

“Why are you farming?”

Some of the deeper implications

ATP at the Oxford Real Farming Conference at Turl Street Kitchen. 4th Jan. 2013. Christopher Jones and Glyn Evans led a session on this topic with help from Peter Carruthers, John Martin and Martin Hodson. Some notes taken by Martin Hodson:

Everybody was asked to say why they farmed or if they didn't why they might, or why other people did. Very quickly we came to the kind of compulsion that compels some people. A farmer's wife described how her husband tried to give up but after four months he started again. The conflict between some of the struggles and economic pressure and the urge to do it well also emerged.

Colin Tudge introduced the concept of autonomy. In a similar way to the police, farmers are their “own men”. Farming enables autonomy.

Farming is a way of life- and we cannot accept giving up. It involves your entire life including your family and holidays.

Farming is 50% growing and 50% marketing.

One vicar said he was closer to God in a field than in the church.

Farming is an opportunity to escape.

The beauty of being outdoors- farmers are at home.

Christopher Jones then gave a short reflection. Farming recognises the inside self. FCN has many examples of the struggles of people trying to earn a living. Farmers cannot help farming. In 1962 CJ heard Martin Luther King preaching to his congregation. He talked about the fight for racial justice. It is not enough to fight for something for its own sake or because it suits you. He said you should always think about the reasons for what you are doing. If not we can create idolatry. We should think about the reasons for the importance of farming. Farming as a, “Business like any other” is patently nonsense.

Colin Tudge reminded us of New Year messages from the Prime Minister and the Archbishop. David Cameron describes life as a competitive struggle and the national task as rising to competition with India, Indonesia and everywhere else. Rowan Williams on the other hand, using the Olympic Games as an example, said real life and community depends on cooperation and generosity. These are two different world views. Williams tells us like it is and is the realist, although many would say Cameron is. There has been a forced loss of Sabbath, and that is NOT only about Sunday observance. We need moderation for land, people and commercial practices. The problem of global warming perfectly illustrates this.

How do we deal with the immense forces that are outside our control? **John Martin** looked at the idea of a Biblical Society with its ideas of Sabbath, festivals and Jubilee. Many of these things are lost on us, but some of the keys are there.

Peter Carruthers was one of the few people to attend both Oxford farming conferences. What should we say to the two conferences? Participants responded: Do we need to have two? Should we breach the divide and bring them together? Is ORFC a “holy huddle”? The discussion over GM was taking place in both conferences with different perspectives. Mark Lynas at OFC: “We are Gods” (probably a reference to his recent book *The God Species*). We should initiate discussions with “that lot”. It was pointed out that there were stands from smaller organisations at OFC. One participant called these “whelk stores”. Another accidentally went to the wrong conference (OFC) and found it a desiccating experience. The people looked unhealthy and unhappy. We are here to learn. A message to the other conference is that we need “hybrid vigour” and we ought to talk.

Peter C. went on to summarise the talk he gave at OFC on the value of farming to society. Farming has both social and cultural aspects. Tom Heap said we cannot leave out economics. Peter C. looked at values and ethics. Utilitarianism is opposed to alternative ethical accounts. Farmers do more than produce food and make money.

The Farming Minister, David Heath (Defra) wants to hear from young people on the future of farming. The Twitter hash tag is #meetfm. Definition of a young farmer- under 55!!

Underlying principles:

The group then identified what it saw as key issues:

- 1) Agriculture used to be about food to feed people, and now it is about making money.
- 2) Farming is about relationships with soil, land etc., and involves integration.
- 3) We are four meals from anarchy (New Economics Foundation).
- 4) Relationships.
- 5) Getting it right.
- 6) Productive.
- 7) Taking care of the planet.
- 8) Sustainability.
- 9) Food production and sociability.
- 10) Part of nature NOT apart from nature.
- 11) The world’s biggest employer
- 12) Nurture.

One participant responded by saying that we were navel gazing. We needed a massive influx of 2 million people onto the land. The real question is “Why NOT farming?”

Another said the situation was immoral and asked what is the role of spirituality?

There was a debate at the other Conference about whether the possibility of farms growing larger and larger was undesirable or not. Although the majority voted that it didn't matter there was a surprising amount of opposition to this. There are ideas around of scaling up “one huge dairy farm”.

Christopher Jones then concluded on relationships- ourselves, our creator, our land. This has been lost from the teaching in much of the church. The idea of the Promised Land. The 3-fold relationship is important. John Martin added that he felt farming was susceptible to hijacking!

Martin Hodson has picked up these tweets about the session.

- 1) ORFC 2013 @ORFC Economic value is only one aspect of impact. Wider impacts important to capture & value #realfarming #Orfc LG
 - 2) ORFC 2013 @ORFC @DefraGovUK discussion on 'Why farm?' happening now at #realfarming , for some feedback for the Minister / #ofc13 from younger folks MB
 - 3) ORFC 2013 @ORFC Why might I farm? Says audience who is deciding to take on family farm. Is the challenge worth it for a young farmer? #realfarming #Orfc LG
 - 4) ORFC 2013 @ORFC Audience shares that her family have remained in farming as 'Custodians of the land'. Selling up not an option #realfarming #Orfc LG
 - 5) Learning for Good @LearningGood @ORFC #realfarming why farming important? Creating link to land for all of us. Caring for planet. Improving diet. Bringing people together
 - 6) Johann Tasker @johanntasker Farm minister David Heath wants to hear from young people on future of farming: <http://on.fb.me/TcobYg> #meetfm #ofc13 #realfarming #orfc
- Retweeted by Learning for Good
- 7) Learning for Good @LearningGood @ORFC #realfarming just heard about new thing <http://farmingstories.org.uk/> - worth a visit!
 - 8) Learning for Good @LearningGood #realfarming @ORFC point in my workshop that it's sad to have 2 conferences on farming same time same place, plans for joint event in May
 - 9) Learning for Good @LearningGood @ORFC #realfarming farmers need to find ways of keeping a balance, seeing their kids & families - but at least they aren't commuting

10) Learning for Good @LearningGood @ORFC #realfarming "people farm because they can't help it" - because it's what is right for them

11) Learning for Good @LearningGood @orfc #realfarming what we've shared so far about why people farm pic.twitter.com/gUmhIdHI [View photo](#)

12) Learning for Good @LearningGood @ORFC my room is packed to to discuss why people farm #realfarming pic.twitter.com/QRj3kRgW [View photo](#)

13) Learning for Good @LearningGood @ORFC #realfarming lovely session on why people farm