Bailey 1927); that “nature and humans are one” (Kumar 2013); and references “the life-giving placenta” (Wirzba 2003).

It would not be difficult for these expressions to find resonance with non-Semitic ecospiritual worldviews as well as with a modern scientific understanding of how nature works. As ecosystem and soil health speak to Christian and non-Christian farmers alike outside Berry’s Kentucky family farm, a sense of divinity and of the sacredness of nature are recognized by ecospiritually attentive non-Christian counterparts and prompt efforts to translate the sacred-nature-centered principle into a set of applicable farming methods and land ethics in an interfaith and scientific fashion.

4. Syntropic Naturing of Atmospheric Rivers, Plants, and Soil on a California Farmstead

Bearing in mind Berry’s inspirational writings on the livingness of soil (W. Berry 1969, 1998) and California’s inland Mediterranean climate, we utilize the practices of regenerative farming in order to build a subsistent farm interwoven with year-long green pastures for rotational grazing of sheep, vegetable gardens, and fruit orchards, and eventually

creating a farm ecosystem that will be independent from external inputs, such as pumped groundwater and compost transported from elsewhere.

We look to the methods of permaculture (Mollison 1988), managed rotational grazing (Judy 2021; Savory and Butterfield 2016), and Götsch's (2019a) syntropic agriculture for the purpose of improving the current conditions of our farm. Being in harmony with nature (Götsch 2019b) is the foundation of syntropic farming, with the farmer, plants, and soil being cooperative actors working together to benefit each other's wellbeing. This is accomplished by letting the "macroorganism" organize itself in its natural, ecological way, with the farmer providing key actions along the way. The term "macroorganism" can refer to both the specific ecosystem in which the farm and farmer exist, or the wider, intelligent processes that foster life.

As part of the macroorganism, the farmer grows and manages a stratified agroforest of diverse species of varying strata to co-create an ecosystem that maximizes photosynthesis, feeds soil life, maintains moisture, and keeps the soil shaded. The dead leaves and branches from seasonal shedding, and the fresh material gained from the farmer's periodical and appropriately timed pruning create in situ organic matter, foster microbes, make humus, and create zones of nutrition and microclimate that foster seedling germination from the planted seedbank. As the tree roots grow stronger and more extensive, they increasingly exude nutrient-rich liquid carbon into the soil and feed microorganisms (Jones 2018). In turn, the plants' capacity to retain water in the soil increases. This, combined with having planted a selection of climate-appropriate species on our farm, will help it wean off externally sourced water. Animal presence in brittle environments such as ours is a critical component of fostering the soil life that feeds all things. Thus, with trees planted in rows with alleys (linear or otherwise), the farm will retain its grassland/gallery-forest heritage so that ruminants can be returned to a land that once knew vast herds of seasonal elk, antelope, and deer, aiding in reestablishment and enhancement of native species (Valliere et al. 2025).

Our inland Mediterranean climate requires a conservation-minded approach to work with a brief rainfall period from November to March, and an extended and frequently hot, dry period the rest of the year. Growing drought-friendly, heat-resistant, wind-hardy, and clay-accommodating plants that also provide food and fodder requires a syntropic approach with its ecosystem-mimicking methods. At times, California's annual rainfall is brought by what meteorologists call an "atmospheric river": a "flowing column of condensed water vapor in the atmosphere responsible for producing significant levels of rain and snow, especially in the Western United States" (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) (2023)). These atmospheric rivers' routes are trans-Pacific, originating off the coast of East Asia or from the western North Pacific—though sometimes they can originate further south and be tropical in nature—and terminating over North America (Pan et al. 2024); they are known for "typically carrying more than twice the flow of the Amazon River" (Vallejo-Bernal et al. 2025).

In reality, these immense rivers in the sky do not always come to our part of the valley with the "right" amount of rain, if they come at all; some seasons have less rain, or lack an atmospheric river altogether, leading to a drought year, and some have more, resulting in floods. NASA's (2023) GeoColor animation captures a real-time movement of a trans-Pacific atmospheric river, whose shape and movement resemble those of the colossal mythic water-dispersing dragons found in many cultural traditions of Asia. Both scientifically and mythically, the landfall of atmospheric rivers teaches us about how a local farm is tightly knitted into the planetary water cycles. Our local groundwater is annually replenished by the sky's rivers, or perhaps it is the dragons who desalinate and convey the water from the other side of the Pacific Ocean to California. Although our farm has a well,

the largely overdrawn underground water in the state discourages us from too frequent use. Unsurprisingly, our core farming activities are centered on the rainy season and scheduled throughout the winter-spring months when there is likely to be precipitation. This, then, is when tree planting takes place. The soil has been softened from its concrete-like solidity, allowing young trees to extend their roots to retain rainwater and transform the nearly pure clay soil into loam. Selected species are planted in the following months until early March, when the seasonal sky river starts to retreat back to the ocean.

The syntropic planting approach is to work with plants categorized based on their different growing speeds, ecological niches, and lifecycles so that the macroorganism has an easier time of organizing its life-impetus. These categories are sometimes referred to as “placenta,” “secondary,” and “climax” (Gietzen 2019), but other models use other terms to describe how plants develop and adapt through ecosystem creation, growth, maturity, and senescence. In this case, placenta refers to fast-growing, pioneering annuals, biennials, and short-lived perennials that maximize the abundant sunlight found in an open clearing, produce large quantities of seeds for the following year, and create a humid, shady oasis close to the ground. These plants create a “nursery” for the species that will come next in succession. They are low in stature and immediately embrace the soil the way a mammal’s placenta protects a fetus. Given that our farm was stuck in one phase of succession for decades while it was continually hayed, we are working with an existing “placenta” that includes wild oats, prickly lettuce, rye grass, chicory, star thistle, vetch, and other native and non-native species. As we support the macroorganism to break free of the previously enforced hay-pasture restrictions, we are trialing other species to act as a placenta by encouraging the dynamic Hall (2025) calls an “infestation.”

The trees we have planted over the last three years have been our partners to improve the soil and work toward the goal of creating an ecosystem unique to the farm. While we are still in the early stages of developing a syntropic system adapted to a Mediterranean climate, we recognize that the essence of syntropic farming lies in the dynamic of nature-human-plant cooperation, as Götsch (2019a) writes:

Syntropic Agriculture . . . helps the farmer replicate and accelerate the *natural processes* of ecological succession and stratification, giving each plant the ideal conditions for its development, placing each one in their “just right” position in space (strata) and in time (succession). It is process-based agriculture, rather than input-based. In that way, the harvest is seen as a side effect of ecosystem regeneration, or vice versa [emphasis added].

In other words, syntropy means concentration, diversification, stratification, and mutual nourishment as opposed to entropy, which connotes energy degradation or dissipation, as found in industrialized, extractive agriculture (Götsch 2019a). Always in motion, nature permeates and embodies herself in everything and everyone. When it is seen as the ultimate “macroorganism” (Götsch 2019b) who gives, takes, and transforms life, nature is not merely substantive to herself but is the potent and present power that environs, embodies, nourishes, and ensouls all organisms. She is horizontally transcendental, meaning that it is the same creative essence that spins together the web of diverse lifeforms and consciousnesses on earth. In this regard, nature is best understood as a verb—to nature, and the act of naturing—because of her constant moving, creative, and transformative force. Nature’s naturing is not just her own doing, but encompasses the actions and interactions of all earthlings, including plants, animals, and microorganisms. Nature never stops naturing with land, air, water, and all lifeforms. Naturing is thus a series of relational, collaborative, and incessant events that are ecologically and biologically observable, and animistically enlivening.

As local farmers in northern California, we see the naturing power of the earth move through atmospheric rivers making landfall, through the greening of annuals and perennials, and the life-giving nourishment generated from the decomposition of the scythed grass, fallen leaves, and coppiced branches and given to the living plants and soil microorganisms. Death is simply a short transition back to life. We very much resonate with what a fellow syntropic farmer says, “Nature has the ability to create fertilizer right from thin air” (Gietzen 2019). We understand this “thin air” as the effortlessness or as a matter-of-fact attitude of nature; however, it requires humans, as farmers, to work faithfully with the circuit of nature’s energy flow from the sun and the seasonal rain down to the foliage, the roots, and microorganisms in the soil. Our role is that of a conduit for this cyclical energy flow until the plants are well established and holistically integrated into the mutually flourishing land-centric community of our farmstead composed of cooperative human and nonhuman members.

5. Debating the Applicability of Religious Ecologies Among Family Farmers

In the interdisciplinary field of religion and ecology, religious knowledges of the ecological world are categorized under individual religious traditions, such as *Buddhism and Ecology* (Tucker and Williams 1997), *Christianity and Ecology* (Hessel and Ruether 2000), and *Daoism and Ecology* (Girardot et al. 2001). These seminal volumes laid the foundation for the field of religion and ecology and provided the policy world with a roadmap of how to mobilize different constituencies of the world’s religions for environmental causes. It is worth noting that eighty percent of the world’s population is religious (Abumoghli 2024). Thus, it is unsurprising that the field of religion and ecology is exceedingly productive. At the same time, the question that remains to be addressed is how these individual religious ecologies can be utilized in regenerative agriculture.

When contextualized in contemporary California, the most ethnoculturally diverse state, individual religious ecological knowledges have high exposure to inter-religious and cross-spiritual conversations and debates. The Pew Research Center’s findings show that in California, about 55% of adults identify themselves as Christian and 33% are religiously unaffiliated. Approximately 9% of Californians are followers of other religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism (Pew Research Center 2024). The religious and nonreligious demographics of the Central Valley reflect the statewide statistics. For instance, 52% of Fresno County residents are Christians and 23% of the residents are not affiliated with any organized religion (Fiala 2021). The remaining 25% are Baha’i, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, Orthodox, and Sikh (USCDornsife 2010). Take Yolo County as another example. About 64% of its population is non-religious or does not have a formal religious affiliation (USCDornsife 2010).

Relevant to this article, there are no known studies that correlate farming with religious knowledge of the environment in the Central Valley. However, those involved in regenerative organic farming in California are known for various kinds of earth spirituality tracing back to the 1970s, as shown in the histories of such farms as Sunburst Farms in the Santa Barbara area (Hoesly 2019) and Green Gulch Farm, associated with Green Gulch Zen Center in Muir Beach. In our area, we concur with Greg and Jennifer House’s finding that recognizes organic farmers’ strong association with the spiritual value of nature as well as with indigenous ecological knowledge (House 2016).

To be noted, earth-based spirituality is likely included in the nonreligious or religiously unaffiliated statistics cited above due to the censuses’ apparent bias against noninstitutionally affiliated spiritual and religious practices. Furthermore, the organic farms cited above are known for their fluency in scientific and traditional knowledge of natural resource man-

agement. Thus, interfaith comparisons and/or absorption of modern scientific knowledge are inevitable. As narrated earlier, epistemic and ecospiritual debates among our family members are commonplace given familial religious backgrounds in Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, and Protestantism. In addition, our educational backgrounds in anthropology, art, environmental studies, water resource management, and religious studies unavoidably come into the foreground of our discussions on the relevance or irrelevance of these individual religious traditions when their ecological knowledges are related to our syntropic farming. In particular, our modern ecological perspective appears to be a critical basis of how we understand religious ecologies from different human spiritual traditions.

As each of these religious traditions holds its unique ecological philosophy, we find that the strengths of the Buddhist concept of interdependence (Macy 1990) and the Confucian idea of the unity of heaven and humans (Tu 2001) inform environmental and interspecies ethics, not actual farm work. Christian ecological knowledge has its canonical basis, particularly in the book of Genesis regarding the origin of this physical world, the emergence of animal and plant species, and the human role as stewards of the earth assigned by the creator. Protestant and Catholic environmentalists are active throughout the world (Hammink 2012; Francis 2015). When it comes to regenerative farming, Wendell Berry is the most recognized Christian yeoman of our time, and is an exemplar embodying the integrality of soil, nature, divinity, community, health, body, and soul in his yeomanry. In his widely read essay “The Body and the Earth,” he writes, “We are a part of Creation, one with all that we live from and all that, in turn, lives from us” and “The Bible’s aim, as I read it, is not the freeing of the spirit from the world. It is the handbook of their interaction” (W. Berry 2015). As an agrarian, Berry’s earth spirituality is found in the topsoil that is “very Christ-like in its passivity and beneficence, and in the penetrating energy that issues out of its peaceableness. . . Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise. Death is the bridge or the tunnel by which its past enters its future” (W. Berry 1969). Plainly, this is Berry’s yeoman theology that speaks of the Christian divinity incarnate in the livingness and fertility of soil. This down-to-earth religiosity of Berry’s agrarianism bears influence as well as inspiration from the previous generations of leading agrarian thinkers.

Liberty Hyde Bailey left an indelible mark on Berry’s agrarian thoughts. W. Berry (1990) calls him “one of the heirs of Thomas Jefferson.” What Bailey inherited from Jefferson was twofold, namely nature as the best teacher of farming and of the “this worldliness” of God, as he wrote in *The Holy Earth* (Bailey 1916), “The living creation is not exclusively man-centered: it is biocentric.” Dedicated to Bailey, Berry’s essay “Practical Harmony” quotes from the same book: “A good part of agriculture is to learn how to adapt one’s work to nature. . . To live in right relation with his natural conditions is one of the first lessons that a wise farmer or any other wise man learns” (W. Berry 1990). The physical form of this nature, appearing in both authors’ writings, is best encapsulated in the first few lines of Berry’s poem “The Man Born to Farming”:

The grower of trees, the gardener, the man born to farming,
whose hands reach into the ground and sprout,
to him *the soil is a divine drug*. He enters into death
yearly, and comes back rejoicing. He has seen the light lie down
in the dung heap, and rise again in the corn. . . . ((W. Berry 1998), emphasis added)

Conversing with Berry’s writing on soil, Wirzba (2003), a contemporary agrarian theologian, offers his biblical view: “it [soil] is the medium through which the divine power of life is effected.” Like Wirzba, we are naturally drawn to Berry’s spiritualization of soil as “a divine drug” that creatively makes annual and perennial mutual transformation of life and death on a farm. At the same time, it is recognizable that Berry’s yeoman theology

is not congruent with the traditional foundation of Christian theology in which God is not this worldly but otherworldly. In this orthodox theological framework, the kingdom of God and the earth are not mutually embodied. While the saved soul ascends to God's kingdom, the body perishes to the earth. Berry openly confronts this institutional Christian theological outlook: "This separation of the soul from the body and from the world is no disease of the fringe, no aberration, but a fracture that runs through the mentality of institutional religion like a geologic fault" (W. Berry 2015).

We cannot agree more with Berry about this unnecessary separation, as it takes away the common consensus among ecospiritualists of all faiths that the earth is sacredly animate. The new agrarianism centered around Berry is certainly relevant in contemporary California, but its religious framework and agrarian values are apparently limited to a particular monotheism. Given the human diversity of California, the Christian-specific outlook of Berry's agrarian spirituality awaits interfaith conversations with agnostic and non-Christian agrarians. Smallholding farming communities in the Central Valley are ethnically and religiously diverse, and bear little resemblance to those of Jefferson's time. If the new agrarianism wishes to grow roots in the Golden State, it will be compelled to beckon a more inclusive and holistic agrarian spirituality of a new yeomanry that reflects California's multicultural ethos.

6. New Yeomanry, Nature's Animacy and Rewilding Agriculture in the Anthropocene

If we set the cultural and religious diversity of the Central Valley aside, the daily routines of individual family farmers are similar to those of the Jeffersonian yeoman farmers. Given the small size of our farm, what we do actually fits the family scale of the Jefferson-era "citizen farmers."

Assuming, then, that we are contemporary yeoman farmers, we are situated in the midst of corporate industrial megafarms that rely on large machines and waged laborers. In this social environment, our yeomanry thus has one important element missing, that is, a collective agrarian ethos similar to Jefferson's time when such farmers were the majority of the nation. This ethos was centered on the political values of and spiritual belief in the unalienable rights of "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" stated in the Declaration of Independence drafted by Jefferson. To a farmer, caring for and working with the land is the basis for materializing these hefty values. Liberty and Happiness can only grow from Life. Farming in this sense is synonymous with growing life—the combined life of soil, plants, animals, farmers, and the community. This essentially syntropic life comes alive when mutual feeding of the human and nonhuman members of the farmland takes place. Thus, identifying immaterial elementals in our farming life, such as beliefs, values, and ethics, becomes essential and equally critical as air, water, and earth.

We honor the sacredness of these unalienable rights as a part and parcel of American civil religion (Bellah 1988; Gardella 2014). Exercising them is particularly crucial for Californians who are concerned about the "issue of inequity in agricultural land access and stable tenure" (Kennedy and Frazier 2024) and policies that lend little support to smallholding farmers. In recent years, progress has been made in terms of policy instruments such as "The Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation program of 2014" and "The Farmer Equity Act of 2017." We also see the implementation of equitable agricultural policies and relevant federal and state programs as fostering citizen responsibility. For example, our recent hedgerow project was partially supported by the county resource conservation district, which organized volunteers to help plant California native plants.

Ultimately, though, on a daily basis at the farm, we cannot rely on state policies to transform the dry, cracked clay soil, an accumulated outcome of an ecosystem damaged

by, if not outright lost to, industrial agriculture since the mid-1800s, into loam. At the same time, we recognize that without those industrial changes, the locale would only be seasonally inhabitable due to winter flooding of riparian-adjacent and wetland areas. In spite of the anthropogenic impact over the last one hundred and fifty years, the state and federal governments continue to count on industrial agriculture to feed the nation and generate revenue from exporting agricultural goods to other parts of the world. In 2023, the total agricultural revenue of California reached \$60 billion, with 17% of the total coming from various organic farm products ([California Department of Food and Agriculture \(CDFA\) \(2024\)](#)). The potential contribution of syntropic farming to the California economy is recognizable, but to realize it, we cannot count on sporadically occurring favorable policies. What we can count on is our own labor—planting more trees, renewing yearly cover crops, and nurturing the growing population of earthworms and mycorrhizae—plus the seasonally fluctuating environmental flows.

Comparatively, the relatively predictable naturing of Mother Earth is far more dependable than the erratic birthing of new state policies. If I borrow the words of [Kimmerer \(2017\)](#), a Potawatomi ecologist and botanist, naturing is “the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things.” Its creative force is prehuman and will continue with or without humans. Its ancientness and eternalness are beyond our full grasp, but have been cherished in diverse traditional ecological knowledges ([Berkes 1999](#)) before the arrival of world religions and modern science.

Syntropic agriculture does not offer a standard recipe, but its principle of humbling oneself to work with the forces of living nature compels the farmer to read the locally revealed animacy of nature, recognize its climate-specific ecological patterns, and farm accordingly. We resonate with Kimmerer’s proposition for “an intertwining of science, spirit, and story—old stories and new ones that can be medicine for our broken relationship with earth” ([Kimmerer 2013](#)). We cannot agree more with her that the interbraiding of traditional knowledge, earth spirituality, and modern science is long overdue. Our syntropic farming is enacting her call for the interbraiding of the scientific knowledge of the local environment and the ongoing understanding of how nature biologically and spiritually works through the earth and different lifeforms.

As previously mentioned, this broken relationship in our area started around 1860 when industrial agriculture began in California, coinciding with the inception dates of the Anthropocene. If we take 1860 and 2026 as two respective ecological baselines, we live in a place marked by the side effects of industrial farming, meaning that crops have replaced most of the natural vegetation. This reflects the estimate that only five to eight percent of the state’s riparian areas are still extant ([Stanley et al. 2020](#)). In comparison, in the mid-1800s the area was a vast mix of wetlands, oak savannah, and riparian woodland, with abundant majestic trees such as valley oak, cottonwood, sycamore, black walnut, and willow ([Cronise 1868](#)). Its rivers and creeks were annually crowded with spawning salmon, and its marshes were filled with lush sedges and rushes. Grizzly bears and tule elk reigned supreme ([Walters 1995](#)). At the advent of industrial agriculture, the county, as described by a local historian, was “favored by rainstorm and sunshine—where every creek, winter-rivulet or summer rill dripping from the bordering hills is a Nile sowing seasons of fertility over the plain” ([Gregory 1913](#)).

The current ecological condition of our farm and the surrounding area is part of the legacy of industrialism: the great trees were felled to provide fencing, lumber, and fuel, including for the steamships that plied the Sacramento River, transporting the goods and equipment demanded during the Gold Rush. Additional land was cleared to expand agricultural fields ([Katibah 1984](#)). Now, it is difficult to see a trace of what it looked like just a century and a half ago. Our syntropic farming thus has a twofold purpose of human-earth

mutual aid. One is to meet our subsistence needs, and another is to restore the biological and ecological vitality of the land from the soil and the mycorrhizal worlds to the treetops and the birds that inhabit them. Thanks to the syntropic approach, both are concurrently taking place but will take some years to yield fruitful outcomes. Perhaps our goals for syntropic farming can be seen as aiming for a “rewilding agriculture.”

When “rewilding” and “agriculture” are put together, they do not look compatible. In the science of the Anthropocene, agriculture, as aforementioned, is deemed one of the culprits causing the human-induced climate change the whole world is now experiencing. Agriculture thus is alleged to work against natural climate cycles (Ruddiman 2003); however, if one revisits premodern farming methods around the world and those used in contemporary regenerative agriculture, farmers worked with nature in diverse forms. The modern extractive version only began two hundred years ago in Europe.

For example, after his research visits to China, Korea, and Japan in 1905, F. H. King, one of the founders of organic agriculture in the West and the author of *Farmers of Forty Centuries* (King 1911), was profoundly impressed by how farmers in these East Asian nations utilized organic matter, such as green waste from coppicing and weeding, and animal manure, to sustain the health and fertility of soil. Another example: published in 1943, Sir Howard’s (1945) *An Agricultural Testament* was a landmark work on regenerative organic farming. It is widely referenced by agrarian authors like Berry and Wirzba. In it, Howard regards nature as “the supreme farmer,” as he writes, “The forest manures itself. It makes its own humus and supplies itself with minerals. If we watch a piece of woodland we find that a gentle accumulation of mixed vegetables and animal residues is constantly taking place on the ground and that these wastes are being converted by fungi and bacteria into humus” (Howard 1945). The book was an outcome of his thirty years of research and service as British Imperial Economic Botanist in India. His work was nourished by Indian traditional agricultural knowledge.

Likewise, the livingness of nature in Götsch’s syntropic agriculture is not new, as he finds inspiration from indigenous knowledge (Jacobi et al. 2025), too. What is new is that he has interwoven indigenous and modern scientific knowledges to restore the ecological health of 1186 acres of deforested land in Brazil. In the same vein but in a different climate zone and historical context, the agricultural activities at our farm are centered on mimicking nature and building intentional cooperative relations with plants, mycorrhizae, animals, and the soil. Meanwhile, we are also learning about the local native Californian history of human-nature interactive resource management. Accordingly, humans are “active agents of environmental change and stewardship,” as M. Kat Anderson writes, “Much of what we consider wilderness today was in fact shaped by Indian burning, harvesting, tilling, pruning, sowing, and tending” (Anderson 2005). Our starting point is building a coherent ecosystem on our farm by planting trees and cover crops. At this phase of our work, cultivating the land means co-stewardship of it with the plants.

The rewilding part is a scientific conservation approach to the restoration of a given degraded environment by (re)introducing animals and plant species. The core of the rewilding concept lies in the base word “wild,” whose Old English and German etymon “wilde” suggest self-willed animals or self-willed land (Nash 2014; Johns 2019; De Vroey and Obst 2025). Given the long history of the peopled land in California, the way we understand wild or being wild is divergent from the concept of wilderness connoting the separation of nature from humans (U.S. Congress 1964). As our syntropic emphasis is placed on soil improvement, rewilding primarily means working with the self-will of the land. The prefix “re-” also implies revering, reacquainting ourselves with, and reembracing the self-will of nature.

The animacy of nature is not abstract but concretely manifests itself through the geological, biological, and ecological activities of the earth. This knowledge of nature, ancient among many indigenous peoples of the world, is being acknowledged and scientifically elaborated by a growing number of modern scientists. The self-will of Mother Earth infuses the material and the spiritual worlds together into what Vernadsky (1998) called the “living matter—the Earth’s sum total of living organisms—that transforms the radiant energy of the sun into the active chemical energy of the biosphere.” Life, as living matter, thus encompasses both body and spirit. The physical earth is not merely a material entity to itself but willfully lives in and through every lifeform as water, air, and earth. It is thus geologically, ecologically, and spiritually animate. Margulis and Sagan (1995) wrote, “From the experience of willing our bodies to move came animism: the view that winds come and go, rivers flow, and celestial bodies guard the heavens because something inside each wills the movement. In animism all things, not only animals, are seen to be inhabited by an inner, animating spirit.”

When earthly existences are understood as the individual incarnations of the total animate living matter, rewilding agriculture means renewing the human membership of the wild or of self-willed nature as an essential part of the new yeomanry in contemporary California. In particular, when humanity is recognized as merely a geologically disturbing agent in the Anthropocene, it is time to recognize that we have a better role to play, one that allows us to repay our environmental indebtedness to and realign our own self-will with that of Mother Earth. Advancing the literacy of nature’s animacy is an integral part of our endeavor. Nature, as the totality of living matter, teaches us daily at the farm about how her self-will interacts with and embodies itself in that of humans and nonhumans. Our growing experience in syntropic farming tells us that being wild and natural is synonymous with being relationally free, or simply means the freedom of mutual flourishing within the same web of life, in which one’s self-will does not pulse independently but rather interdependently with everyone else’s.

7. Conclusions

Regardless of different religious and spiritual bases of the new agrarianism and syntropic agriculture, their common ground is obviously found in what Bailey said one hundred and ten years ago, “A good part of agriculture is to learn how to adapt one’s work to nature, to fit the crop-scheme to the climate and to the soil and the facilities. To live in right relation with his natural conditions is one of the first lessons that a wise farmer or any other wise man learns” (Bailey 1916). The principle of this nature-centered approach is further substantiated by what W. Berry (2002) calls “good farming” with land as “a gift of immeasurable value,” and by what Wirzba (2003) describes as an “attempt to live faithfully and responsibly in a world of limits and possibilities.” Since the Jeffersonian agrarian movement, a new agrarianism has evolved into an environmentalist farming movement centered on the health of the soil and cognizant of nature’s intrinsic value. The agrarianism that Berry has advanced over the last fifty years is representative of the agrarian concern over the degrading anthropogenic consequences of industrialized agriculture. Our locally grounded, conservation-centered farming is indebted to the inspirations from Berry and his peer agrarian thinkers.

Kimmerer and Lake (2001) write, “Every landscape reflects the history and culture of the people who inhabit it. The worldview of a society is often written more truthfully on the land than in its documents.” The landscape of California is written with native, immigrant, and industrialization histories. As aforementioned, the pace of industrial agriculture is concurrent with the Anthropocene. It overwrote the landscape that native Californians once stewarded with their interactive relations with nature. The immigrants at the advent

of industrialization witnessed the ecologically and biologically lively landscape; Anderson points out that the native peoples' interactive management of natural resources had conserved California as a home of "25 percent of the biological diversity in the continental United States" (Anderson 2005) until 1850. The currently industrial farmlands in the state are an anthropogenic outcome of industrialization. Nature and humans are deeply dichotomized in the Anthropocene regardless of the evolutionary fact that humans emerged from the earth not all that long ago.

While we know that industrial agriculture will persist into the indefinite future, being smallholding farmers gives us an opportunity to experiment with the syntropic approach that has actually led us to the idea of rewilding agriculture contextualized in our local history, environmental condition, indigenous ecological knowledge, climate pattern, and the subsistence needs of the farming family. "Nature," as the nomenclature for the biosphere, and "naturing," as nature's lively actions and interactions, are the center of our syntropic farming. They require us to have fluency in the local ecology through modern scientific knowledge and to embrace a locally specific earth spirituality revealed in the annual rainfall, the seasonal environmental flows all around us, the healthily growing plants as our co-stewards of the soil, and the expanding mycorrhizal worlds beneath. This earth spirituality has no ready-made canon but is certainly written in the landscape, the sky, and the moving waters above and below. Our literacy of nature's grammar of animacy starts from where we are emplaced, live, labor, harvest, and reciprocate with the land as living matter.

With this said, the ecospirituality of syntropic farming in contemporary California is not based on a single religion but biocentrically appreciates the animacy of nature. It may benefit from diverse religious ecologies, but it grows on its own as the level of our literacy of the earth's animacy increases. Given the multicultural and multi-religious demographics of the state and of our multigenerational family, our new "yeomanry" in California thus does not have a single religious ecology based on a single religious tradition; instead, what we are learning from the land tells us that we have a syntropic ecospirituality in which the sun, the moon, the sky rivers, the living soil, and the seeds and the fruits of plants teach us how nature works holistically. This yeoman ecospiritual life grows from the health and wealth of Mother Earth.

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