

## INTRODUCTION

Some keep the Sabbath going to church;  
I keep it staying at home.

Emily Dickinson

The center of life routine is surrounded by a  
circumference of choice.

Helen and Scott Nearing, *Living the Good Life*

### Choices

To say this is a book about American religion is—to borrow a phrase from Emily Dickinson—to tell the truth but “tell it slant.” It is a book about choices and negotiating the circumference of choice. It is a book about people who have chosen to be self-conscious about their lives and to shape life with less attention to economic livelihood and more attention to living itself. The problem of living, of course, is ultimately wrapped up in the problem of meaning, the question of how to render one’s life experiences meaningful and meaning filled. For some, this is a philosophical question; for many, it is also a religious and spiritual one.

The problem of meaning and the problem of living are seldom defined or enacted in the same way. In the early 1930s, the socialist Scott Nearing faced the dilemma of being a public intellectual whose political and antiwar views had caused him to be blacklisted by universities and publishing houses. In the 1920s, Ralph Borsodi fled his job as an advertising executive for Macy’s and sought to bring the United States out of impending “material barbarism.”<sup>1</sup> More recently, Wendell Berry sampled and then rejected a literary life in New York, San Francisco, and Paris, choosing, in 1965, to return home to Kentucky and to daily labor as a farmer and writer.

Lesser-known figures, whom I shall introduce in these pages, have faced similar choices. What do you do, spiritually and practically, after returning from two tours of duty in Vietnam? If you are a woman who would “really rather live in

the nineteenth century,” is it possible to live such a lifestyle when you are firmly planted in the new millennium?<sup>2</sup> How can one be artistic with one’s entire life, not just with one’s approach to dancing or puppet making? For Helen and Scott Nearing, Ralph Borsodi, Wendell Berry, and a vast array of other adventurers, the practice that answered these theoretical questions was the same: grow your own food, build your own house, live close to nature, and make the home the center of personal, professional, and spiritual existence. Indeed, for these individuals (who call themselves homesteaders), the divide between the personal and professional is actively resisted; so too the division between theory and practice. Homesteading means staying at home but in the richest possible sense.

The practice of homesteading that is the subject of this book is not the same homesteading as that provided for in the Homestead Act of 1862. Indeed, this nineteenth-century legislation, promising 160 acres in exchange for five years of dwelling on the land, was primarily an expression of the dominant American ethos: railroad-produced expansionism, early industrialism, and manifest destiny. Today’s homesteaders, although they often are seeking inexpensive land and the same skills and fortitude as earlier pioneers, might see the Homestead Act as an ironic and troubling prelude to their own struggles against industrialism, consumerism, and corporate greed. Homesteading, for today’s back-to-the-landers—as well as for the Nearings, the Borsodis, and others who preceded them—means something quite different from participating in a government-sponsored plan of western settlement. It means choosing to center one’s life around home, a home consciously built with attention to a particular place in the natural world. The details of that life may vary, but the ethic of living “at home in nature” is an ethic of simple living, of being a producer more than a consumer, and of letting nature set the terms for one’s daily choices. As Linda Tatelbaum puts it:

If it’s insane to carry fresh cold water from a stone spring to my house each day, so be it. If it’s insane to benefit from the light of day and rest when darkness comes, so be it. If it’s insane to share a single reading lamp with my husband as we sit quietly at the end of a day’s work, then surely I must be crazy. . . . I like walking down into the cellar for a quart of milk, down into the cool, dark earth. I like the different light that comes in on cloudy days and sunny days and blizzard days.<sup>3</sup>

This homesteader sees the value of creating for herself a circumference of choice. Her written testament of her daily practices and her repetition of “so be it” becomes a refrain of “amen” (literally, “may it be so”) to the way of life she has chosen.

But what have such choices to do with religion—either directly or at a slant?

Addressing this question and its endlessly intriguing offspring is the intention of this study. Focusing on homesteading texts as “testaments” to a new way of living—as conversion narratives of a kind—starts us in the right direction. Fittingly, my exploration includes attention to the ongoing legacy of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, the original sacred text of homesteading for so many who have followed his lead. Thoreau’s experiment at Walden was too fleeting to qualify as a full-fledged homesteading project, but it was a lived expression of Transcendentalist visions of nature and the divine, which set the stage for other similarly post-Christian, but nonetheless religious, experiments in getting close to nature. In terms of tracing the Thoreauvian legacy down to the present, this book is a work of intellectual history.

But this study also includes an examination of the ways in which nature is constructed, that is, how the word *nature* is interpreted and understood by those who consciously seek to live intimately with the natural world. For nature, as we know from the voluminous dictionary definitions given to the term, is no mere unilateral “thing.” Although we tend to think we know it when we see it (those green mountains, that pewter-toned river), nature is a moving target. In its broad Western context, for instance, nature is imagined and reimagined through the ancient Roman, Hellenistic, and European lenses of Virgil and Lucretius, Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, Newton and Descartes, Rousseau and Wordsworth, Darwin and Heisenberg. And in American history particularly, we find distinct (but also related) voices that stretch from the Calvinist visions of Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards to the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and on to the environmental ethics of Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson. All of these writers and thinkers share a Western cultural heritage that shapes some common approaches to the meaning of nature, but each also constructs a vision of nature out of a specific historical context and unique personal experience.

For the homesteaders and back-to-the-landers, who are the focus of this study, nature is most often constructed in a particular way: as sacred, beneficent, and redemptive; or, sometimes in more rational language, as the ultimate source of “order” or “purpose” in life, as the “core” or “true set of laws” around which daily life should be organized. But this book begins with the assumption that neither nature nor religion exists outside of culture. “Nature” and “religion” are *always* shaped by historical and social contexts. These contexts define both the terms themselves and the uses to which they can be put. In that sense, this text is also a work of cultural history.<sup>4</sup>

Finally and of importance, this study is a history of practice. It seeks to examine what people do, why they do it, and how what they do functions as an expression of their most deeply held values and beliefs about what the world

ought to be like and how they ought to live in it. For some, homesteading becomes primarily a private, symbolic practice of dissent from the dominant culture. For others, it is a means of radically reforming that culture. For still others, it is a delicate balance of both. In all cases, however, homesteading involves not just practical work but also symbolic, cultural work.

This book investigates certain modern American varieties of the search for meaning, not as they might be theorized by professional philosophers and theologians, but rather as they emerge out of daily lived experience. Given the extent to which homesteaders are motivated by environmental commitments and concerns, some might prefer to call such a study an examination of philosophy or even of politics. Certainly, such terms would not be inaccurate, but the language homesteaders themselves have more often used (both in earlier periods and today) is the language of spiritual searching and spiritual practice.

In terms of ideal types, today's homesteaders fit the category of what sociologists Wade Clark Roof and Robert Wuthnow have called "spiritual seekers."<sup>5</sup> They exercise one version of a growing feature of contemporary American religious life: the tendency to pursue religious or spiritual life outside institutional structures. But as the historical chapters of this book will reveal, such seeking is not necessarily new, nor is the turn to nature only a recent, post-environmental-movement phenomenon. Rather, the search for a spiritual life close to nature is part of a longer American story. This study, then, is not only an examination of contemporary nature-oriented spiritual practice or of modern American forms of rebellion against the culture of consumption. It is also, significantly, an examination of these contemporary practices in light of a long history of the turn to nature as a form of spiritual regeneration and cultural dissent.

## The Religious Argument: A Closer Look

Before we imaginatively waltz into the homes and gardens of homesteaders of the past and present, a few caveats are in order. This research began with the relatively straightforward observation that for the homesteaders I had read and interviewed, nature had become the site of meaning and authority once previously occupied (in American history and often in their early lives) by the more traditional religious structures of church, synagogue, or religious education. For these homesteaders, nature had come to serve as the "ultimate reference point" or "ultimate concern" by which good and evil, right and wrong, sacred and profane could be discerned.<sup>6</sup>

Countless homesteading texts are redolent with religious and moral language about nature. Indeed, the excessive use of Romantic tropes sometimes impedes the literary quality of homesteading tales. Sometimes, such language oddly

breaks ranks from otherwise dry pages of technical description on how to build cold frames or relocate an outhouse. We think we are getting gardening advice, and suddenly a variation on Gray's "Elegy for a Country Churchyard" or the Book of Genesis bursts onto the page like a volunteer sunflower. Listen, for example, to Sam Ogden's 1957 meditation on contemporary farming norms:

It seems to me that the whole pattern of our mechanized and materialistic civilization is so tightly integrated that no single aspect of it can be changed or reformed. To change any part the whole must be changed. The overall pattern is unified and tightly knit and is the expression of our cultural values and convictions. . . . The home gardener, on the other hand, is a free agent. . . . He can and should treat his soil with consideration for the laws of Nature, and to do this he must turn his back on most, if not all, of the pronouncements of the latest of scientific agricultural dogma. If this be heresy, make the most of it.<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, Paul Corey, in 1944, segues from a scientific discussion of compost to a moralizing rant about how "the masses" may not understand the true nature of nature, including the natural virtues of human waste: "No matter how much you may be shocked by the idea, your own excrement is excellent fertilizer. . . . If you are so fastidious and stupid that you can't bring yourself to utilize your own fertilizer products, then the raising of food is something you should stay far away from—and the eating of food likewise. The food you eat is the result of decay and rebirth and you'd better accept the fact grimly and firmly and exploit it to the utmost."<sup>8</sup> Ogden's and Corey's commentaries are much more than scientific replies to factory-farmers or advice to squeamish suburbanites. They are modern jeremiads urging the reader to get back to the (organic) Garden.

Of course, not all homesteading testimonies are so heavy-handed or draw such sharp lines between the "true believers" in nature and the ignorant apostates of the general culture. Some display a gentler tone, as when Gladys Dimock moves effortlessly from an inventory of her homestead supplies to a deeper meditation on the virtues of gardening: "A garden shows the connection from creation to development to decay to regeneration, in an annual rotation, that is as convincing an argument as any I know for the theory that energy never ends, that it is merely transformed in an unbroken round. . . . [Food] is not the whole of the benefits offered. . . . There is what can only be called the spiritual benefits of gardening. . . . Spend the afternoon in the garden and by suppertime everything will be right, including your own peace of mind."<sup>9</sup> Here Dimock offers a reflection akin to many we will hear in this study: words of reassurance ("all will be well," "the flow of energy never dies") that rest on what I have come to call a "theology of the soil."

In the pages to follow, however, my intention in describing and interpreting the moral and religious language of homesteading is not to support primarily a functional interpretation of religion (homesteading is a way of making meaning; therefore, homesteading is religious). Functional definitions of religion can be applied to a wide range of phenomena. Debating where to draw the line between acknowledged and “implicit” religion is not the most interesting—or revealing—approach to the data before us.

We get a bit closer to the mark, but still risk oversimplification, if we argue that, for homesteaders, among others, nature is conceptualized as sacred; therefore, life lived close to nature is religious.<sup>10</sup> But it is also unwise to begin with the assumption that we can universalize our understanding of what is definitively “sacred” (or “sacred space”) and what is not. While earlier sociologists and historians of religion, such as Émile Durkheim and Mircea Eliade, felt confident that the “sacred” could easily be distinguished from the profane, I and others, while indebted to their work, want to argue with their essentializing tendencies.<sup>11</sup> My own approach to the material is not so much to provide static definitions (of “religion” or “the sacred”) from without as it is to explore the physical homesteads themselves and the stories that people tell about them, to see what they tell us of the symbolic (and literal) construction of spiritual and ethical living in modern American culture.

My concern in this book, then, is with what some scholars of American religious history have called “lived religion.” Of course, all religion is lived to a certain extent. But the term *lived religion* also refers to an approach to the study of religion. It is an approach in which, as Robert Orsi tells us, “religion is not only *not sui generis*, distinct from other dimensions of experience called ‘profane.’ Religion comes into being in an on-going, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life.” The concept of lived religion does not attend to what is static or “wholly other”; nor does it presume that religion will always serve to resolve personal, social, or cultural tensions. In contradistinction to these earlier ways of describing the nature and function of religion, a lived-religion approach examines the sacred as “the space of activity, engagement, ambivalence and doubleness.” Religion, in this view, has to do with what David Chidester calls “that dimension of human experience engaged with sacred norms,” yet it recognizes the fluidity and ambiguity of how “the sacred” is constructed and where it may be found. I have argued elsewhere—and will continue to make the case here—that a study of homesteading illuminates our understanding of lived religion in American culture.<sup>12</sup>

For some readers, however, the term *religion* still bears the burden of signifying stultifying tradition, bureaucratic (and often hypocritical) institutions, expensive buildings, and unchanging dogma, the very aspects of “religion” that

most homesteaders rail against! While I am apt to cast a wider and more positive net with respect to what religion might be and might do in the world, in the ethnographic portions of this text, I tend to use the language that most homesteaders and many contemporary readers themselves would use, a language that distinguishes between religion and spirituality.<sup>13</sup>

As a historian of religion, however, I do not make these definitional claims in the same way. My own interest is not to accept these contemporary distinctions at face value but, rather, to probe the connections between them. Thus, because I am putting contemporary homesteading stories in the context of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century precedents, I will also be describing the ways in which placing nature at the center of one's universe of meaning becomes a kind of "religion relocated." That is, I do not submit that spirituality is a static category that is somehow essentially distinct from another static category that we might call religion (sometimes thereby implying "true religion").<sup>14</sup> Rather, I see the very *discourse* of identifying oneself as "spiritual but not religious" as the result of a post-Enlightenment historical process, one more far reaching than is often assumed. This is a historical process in which contemporary homesteaders and a broad range of their peers and predecessors have participated by looking to nature for moral authority and spiritual renewal. The nineteenth-century essayist and farmer John Burroughs, for example, was quite intentionally enacting a post-Enlightenment gesture of "relocating religion" when he entitled a once famous essay "The Gospel of Nature."

It should be clear by now that my interests in this project are not only Durkheimian but also Weberian. That is, I am less interested in the fixed *location* of the sacred or the essential *definition* of religion and more interested in the ways in which problems of meaning are worked out by those who construct the sacred and the profane, the religious and the spiritual, in particular ways. I am interested in sacred space but also sacred canopies; the meaning of ritual but also the practice of ritualization; theories of religion but also the daily, lived enactment of a spiritual and ethical life.<sup>15</sup>

## Thinking about Homesteading: A Map of the Book

In the chapters that follow, I weave together the intellectual and cultural history of homesteading with an ethnographic study of how daily life is pursued by the individual homesteaders I have come to know in Maine. The ethnographic portions (chapters 1, 2, and 3) precede the historical narrative (chapters 4, 5, and 6), but the two sections of the book are meant to be in dialogue with each other. In the opening chapters, I focus primarily on how choices about homesteading

are made and unmade and what these choices mean. I ask a number of questions: In what ways is one “reborn”—indeed, spiritually regenerated—when one chooses to leave a consumer-oriented urban or suburban life behind and take up a rural, partly self-sufficient one? At the same time, in what sense is “getting close to nature” really *about* nature, and in what sense is it about cultivating the self, sometimes—ironically—in spite of nature? How and why is it that when seeking to pursue “the natural,” some homesteaders still express a kind of longing for immortality that we might equate with more traditional religious visions? And in broader, more historical terms, in what senses is *nature* being pressed into the service of what is primarily a vision of *cultural* reform? These are the questions that I found percolating up from the pages of a how-to manual or in the pauses of a morning interview.

In the first half of *At Home in Nature*, I am intentionally probing beyond the obvious significance of how-to texts or spoken personal narratives. I want to get past *what* homesteaders do and into the realm of *why* they do it. But I lay no claim to the assumption that I can (or should) cast homesteaders’ practices as “texts” that only I can interpret.<sup>16</sup> Rather, I seek to bring to the fore both the light-hearted musings and the earnest rationales that homesteaders *themselves* have offered through the pages of their written testimony or in conversations conducted while picking rocks from a field.

But of equal importance is that these homesteaders have not made their choices in a historical vacuum. My assertion in the second half of the book is that while the search for meaning may be universal, it always takes place in a social and historical milieu. The choice to go “back to the land” is not merely an aspect of the 1960s counterculture, as is often assumed, but a longstanding practice that has a history of its own.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, another important argument of this book is that it is a mistake to see contemporary homesteading as merely a latent “hippie” phenomenon occurring primarily among baby-boomer “seekers.” While the homesteaders I came to know most closely in Maine might fit this demographic category, their practices and the way they think about them descend from a long line of visionaries, including not only Henry David Thoreau and Helen and Scott Nearing but also John Burroughs, Bolton Hall, Ralph Borsodi, Mildred Loomis, and other late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics of the culture of unbridled progress, capitalism, and consumption. Many contemporary homesteaders trace lines of personal history or intellectual inspiration from back-to-the-landers of previous periods.

Taking a longer view also helps us to begin to see the spiritual dimensions of modern homesteading in historical perspective. As I have stated above, I cannot argue (except by applying crude, functional definitions) that homesteading is “a religion” in the traditional sense. It is not. But we *can* see the ways in which

the practice of homesteading often involves religious or spiritualized visions of nature that have a long, dynamic history in American culture. The “conversion to nature” that homesteaders exhibit might be seen as a particularly intense version of what Catherine Albanese has insightfully termed “nature religion.”<sup>18</sup> As with the case studies Albanese compellingly brings to light, homesteaders’ visions of nature are shaped by a broader story of the American relationship with nature—a story both civic and religious—that has always been marked by love and passion, domination and fear, the longing to “commune” and the desire for control.

Throughout this book, I also put forth the argument that while homesteaders attempt to resist dominant cultural norms, they also often reproduce them. Thus, while conventional religion is resisted by most of these individuals, everyday religiosity is not. Their attempts at solving certain problems of meaning cause them, for instance, to find in nature a source of truth, authority, and immortality that other Americans have sought in a Jewish or Christian concept of God. Relatedly, these middle-class advocates of simple living sometimes hold tightly to their own elite sense of moral authority, even if that authority is enacted in unconventional places. Strains of spiritual perfectionism and exceptionalism are not hard to find in many testaments of homestead living. Here again we find that familiar and persistent themes in American religious life may go underground, but they do not go away.

In analyzing homesteaders’ life choices—particularly the choices to farm, write, and urge others back to nature—I am also investigating the evolving cultural conditions that have influenced these choices and to which the new lives of farming and writing are intended to be a response. Thus, while I am still attending to the problem of meaning-making in the latter half of this book, I am adopting a historical approach that argues that the religious work of homesteading can be effectively interpreted only when treated both ethnographically and in the context of the changing social and cultural conditions of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century America.

Homesteading locates itself at the crossroads of at least two stories of American culture: the turn to “nature” and the extraecclesial quest for “the religious.” Both of these stories are stories of modern (some would say postmodern) America. The related story, as I am suggesting here, is the story of how certain legacies of religious American culture refuse to disappear in the face of these practices of dissent. As the following chapters unfold, I will occasionally point out how the desire to control the natural world, the quest for immortality, and the tendency toward a sectarian kind of exceptionalism sometimes continue to be subtly expressed by these proponents of a more natural, more embodied, more humble way of living. My point in discussing these underlying themes is not to

undermine or unduly criticize what I primarily take to be admirable and instructive ways of living, ways of living from which we all can learn. Rather, I seek to illuminate the complexity and contradictions of religious and cultural action. Homesteaders were and are passionate about what they do, but they are also ambivalent. Ambivalence toward nature is a dominant theme in American environmental history. Not surprisingly, it is also a significant theme of this book.

Throughout this text, the lives of Helen and Scott Nearing serve as a touchstone. It is through the Nearings' books that I first encountered "modern" homesteading, and it is through living at Forest Farm that I experienced the details of homesteading life through my own labors. In this study, the Nearings serve as a kind of linchpin between ethnography and history. I treat Helen Nearing primarily in the ethnographic chapters, not only because I knew her personally, but also because her own interpretations of the meaning of homesteading tend to reflect more recent attitudes. Similarly, while Helen Nearing is certainly a historical figure in her own right, Scott Nearing is the focus of the historical chapters. In part, this is because my knowledge of him is only historical. More important, Nearing's vision of homesteading emerged out of his own early experiments in an alternative community called Arden and his (often unrecognized) passionate interest in the Social Gospel, a movement that held Christianity accountable for the social ills of the early part of the twentieth century. His style of homesteading, while it changed over time, reflects earlier eras and tells us much about them.

It is important to remember, however, that the separate categories of history and ethnography are more hermeneutical than they are real. In larger terms, I am always considering contemporary homesteaders in their historical context and historical figures in terms of contemporary expressions and interpretations of religious practice. In adopting this approach, I am also making an argument about how we might "do" studies of American religious life. In my own experience, the conversations that ensue in ethnographic research are vital in forming the questions one then poses when interpreting primary historical texts. In a complementary fashion, the work done in archives provides the long view of religious meaning-making that sociological and anthropological research alone cannot provide. In the field of American religion today, it is vital that some scholarly investigations bridge the traditional disciplinary boundaries of history and sociology and work back and forth between them. The multidisciplinary approach offered in this study, however, begins with particular people who have devoted themselves to particular places. It is with their individual stories that this book must properly begin.