

# Towards a Christian response to alternative farming<sup>1</sup>

*S P Carruthers*

Farming was the foundation of a pre-industrial, agrarian society. Modern agriculture, however, is a product of the industrial revolution, and is dominated, though not necessarily permeated, by an industrial mindset. In the view of some, this industrial mindset, with its underlying ‘productionist paradigm’<sup>2</sup>, is the root of the crisis. The ‘way out’ is to develop an alternative ‘post-industrial’ agriculture.

The most widespread alternative agriculture in the UK is organic farming. Several other alternative agricultures, not all of which are practised in the UK, have elements in common with organic farming, but also distinct features. In some cases, ideology is much more explicit and integral. Some major on one or few particular cultural techniques, and/or certain ‘gnostic’ elements and ‘mystical’ procedures. Common themes include harmony with nature and care of the soil, health and wholeness, holism and connectedness, permanence and polyculture, recycling of wastes and responsibility for future generations.

This article describes the background and content of some of these alternatives, emphasising their ideological and ethical elements, asks how Christians should respond, and identifies the need for more work to develop specifically Christian approaches.

## **Organic farming**

### *Origins*

Organic farming originated from the pioneering work, in the 1930 and 1940s, of Sir Albert Howard and his associates. Notable among the latter was Lady Eve Balfour, who, following her first encounter with Howard in 1938 and avid reading of his and others’ writings on the issues of health, food and soil, established a “long-term, comparative, controlled experiment to test the theories put forward, by Howard and others” (Balfour, 1952). In 1943, she published the now classic text, *The Living Soil* (Balfour, 1943), and she was instrumental in the founding of the Soil Association in 1946. The significance of these two figures is such that organic farming is sometimes termed the ‘Howard-Balfour’ system (eg Boeringa, 1980).

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of the material in this article originally appeared in a 1997 report by the University of Reading on ‘Organic herbage legume intercropping’ to MAFF (as was). MAFF’s support of the original research is acknowledged.

<sup>2</sup> According to Thompson (1995), modern industrial agriculture is predicated on the ‘productionist paradigm’, the principle that more production is always better. Since World War II, productionism has come to dominate the agriculture of developed countries, a phenomenon he attributes to the opportunities provided by technology – mechanisation, inorganic fertilisers, pesticides, veterinary medicine, and plant and animal breeding. This “technocentric productionism, the headlong and unreflective application of industrial technology for increasing production, is anti-environmental” (Thompson, 1995, p 70).

The core of the organic farming approach developed by the pioneers was a concern for the health of the soil. Its essential *modus operandi* was summed up by Balfour (1943) as: “feed the soil and let the soil feed the plant”. This contrasted with farming based on soluble inorganic fertilisers (inorganics or ‘artificial’) which directly feed the plant (and by implication, organic proponents contend, impoverish the soil). Arguing that conscious advocacy of organic methods can only exist in the face of alternative methods, Conford (1988) traced the roots of organic farming to the developments in the nineteenth century that described the nutrition of plants and, by implication, encouraged the application of artificial fertilisers. Significant milestones included Liebig’s monograph *Chemistry in its application to agriculture and physiology* published in 1840, and the initiation in 1843 of the Broadbalk experiment at Rothamsted. In addition, the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, a series of years of bad weather and a flood of American imports in the latter part of the Century all served to push farming towards specialisation and the greater use of artificials (Conford, 1988). As ever, agriculture was shaped by the twin influences of politics and technology.

Howard was influenced by Darwin’s monograph on earthworms, by the work of S A Waksman in the USA on humus, by what he saw as the shortcomings of the Broadbalk experiment, and by his experiences at the Institute of Plant Industry, Indore, India. He believed that Liebig, being a chemist and not a biologist had failed to appreciate the significance of soil microflora and microfauna (perhaps a foreshadow of today’s much more explicit reaction against reductionist science and the advocacy of holism). In 1931, he returned to England from India and subsequently found allies in Lady Eve Balfour, Friend Sykes (who implemented Howard’s ideas on his estate in Hampshire), Richard de la Mare (who edited Faber’s agriculture and gardening list and provided a publishing outlet for most organic farming books until the 1960s), Newman Turner (who farmed on the Somerset levels) and others.

A number of factors, both social and scientific, motivated the development of organic farming. The American Dust Bowl served as a powerful warning of the reality and risks of soil erosion, and awareness of a growing world population prompted fears of severe global food shortages. Despite varied social, ideological and political backgrounds, many of the early proponents of organic farming were “united by a concern for the health of the soil and by their fear of increasing famine” (Conford, 1988). Awareness and understanding of the nature, causes, extent and seriousness of soil erosion was enhanced by the publication in 1939 of Jacks’ & Whyte’s *The rape of the earth: a world survey of soil erosion* (Jacks & Whyte, 1939). Man’s ‘contract’ with the soil was understood, not only as the basis of production, but also as the foundation on which civilisations stood or fell (eg Hyams, 1953; Carter & Dale, 1955). Famine could be averted by recognising that the “whole world shares a common danger in the disappearance of its soil” (Balfour, 1943).

Several other themes are notable within, influential on, or contemporaneous with, the development of organic farming. Understanding of the links between diet and health was increasing, ideas of ‘wholefood’ diets and their health benefits were developing (eg Wrench, 1938) and the improvement of the health of the nation was a central theme of *The Living Soil* (Balfour, 1943). While trees do not feature strongly in organic farming, recognition of their role in nature and their significance to people formed part of the background to its development. For example, Richard St Barbe

Baker had founded the 'Men of the Trees' in 1922, J Russell Smith had published *Tree crops - a permanent agriculture* in 1929, and J S Collis published *The triumph of the tree* in 1950. The organic farming pioneers were opposed to the use of artificial fertilisers, to specialisation and to monoculture; they advocated biological methods of maintaining soil fertility, mixed farming and the minimisation of waste.

Organic farming had also a political dimension. Conford (1988) depicted the organic movement as a response to the inter-war dilemma of choice between fascism, communism and "the decrepitude of bourgeois democracy". Its proponents argued that a "revivified rural life, based on the principles of husbandry, could provide an answer to the problems which beset Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. Land work would reduce unemployment; humus-grown food and open-air tasks would improve standards of health; industry would be smaller-scale and geared to the needs of rural activities, and this would counteract centralisation and alienation, thereby contributing to desirable demographic changes; the mass movements of urban civilisations - particularly communism - would lose their breeding ground; rural festivals and rituals connected with the cycle of seasons would reduce the need for mechanised entertainments of a jaded proletariat" (Conford, 1988).

Some of the pioneers were concerned not only with natural and physical methods, but also social and spiritual values, and with the intimate links between the two. For example, Balfour (1943) wrote that "when a new generation has arisen, taught to have a living faith in the Christian ideals, to value and conserve its soil, and to put service before comfort, then not only will our land have citizens worthy of it, but it will also be a land of happy contented people". The social and spiritual ideals behind organic farming are perhaps best illustrated by the writings of H J Massingham. He denounced 'progress' in the modern sense as the "archetypal example of abstract thinking" and inveighed against the application to the land of the "quantitative principles that govern modern man's urban life"; and he saw industrial agriculture and the treatment of the farm as just like 'any other business' as the end product of a degenerative process that started with the Enclosures (Massingham, 1942). Massingham's ideal was to restore agriculture to its central place in English life, in a society of yeoman farmers and local craftsmen (Conford, 1988).

It is interesting to note the clear parallels between the above themes and the present agenda. In one sense, this indicates that the issues remain or have re-surfaced. From another perspective, the pioneering work of the 1930s and 1940s could be seen as eventually having born fruit, for example, in the growth of organic farming in the last few decades and the proliferation of other alternative agricultures, in the increase in consumption of wholefoods, and in the mushrooming of research and development of agroforestry and other 'holistic' or integrated approaches.

It is interesting also to note that, while many of seminal works were published in the 1940s and 1950s, much of the thinking was done in the years between the two world wars. As Conford (1988) stated, "all the essential ideas of the organic movement were in existence by 1952". The backcloth to the development of organic farming was the aftermath of the 'war to end all wars', the Russian revolution and after, the Depression, and the build up to World War II.

## ***Rationale***

As implied above, the principles of, and rationale for, organic farming were laid down in the 1930s and 1940s. Advocacy of organic farming today rests on the same issues in essence, but different in detail and expression. Lampkin (1990), for example, related the worldwide growth in the 1980s of organic farming and markets for organic food to the problems of overproduction in the industrialised countries, underproduction in the developing countries and the environmental impact of agriculture. Blake (1987) introduced organic farming as addressing “all the problems currently facing modern agriculture”, listing environmental pollution, food quality, surpluses, Third-World famine and farmers’ “squeezed profit margins”.

The rationale for organic farming rests, therefore, at least in part, on a critique of conventional agriculture. In presenting organic farming as meeting the criticisms of ‘orthodox’ approaches, Oelhaf (1978) argued that the failures of conventional agriculture arose from: the fact that it “need not take account of its effects on the environment (except as forced by law)”; “hidden dimensions of food quality”; the “distribution of resources among the present inhabitants of the world and between us and future generations”; “the role of man as exploiter (of other creatures) and exploited (treated as an input to the system rather than an end in himself)”. In his justification for organic farming, Lampkin (1990) listed the problems of current agricultural practice as: damage to soil structure and the environment; potential health hazards in food and reduced food quality; intensive energy use; ethically unacceptable intensive animal production; and high cost to society and to the farmer.

Organic farming is believed to address the failings of conventional agriculture as follows:-

1. Soil erosion - soil health is central to the organic farming approach, and many of its techniques are aimed at maintaining ground cover and soil organic matter, both of which have been shown to reduce erosion considerably.
2. Pollution - organic farming avoids the use of polluting inorganic fertilisers and pesticides. It also replaces these, in part, with organic wastes, potentially reducing the polluting impact of these elsewhere.
3. Biodiversity - it is argued that the emphasis on rotations, diversity, mixed farming and a biologically active soil promotes biodiversity, and maintains habitats and traditional landscapes. It is also argued that many organic farmers are more environmentally aware and interested in wildlife conservation than industrial agriculturalists.
4. Sustainability - organic farming is believed to be inherently more sustainable than conventional farming.
5. Energy - reduced use of inorganic fertilisers and pesticides results in a reduction in the use by agriculture of fossil fuels. An emphasis on local resources and markets may also reduce the energy used in transport.
6. Food quality - organic food does not contain the residues of pesticides, hormones and antibiotics, and should contain much lower levels of nitrates. There is growing scientific evidence that organic food is of higher quality in terms of dry matter and vitamin content and storage quality (Lampkin, 1990).
7. Animal welfare - organic farmers avoid intensive animal production systems (partly out of conviction, partly due to the difficulties of controlling disease in intensive units without antibiotics).

8. Resource distribution - it is argued that organic farming has less impact on the resource base and, hence, maximises intergenerational equity (Oehlaf, 1978), which is also more generally favoured by the less exploitative approach characteristic of the organic farming ideal. Organic farming may also enable greater numbers of farmers to farm the land.
9. People and communities - organic farming favours community by advocating greater co-operation, local supply and marketing etc.

Apart from its direct countering of the deleterious impacts of conventional farming, the rationale for organic farming rests on the growing market and potential premia available for organic food, which are themselves a consequence of consumer concerns over conventional agriculture.

### *Agenda*

Organic farmers range from complete opportunists, exploiting a market niche, to total idealists, for whom the priority is to implement deeply held convictions and beliefs. The majority probably combine elements of both these extremes, and seek to practice a system of farming to which they are ideologically committed, in a commercially successful way.

Lampkin (1990) was anxious to dispel the myth “that organic farmers are part of the love and magic, beard and sandals brigade” or simply ‘hobby’ farmers, and to point out that organic farmers range from “hard-headed” businessmen to “self-sufficiency smallholders seeking the good life”.

Nevertheless, many in organic farming are ideologically motivated or attracted by its core or associated ideologies. Lampkin (1990) stated that “organic agriculture has been passionately supported by people with radical views on other issues and by those holding minority opinions about such things as nutrition”. Organic smallholder, Francis Blake (1987) described how he came to realise that organic farming was a “philosophy of life”, concerned with wholeness and interconnectedness, that embraced the entire content of life and not simply farming. Hopkins (1945) commented that the “nature-knows-best philosophy of the” humus “school tends to appeal to those whose leanings are somewhat artistic”.

Conford (1988) argued that organic farming could be seen as “inherently religious in a general sense, since it is based on reverence for the laws of nature - literally on humility - rather than the arrogant assumption that the earth can be indefinitely persuaded or forced to do Man’s will”. Balfour and Massingham both explicitly expressed Christian belief. It was Devonshire farmer, Michael Huggins’ reading of the Bible that persuaded him of the value of the organic approach (Huggins, 1996).

Criticism of conventional agriculture and agricultural policy and campaigning for policy change are high on the agenda of the organic farming movement. As illustrated above, many organic farming texts include a critique of modern agriculture. Related to this are the movement’s efforts to secure a ‘fair deal’ for its adherents, in terms of policy and financial support, research and development, and marketing. The movement is also concerned with advice, education and training, and, in particular, quality control and certification.

## **Biodynamic agriculture**

Biodynamic agriculture is rooted generally in the anthroposophic teachings of Rudolf Steiner, and specifically in a series of lectures he gave at the Free High School for Spiritual Sciences in Switzerland in 1924. There appears to be no rigid definition of biodynamic agriculture; each enterprise is individual, as agriculture is seen as a “creative principle leading to multifarious forms” (Boeringa, 1980). Boeringa (1980) described biodynamic farming as comprising a ‘biological’ element, concerned with reinforcing the life-processes in nature, and a ‘dynamic’ element, concerned with operating the forces that affect nature. The goal is a “durable co-operation between mankind and nature which are both in a state of continuous development”. Biodynamic agriculture emphasises ‘process’ and ‘progress’.

The ‘biological’ dimension arises from a view of nature as one coherent totality, a living whole with the properties of an organism, and the parts of nature (eg the soil) as organs of that organism. Processes in nature are determined by the interplay of terrestrial or physical forces and extraterrestrial or cosmic ‘forces’ (ether forces, astral forces, spiritual forces). Soil, plant and animals together are the foundation for man’s relationship with nature. Through agriculture, man ‘recreates’ the natural relationships between soil, plants and animals in a unique configuration. If organic farming’s focus is on the ‘living soil’, biodynamic agriculture emphasises the ‘farm organism’ (Koepf *et al.*, 1976), as a unique expression, or microcosm, of nature itself.

The ‘dynamic’ aspects of biodynamic agriculture are aimed at ‘operating’ or ‘manipulating’ the cosmic forces that influence the life-processes of soils, plants, animals and man. Biodynamic ‘preparations’, which resemble homeopathic medicines in the immense dilution of their ingredients and the importance of rhythmic stirring, serve to make the soil ‘accessible’ and the plant more ‘sensitive’ to extraterrestrial forces. Sowing, cultivation and harvesting are conducted according to lunar and astrological calendars.

## **Other alternatives**

**Lemaire-Boucher** agriculture emphasises the use of heaped composts, leguminous plants, and Calmagol (a preparation made from coral algae). The latter effects the ‘biological transmutation’ of elements, belief in which is at the heart of this approach.

The **Muller-Rusch** approach majors on the application of finely ground rock dust (R Brighton, personal communication, 1995). Other approaches described by Boeringa (1980) include macrobiotic agriculture, organic-biological agriculture, mazdaznan agriculture, and veganic agriculture.

**Permaculture** arises from the work of Bill Mollison in Australia and has gained a small following in the UK. It centres on design and permanence and incorporates many elements of organic farming, but within a wider framework (eg Mollison, 1988).

Kiley-Worthington (1981, 1993) proposed an approach she entitled ‘**ecological agriculture**’, which also shares common ground with organic farming, but emphasises animal rights.

## **Sustainability**

Of greater significance are the various methods and approaches to ‘sustainable’ farming being developed within the context of mainstream agriculture. Sustainability means different things to different people, but there is little doubt that it has become a pervasive concept or ideal. Porritt (2000) predicted that “the boundaries between what we know describe as ‘organic’, ‘chemical’ or ‘GM’, are likely to soften; whatever the descriptor, all production systems will be bound by the same discipline of sustainability”.

The vehicle of sustainability has enabled many elements of contemporary environmentalism to penetrate mainstream thinking and policy making. While the term and concept originated as an expression of ‘intergenerational responsibility’, there is little doubt that it has become socially constructed and politically hijacked. Examination of the DETR’s ‘sustainability indicators’ (DETR, 2000) reveals a ‘collage’ of ideas that owe more to political correctness and ideology than to any objective set of principles. In this sense, sustainability is thoroughly ‘post-modern’.

## **The religious angle**

There are strong New Age elements in several alternative-farming movements, and in environmentalism more generally. The latter has much of the character of religion, offering spirituality, an ethic and even a future ‘Golden Age’<sup>3</sup>. The religious critique of farming seems more likely to come from this quarter than from traditional Christianity. The challenges for Christians are both to reclaim lost ground and speak with a clear voice in the environmental arena and with respect to farming, and to establish ‘rules of engagement’ in order to work with environmentalists and other religionists in addressing shared concerns.

## **The Christian response?**

Can, or should, organic farming and other ‘sustainable’ alternatives be espoused and advocated as a Christian approach? Should Christians farm and buy organic? Certainly this is the conclusion of some. For example, as described above organic pioneers, Lady Eve Balfour and H J Massingham both professed Christian belief and regarded organic farming as an essentially ‘Christian’ way. The organic farming charity Land Heritage has a Christian foundation, and many Christians among its members and officers.

---

<sup>1 3</sup> The wider vision of organic farming as described above, and certainly of some other alternatives, taken to their logical conclusion could be seen as suggestive of a ‘pseudo-Millennium’ (perhaps even an ‘anti-Millennium’) - the realisation of the vision of peace and harmony, for example of Isaiah 11:1-9, without the second advent of the Prince of Peace!

The array of approaches and goals with the label of sustainability includes many that Christians would readily espouse. As is clear from the accounts above, organic farming and some other alternatives and the wider concepts of sustainable agriculture, do appear to offer a means of expressing Christian environmental responsibility and social justice to a greater extent than perhaps do some contemporary conventional approaches.

Nevertheless, Christians cannot 'buy into' the whole package. They need to remain critical of those ideological and quasi-religious elements that run counter to Christian and Biblical principles. Further, the problems of operationalising many alternatives are considerable - in terms both of farming and consuming.

The challenge remains, therefore, to develop approaches that enable Christians to farm in ways that reflect Biblical principles yet remain in farming, and provide a basis for a stronger prophetic voice in the agricultural arena.

## References

- Balfour, E (1943) *The living soil*. London: Faber.
- Blake, F (1987) *The handbook of organic husbandry*. Marlborough: Crowood Press.
- Boeringa, R (Ed) (1980) Alternative methods of agriculture. *Agriculture and Environment*, 5.
- Carter, V G & Dale, T (1955) *Topsoil and civilisation*. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma.
- Conford, P (1988) Introduction. In: Conford, P (Ed) *The organic tradition*. Bideford, Devon: Green Books.
- DETR (1999) *Quality of life counts. Indicators for a strategy for sustainable development for the United Kingdom*. London: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.
- Hopkins, D (1945) *Chemicals, humus and soil*. London: Faber.
- Huggins, M (1996) Western agriculture and Christian ethics. In: Carruthers, S P & Miller, F A (Eds) *Crisis on the family farm: ethics or economics?* CAS Paper 28. Reading: Centre for Agricultural Strategy.
- Hyams, E (1952) *Soil and civilisation*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Jacks, G V & Whyte, R O (1939) *The rape of the earth: a world survey of soil erosion*. London: Faber.
- Kiley-Worthington, M (1981) *Eco-agriculture: food first farming*. London: Souvenir Press.

Kiley-Worthington, M (1981) Ecological agriculture: what it is and how it works. *Agriculture and Environment* **6**, 349-381.

Koepf, H H, Petterson, B D & Schaumann, W (1976) *Biodynamic agriculture*. New York: Anthroposophic Press.

Lampkin, N (1990) *Organic farming*. Ipswich: Farming Press.

Massingham, H J (1942) *Remembrance*. Batsford. Quoted in: Abelson, E (Ed) (1988) *A mirror of England*. Bideford, Devon: Green Books.

Mollison, B (1988) *Permaculture - a designers' manual*. Tyalgum, Australia: Tagari Publications.

Oelhaf, R C (1978) *Organic agriculture*. Montclair, New Jersey: Allanheld, Osmun and Co.

Porritt, J (2000) *Playing safe: science and the environment*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Thompson, P B. 1995. *The Spirit of the Soil. Agriculture and environmental ethics*. London: Routledge.

Wrench, G T (1938) *The wheel of health*. London: C W Daniel.