

A [sample entry](#) from the

Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

(London & New York: Continuum, 2005)

Edited by

[Bron Taylor](#)

© 2005
All Rights Reserved

Berry, Wendell (1934–)

Perhaps Wendell Berry's greatest contribution to contemporary discussions about the significance of nature in American culture is his refusal to be subjected to easy categorization. While thoroughly Christian, he is an outspoken critic of institutional religion and while his ethics are biblically based, his writing embraces the wisdom of Buddhism and other religious traditions, especially when such wisdom may be put to use in keeping human hubris in check. Though "liberal" in his ecological thinking, his emphasis on the virtues of the small community and on the importance of marriage (in both family structure and as a guiding metaphor for responsible agricultural work) strike some as "conservative." His defense of traditional gender roles and the practice of tobacco farming disarms some critics, while his clarion call to "eat locally" has helped push interest in organic foods and small-scale agriculture beyond the early dominant tendencies to dismiss these growing movements as minor, countercultural concerns.

Born in 1934, Wendell Berry grew up in Kentucky and received both his undergraduate and master's training at the University of Kentucky. He subsequently taught in the English department at Stanford University, traveled to Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship and later joined the Faculty at New York University. In both California and New York he became acquainted with the Beat Poets and formed a particularly strong friendship with Gary Snyder. While pursuing his writing career where it took him, Berry also began to feel the pull of his native region. In 1961, on the eve of departing for a literary fellowship in Paris, Berry started to reflect on the value of developing a commitment to a particular place, which began with time spent at a rustic outpost, known as "the Camp," near his boyhood home. Here Berry first articulated to himself, and later to his readers, the virtue of "belonging" to a particular natural locale, a virtue and goal he explicitly conceptualized as a "spiritual ambition." Berry's developing ethic and aesthetic of "staying in place" soon led him to prioritize a bioregion over a potentially nomadic literary life. In 1965, at the age of 31, Berry moved to his farm in Port Royal, Kentucky where he has farmed ever since.

Several of Berry's essays speak directly to the relationship between Christianity and ecology in particular, as well as to the complex interweave of religion and nature more generally. In his 1990 essay, "God and County," Berry asserts one of his fundamental religiously informed principles for ethical living: that we are "unrelentingly required to honor in all things the relation between the world and its Maker and [that] . . . we ourselves, as makers, should always honor that greater making" (Berry 1990: 95). Berry sees in the Christian tradition the theological roots for responsible Earth stewardship, but fears that the

institutional Church, because of its dependence on what he elsewhere calls "the little economy," is necessarily (and negatively) implicated in the very economic and institutional structures that threaten the health of the planet and the flourishing of small, local communities.

Berry extends some of these ideas further in his (1992) "Christianity and the Survival of Creation" when he acknowledges that historically "the evangelist has walked beside the conqueror and the merchant" (Berry 1993: 94) in the intensive exploitation of land and indigenous cultures that has marked the last five centuries of American history. In one of his characteristically blunt statements, Berry proclaims that "The certified Christian seems just as likely as anyone else to join the military-industrial conspiracy to murder Creation" (1993: 94). At the same time, Berry insists, a genuine reading of the biblical tradition reveals a clear injunction that the Earth belongs to God and that destruction and abusive possession of the land is a violation of the biblical principle that humanity is a temporary "sojourner" on the land, which is divinely created. Destruction of nature, in Berry's reading, is "not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics . . . [but] the most horrid blasphemy" (1993: 98).

While Berry's consistent elucidation of the notion of a genuine "economy" lends a strong sense of moral gravity and urgency to his work, the other most prevalent theme in his writing is the concept of pleasure, rooted in the divine injunction to take pleasure in God's creation. In essays such as "The Pleasures of Eating," "Economy and Pleasure," "Getting Along with Nature," "Going Back (or Ahead) to Horses," and "An Excellent Homestead," Berry leavens his more direct moral injunctions with exempla (often clearly modeled on the genre of the biblical parable) taken from his daily life on the farm or in the company of like-minded friends and neighbors. Turning the individualistic concept of the pleasure-principle on its head, Berry argues for the "simple" pleasures that can be found in dissenting from the dominant, consumerist culture through work close to nature and dedicated to local communities.

Berry's extensive body of fiction and poetry can be seen as extensions and elaborations of his prose essays, though set in a different key. The novels shift in historical setting and in the characters that occupy center stage, but are linked by tradition and bioregion with the majority of the stories focusing on the fictional community of Port William, which borrows extensively from Berry's observations and experiences in and around Port Royal. Of particular note is the revised version of *A Place on Earth* (1983), in which the main character of the drama is Port William itself. Berry's poetry is especially evocative, revealing his rich mining of the biblical tradition and his creative blending of that tradition with his own experiences of work and play upon a particular piece of land. His *Farming: A Handbook* (1967) and *Sabbaths* (1987) are especially important in this regard.

The scholarly work on Berry (primarily coming out of literary disciplines) has tended to be more laudatory than critical. As mentioned above, Berry's writing was negatively received (beginning with a series of exchanges in *Harper's Magazine*) when he defended his choice to avoid computers (and thus, the power companies on which they rely) by relying on his wife Tanya to type and finalize his manuscripts. Both feminists and defenders of technological innovation criticized Berry for being neo-Luddite in his outlook on tools, as well as patriarchal in his view of women. Berry countered these criticisms with a strong defense of the intimacy with nature that a cultivated resistance to technology affords, as well as an argument for intimacy in marriage which is nurtured by the sharing of household labor, which, in Berry's context, includes both farming and writing.

Berry also came under fire in the 1980s from deep ecologists who (following the arguments of Lynn White Jr.) tended to categorize Christians as necessarily "shallow ecologists" who participated in a tradition whose legacy toward nature was a destructive one. Berry's fiction, poetry and essays all argue against this critique, sometimes subtly, by example, and sometimes directly, as when Berry makes distinctions between institutional Christianity (which he sees as often implicated in capitalism and industrialism) and the ideal Christian life (which he argues rests on a model of stewardship and a vision of sustainability for future generations). Berry also draws on key concepts in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, such as the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, which speak directly to divinely ordained principles of rest and renewal for the land. These concepts, while utilitarian in some respects, also emphasize that land cannot be "owned" by humans, but only borrowed, a concept that (without using theological language) is also upheld in the writings of deep ecologists.

Beyond deep ecologists in particular (who in their early writings were particularly hostile to Western religious traditions), Berry's work has not been warmly received by a larger collection of ecocentric (also called biocentric) writers and activists. The complaint, not always directed at Berry *per se*, involves a long-standing tension between environmentalists who uphold the intrinsic value of all species and who rail against anthropocentrism and utilitarianism, and agriculturalists who defend human interests in theory and who, in practice, interact with nature in "instrumental" ways.

Berry's reply to this critique is to emphasize the way that work on the land, the pleasure gained from such work and the knowledge of biological processes that emerge from daily contact through agriculture all contribute to the farmer (or related workers) developing an ethic of responsibility for and sense of mutuality with the natural world. For Berry, this sense of interdependence with the land ultimately involves not only biological knowledge,

but also relational knowledge and spiritual knowledge. For Berry, while the practice of farming may appear "anthropocentric," responsible farming that contributes to the health of both land and people is ultimately a communitarian act, good for people and good for the long-term health of the planet. Again, Berry's stance is ultimately theocentric, rather than biocentric. While taking a position that places comparatively more emphasis on human values, he shares with the ecocentrists a view which ultimately deemphasizes human interests in the face of the health of "Creation," which includes both human and natural communities.

Rebecca Kneale Gould

Further Reading

- Angyal, Andrew. *Wendell Berry*. New York: Twayne Publishing, 1995.
- Berry, Wendell. *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.
- Berry, Wendell. *What Are People For?* San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990.
- Berry, Wendell. *A Place on Earth*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983.
- Berry, Wendell. *The Gift of Good Land*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981.
- Berry, Wendell. *Recollected Essays: 1965–1980*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981.
- Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977 (2nd edn.).
- Goodrich, Janet. *The Unforeseen Self in the Works of Wendell Berry*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001.
- Merchant, Paul, ed. *Wendell Berry*. Lewiston, ID: Confluence Press, 1991.
- Smith, Kimberly. *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003.
- See also: Back to the Land Movements; Deep Ecology; Jackson, S. Wesley "Wes"; Shepard, Paul; White, Lynn – Thesis of.

Bestiary

The Bestiary is a medieval catalogue of animals that thoroughly entangles categories of the natural and the supernatural. The fabulous phoenix resides alongside the mundane pelican, yet both are emblems of Christ: the phoenix for the resurrection (the phoenix is immolated, then rises from its ashes), and the pelican for the passion and compassion (the pelican tears at her own breast to feed her chicks with her blood). The Bestiary evokes the worldview of its time, presenting nature as a book, or code, which reveals society, psyche, and the divine.

It would be anachronistic to look into the Bestiary for a