

Gelassenheit in Goiás: A Mennonite political ecology

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Abstract

In 1968 a group of nine U.S.-born Holdeman Mennonites purchased Cerrado land and later became some of the first farmers to produce high yields of corn and soybeans in Southwestern Goiás, Brazil. This article analyzes how Mennonite religion affects the political ecology of their soy production as a "lived religion." Beliefs in education, pacifism, and cultural survival led the community initially to flee the United States and their belief in non-materialism, pacifism, and devotion to the community continue to play direct roles in farming practices, business management, and community management. I document the ways that religion impacts engagement with the environment and how engagements with the environment relate to religion. I build on earlier work in political ecology to understand the role of religion in ecological interactions and engage with the intersection of political ecology theory and religion.

Keywords: Religion, Brazil, soy, Cerrado, social values, ethnography

Resumo

Em 1968, um grupo de nove menonitas Holdeman, nascidos nos Estados Unidos, adquiriu terras no Cerrado e, mais tarde, tornou-se um dos primeiros agricultores a produzir altas safras de milho e soja no sudoeste de Goiás, Brasil. Este artigo analisa como a religião menonita afeta a ecologia política de sua produção de soja como uma "religião vivida." Crenças em educação, pacifismo e sobrevivência cultural levaram a comunidade a fugir inicialmente dos Estados Unidos, e sua crença no não materialismo, no pacifismo e na devoção à comunidade continua a desempenhar papéis diretos nas práticas agrícolas, na gestão empresarial e na gestão comunitária. Neste artigo, documento as maneiras pelas quais a religião impacta o engajamento com o meio ambiente e como o engajamento com o meio ambiente se relaciona com a religião. Baseio-me em trabalhos anteriores em ecologia política para compreender o papel da religião nas interações ecológicas e me engajar na interseção entre a teoria da ecologia política e a religião.

Palavras-chave: Religião, Brasil, soja, Cerrado, valores sociais, etnografia

Resumen

En 1968, un grupo de nueve menonitas Holdeman nacidos en Estados Unidos adquirió tierras del Cerrado y posteriormente se convirtieron en algunos de los primeros agricultores en producir altos rendimientos de maíz y soja en el suroeste de Goiás, Brasil. Este artículo analiza cómo la religión menonita afecta la ecología política de su producción de soja como una "religión vivida." Las creencias en la educación, el pacifismo y la supervivencia cultural llevaron a la comunidad a huir

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inicialmente de Estados Unidos, y su creencia en el no materialismo, el pacifismo y la devoción a la comunidad siguen desempeñando un papel directo en las prácticas agrícolas, la gestión empresarial y la gestión comunitaria. En este artículo, documento las formas en que la religión impacta la relación con el medio ambiente y cómo esta se relaciona con la religión. Me baso en trabajos previos en ecología política para comprender el papel de la religión en las interacciones ecológicas y abordar la intersección entre la teoría de la ecología política y la religión.

Palabras clave: Religión, Brasil, soja, Cerrado, valores sociales, etnografía

1. Introduction

In the last fifty years, soy production has expanded from being a significant cash crop in Southern Brazil into a leading export commodity. Much of this change has come at the cost to communities and ecologies in the Brazilian Cerrado, a tropical savannah. The Cerrado has been the focus of Brazilian government and settler aspirations. In the colonial era, *bandeirantes* (literally, flag-carriers) took possession of land and people in the Cerrado in the name of progress, and in the 1940s policies and narratives of the 'March to the West' proposed a new path to progress through migration and economic development (Franco, 1940). Agricultural development programs in the 1970s gave a new focus to these dreams of progress in the Cerrado via a pathway to agricultural modernization (Garfield, 2001). Nearly 8.4 million hectares of savannah vegetation were converted to farmland between 1990 and 2017; soybean acreage expanded by a stunning 326% between 2000 and 2017 (Polizel *et al.*, 2021). Land holding in the region is tightly controlled by few large Brazilian-owned farms. In 2018, 7,188 large farms accounted for 19.5 million hectares, and 136,586 small and medium properties accounted for 17.5 million hectares (Polizel *et al.*, 2021). Still, soybean farming is not uniform throughout the Cerrado (Vennet, Schneider, & Dessein 2016).

In the 1960s, a group of Holdeman Mennonites embarked on a tour of rural Brazil in search of cheap arable land as a means of creating the conditions of life that were supportive of their lifestyle and livelihoods. They wanted to escape from the worldly traps of public education, color television, and forced military service in the shadow of the Vietnam War. The group of nine United States-born Holdeman Mennonites purchased 10,000 hectares of Cerrado land in 1968, and later became some of the first farmers to produce high yields of corn and soybeans in Southwestern Goiás, Brazil. Holdeman Mennonism had been founded in the United States by John Holdeman in 1859 and split off from the conservative Old Order Mennonites. Holdeman believed that Mennonism had strayed too far from its roots, and Mennonites needed to re-dedicate themselves to non-resistance, the idea of one true church, shunning (avoiding former church members), evangelism, and traditional dress (Hiebert, 1971).

Religion has played a central role in the community's migration, settlement, and expansion in Brazil. Mennonites practice a "lived religion" (Ammerman, 2016, 2020; Beekers, 2020) in which their central set of beliefs, including for the Holdeman Mennonites pacifism, ascetism, and devotion to the community and family are enmeshed with crop selection, agricultural practices, and market engagement. Beliefs in education, pacifism, and cultural survival led the community to flee the United States. To this day, their beliefs continue to play direct roles in farming practices, business management, and community management. In this article, I document the ways that religion impacts engagement with the environment in this case, and how engagements with the environment relate to religion. I build on earlier work in political ecology to better understand the role of religion in ecological interactions, and engage theoretically with the role of religion in the field.

2. Religion in political ecology

Political, theoretical, and empirical engagement with religion has been lacking in political ecology, but with some exceptions, primarily relating to indigenous communities. The impact of religion is generally limited to considerations of environmental justice and the protection of sacred lands and spaces; rejection, evangelization, or acceptance of agricultural, industrial, and urban development; and to myths as explanations for how people relate to their ecologies (Wilkins, 2021).

Georgina Drew's ethnography of opposition to hydropower projects in India, however, shows how political ecologists can take sacred life seriously (2017). Drew's ethnography aims to "challenge observers of environmental campaigns to acknowledge the contingency, ambiguity, and positive political potential inherent in lived experiences of devotion to sacred entities that are also natural resources" (p. 19). Further, she argues that "political ecology needs more religiously attuned analyses, especially when resources are revered" (p. 6). There is ample evidence that social values play a meaningful role in how humans engage with their ecologies. Kantner and Peixoto (2023), for example, demonstrate how, in the midst of pro-development governance and agribusiness, indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities create relations and territories that reject financialization, private property, and profit accumulation. According to an indigenous leader, the Brazilian government and local landowners devalued the communities' livelihood practices, social relationships, and use of the land to favor a *capital-centric* (Gibson-Graham 2006) discourse of growth and to elevate capitalist values over all other values: "Growth! Brazil says that growth is soy planting, management projects, hydroelectric construction, railway construction, and mining. So, for them this is development. Indigenous land is not development for Brazil because it does not generate profit for Brazil" (Kantner & Peixoto, 2023, p. 479).

Conflicts over agricultural development invariably include conflict over values and actions. Action (what people do) and what they value (what meaning people ascribe to such actions) are co-constitutive (Graeber, 2001, 2013). Social value gives meaning to our actions just as we continually re-ascribe meaning to our actions. Thus, we can observe the impact of religion on political ecology through its impact on individual and communal values and actions; this is particularly salient when viewed through the lens of "lived religion."

Lived religion frameworks originated in an effort by theological scholars to "go beyond the narrow, largely Western, constraints that defined religion as an institution and a worldview" (Ammerman, 2020, p. 10) and to refocus attention on non-elites' everyday religious practice (Ammerman, 2016). The concept positions religion as something that is practiced in multiple, sometimes overlapping and sometimes competing spheres of social action. Key to this is the application of the hybridity of social life to any understanding of religious practice insofar as religion shapes and is shaped by other social actions (e.g. work, family care, leisure, etc.). We can think about religion not in terms of static beliefs, institutions, scriptures, or religious leaders, but as a set of modifiable values and actions that are acted out and enacted through everyday action. I incorporate 'lived religion' into the following political ecology analysis in order to understand how religious beliefs among Holdeman Mennonites impacts their employment of certain agricultural practices in Brazil.

3. Mennonite farming, *Gelassenheit*, and the environmental ethic

As argued by James Urry (2006), many recent studies of Mennonism focus on their withdrawal from "worldly" secular concerns such as participating in government elections and serving in public office. This view frames Mennonites as a traditional people who are separated from politics, modernity, and the secular world. Subsequently, communal or personal decisions are portrayed as

responses to modernity, governmental intrusion, or other worldly matters and Mennonite actions as a withdrawal from worldliness. Thus, the flight of early Mennonites from intolerant regions of Western Europe to more tolerant Holland and later to Russia is framed as escaping the traps of modernity, and their migration to Canada and the United States as fleeing communism. Seen another way, each of these subsequent migrations fit into a continual process of creating the conditions for the enactment of a new reality for Mennonites. Reflecting Urry's argument, I approach the migration of Mennonites to Brazil not as a reactionary response to socio-cultural changes in the United States, but as a proactive action to foment a new reality in which a Mennonite community could embrace their way of life, values, and community, and thrive.

Mennonites have a complicated history in regard to land stewardship and sustainability. They have been welcomed by governments in North America and later South America to settle and develop regions perceived to be underdeveloped. Their work is often tied to the transformation of grasslands, forests, and pastures to farmland, with the displacement of local communities. The religious teachings of Mennonism speak to the importance of hard work and improvement, but also the imperative to conserve and steward the land. Paradoxically for the Mennonites seeking isolation, their frontier work often leads to modernization and development (Goossen, 2016; Polain de Waroux *et al.*, 2021). Development then brings incursions upon Mennonite isolation and surging farmland prices, leading Mennonite communities to resettle in more isolated locations, beginning the process again. Mennonites in Belize, often called 'mechanites' are often recognized as pioneers in soy production and leaders in their field (Dana & Dana, 2008; Miller, 1982), while Mennonites in Bolivia are significant actors in the same cropping system, technically advanced and highly capitalized landowners (Hecht, 2005; Soruco, Plata & Medeiros, 2008). Mennonites in Paraguay claim responsibility for improving the economy and wellbeing of the Chaco, with a positive influence on local indigenous populations (Stoesz & Neufeld, 2008).

Mennonites may have pioneered industrial agricultural cultivation in isolated frontier spaces across Latin America, but this has also involved deforestation (le Polain de Waroux, Neumann, *et al.*, 2021), as they balance agrarian traditions and modern farming (Shenton, 2017). Mennonites in Pennsylvania, USA, also distinguished themselves as modern farmers in their use of manure, lime, gypsum and crop rotation to improve soil health and maintained improved pastures, clean barns, and stall-fed livestock (Shention, 2017). Mennonites in the Yucatan are responsible for increased levels of deforestation compared to their neighbors (Ellis *et al.*, 2017); Bolivian Mennonites participate in extractive, industrial soybean production (Nobbs-Thiessen, 2017; Hecht, 2005); and Mennonites in Paraguay take a leading role in soy cultivation in the Chaco (le Polain de Waroux *et al.*, 2018). Mennonites are tied to indigenous Métis dispossession in Manitoba, Canada (Wiebe, 2017) while their access to capital and technology threatens land and livelihoods of local Mayans in Mexico (Spiric & Ramierz, 2022).

Mennonite theology creates ample space for an environmentally sustainable land ethic (Redekop, 2000). This ethic stems from the recognition that the world is an expression of God and an established order between natural and human worlds. Redekop suggests that the restoration of this order is a primary concern of Mennonites and should also be a secular concern. The environmental ethic of Mennonism suggests that Mennonites work according to a different model, or perhaps an alternative modernity, to other soy landowners in Brazil. However Loewen found that in practice their often-intimate relationship with the land did not translate to such an ethic. Research on Mennonite farming practices "may not exonerate Mennonites and other Anabaptist groups of environmental mismanagement, but they will reveal a culture deeply and significantly inter-related with the land. The absence of a deep-plough or animal- draft culture did not mean that Mennonites took land for granted or that they ignored a religiously and historically informed ethic of land stewardship"

(Loewen, 2005, pp. 161–162). A dissertation by Jenkins previewed this finding, identifying a disequilibrium between "historic Mennonite ideology/values (proscription) and their farming practice (prescription) which reduced difference between Mennonite and worldly farmers, and exposed Mennonite farmers to the same circumstances of farm financial crisis in the 1980s" (1986, p. 228). Religious and communal values can play a significant part in determining best farming practices. It is also necessary to consider dimensions of commodity markets and public policies when considering land use change and farming practices alongside the cultural aspects of farmer behavior (le Polain de Waroux, *et al.*, 2021). Farmer subjectivities stem from state-led and community-supported discourses that connect certain farming practices (such as tillage, early planting, or weed-free fields) to the moral character of a farmer and their family (VanWinkle & Friedman, 2017; Ofstehage, 2022). Faith-based farming can encourage conservation agriculture. "Farming God's Way," for example translates interpretations of Biblical scripture to conservation tillage and the use of cover crops (Spaling & Vander Kooy, 2019).

Mennonites in agrarian settlements implement contrasting strategies: either scaling up farms and using modern technology, which has been the route of the mechanites in Belize and Paraguay, or by supplementing or abandoning agriculture by pursuing waged employment. Those who embrace technology do so carefully, sometimes with concern for environmental destruction, and limiting their experimentation, for example refraining from planting rice because of its perception of being "antithetical to their sensibilities as traditional grain and cattle producers, even though it was supported by religious leaders" (Loewen 2016, p. 114). They also limit inequality by formally or informally restricting a single family from the accumulation of too much land. One guiding principle, especially for the community of Holdeman Mennonites in Rio Verde, is that of *gelassenheit*.

Calvin Redekop defines *Gelassenheit* as yielding: "it means that the Christian must yield to God's will" (2001, p. 88). Mennonite scholar Sandra Cronk expands this by adding that "by working hard a member shows he is more concerned with others than with his own comfort...work is thus transformed into a service of love for others; it is not primarily a way of gaining personal wealth, power and prestige" (1977, cited in Redekop, Ainlay, & Siemens, 2001, p. 88). Funk adds that *Gelassenheit* is emphasized through discipline within the community, church as community, and willingness to suffer (2012). Work, then, is more than profit accumulation; it is a means of submission to God and a service for the community.

Dana and Dana show the value of *Gelassenheit* in action in their study of agrarian development in a soy-producing Mennonite colony in Paraguay (2008). A Mennonite-founded cooperative functions as a seller of inputs and as a primary buyer of agricultural products. Instead of distributing dividends to a farmer-owner as is typical, dividends are distributed through a mutual aid program that provides health care or to people in need. One colonist reflected that with the cooperative, "Instead of looking for markets, we can focus our energy on the work itself" (Dana & Dana, 2008, p. 72). When the balance between individual and community shifts too dramatically, in the eyes of Mennonites, actions can be taken against the offender. For example, some Mennonites on the Rio Verde Colony have been shunned for accumulating too much land and restricting access to their neighbors. A Holdeman Mennonite is cited in Redekop's work on *Gelassenheit* as claiming that above anything else, a vocation must aid people and avoid risk. Both situations suggest that *Gelassenheit* does structure the way that Holdeman Mennonites conduct work or at least structure the way that work is subject to value judgments and negotiation.

However, Mennonites continue to struggle with interpretations of *Gelassenheit* as they integrate themselves into worlds of business, and are left to determine the extent to which business and Mennonism are allowed to overlap (Roessingh & Boersma, 2011; Roessingh & Schoonderwoerd, 2005). Mennonites in Spanish Lookout, Belize pursue a selective modernization and in fact promote

their interpretation of modernity as well as their role in "growing Belize" (Roessingh & Boersma, 2011). A crux of this question is whether Mennonites who have migrated undergo a process of change, preservation, or something in between. Good-Gingrich and Priebisch (2010) argue that Mennonites who migrate in order to preserve their culture, community, and religion voluntarily and involuntarily undergo loss of that which they seek to preserve. Higdon supports this thesis in relation to agriculture, arguing that migration and farming necessitate change to at least the agricultural practices of the community to fit their agroecosystem, though certain changes in terms of machinery, diversification, and scale of production may conflict with community egalitarian ideals (Higdon, 1997). Cultural reproduction goes beyond the Mennonite community as well. For example, a Mennonite community in Curitiba, Brazil reproduces itself through education and ethnic schooling (Sahr & Lowen Sahr, 2000).

Good-Gingrich and Priebisch demonstrate how a Mennonite colony in Mexico has been induced to send men to Canada to seek wage labor in order to financially support the colony (Good-Gingrich & Priebisch, 2010). This move, they write, is intended to preserve the feasibility of the colony and its cultural traditions, but paradoxically leads to changes in gender relations on the colony and a re-ordering of legitimate work. This, they write, is the paradox of preservation by change. Loewen's comparative study of Mennonite communities' responses to rural disjuncture in North America demonstrates a similar dynamic (Loewen, 2006). The group that founded a colony in what is now Spanish Lookout, Belize originally migrated to preserve communitarianism and conservative principles, but these principles were reformulated to favor exclusivity and to become radicalized as extremely conservative. Colonists constructed new moral explanations for their move and re-framed their migration as "separating the grain from the chaff." They also ended opposition to government support in favor of state protection, used agricultural commodification to support the colony, and reduced restrictions on mechanized agricultural implements to become "mechanites." Both cases suggest that Mennonites' attempts to preserve cultural traditions, social relations, and values induces change – change in ideals of work, change in who belongs in the colony, and change in how the state is perceived, or used. ""²

Ethnographic work with large scale Brazilian (Almeida, 2017; Gracia 2017; Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho, 2016) and foreign (Ofstehage, 2016; 2018a; 2018b; 2025) soy farmers in Brazil demonstrates commitment to capital accumulation, farming efficiency, land speculation, and business acumen. Mennonites tell a different story – their work, life, and community recall agrarian ideals of autonomy, hard work, and social connectedness with rootedness in place. It seems obvious that Mennonites should maintain this agrarian ideal, as popular conceptions of Anabaptists like the Amish are that they reject modernity in favor of tradition. But even a cursory reading of the Holdeman Mennonites' story in Goiás complicates this narrative. They applied cutting-edge farming practices upon arrival in Goiás, work actively with local Brazilians to spread their gospel, and as noted above, one of their main concerns in migrating from the United States was the future of their children and community, threatened by socio-cultural changes. This suggests, as proposed by Bottos (2008) that this group is not concerned primarily with conserving, preserving, and maintaining something, but with creating. He writes, "The repeated migrations and schisms...can be interpreted as the concrete ways in which different imaginations of the future were being accepted and rejected, what conditions were deemed suitable for the appropriate reproduction of the Old Colony moral order, and which were not" (Bottos, 2008, p. 192). Through migrations, excommunications, and shunning, Bottos

² The concepts of stewardship and *Gelassenheit* roughly fit the typology that Peggy Barlett defined as agrarian values – a connection with the land, multigenerational decision making, emotional attachment to work, and the embeddedness of spiritual realities in farm work and farm life (1993).

argues, Mennonites actively work towards a future that more wholly reflects their worldviews. Winland finds that Mennonites do not simply undergo "gradual erosion of cultural, ethnic and other particularistic bases of identity..., but rather the continuous renegotiation of the boundaries and meaning of a 'universal community of believers'" (1993, p. 131) and as Good-Gingrich (2013) notes, migratory lives provoke confrontation and Mennonite migration may act as a counterculture to capitalist social and environmental systems.

4. Methods

The fieldwork for this article was carried out over six months in 2013 with 20 Mennonite farmers in Rio Verde, Goiás (Figure 1) in conjunction with seven months of fieldwork carried out from 2012 to 2014 with 25 non-Mennonite U.S. farmers from the United States in the state of Bahia, also in Brazil. At this time the colony occupied an estimated 20,000 hectares; the largest farm was 580 hectares. I worked with farmers in their fields to understand everyday farming techniques. I observed who was doing what on these farms, and how. Using my experience growing up on a South Dakota soybean farm and with an education in agronomy, I reflected on the differences and possible hybridization of US and Brazilian farming styles. I recorded fieldnotes on what practices were utilized by farm managers and laborers, how they performed them, who was involved, what machinery was used, and what reasons farmers provided for the practice. Using my agronomy training, I paid particular attention to tillage practices, pest management, seed selection, and construction of conservation structures, including terraces, grassed waterways, and riparian buffers.

These key practices provide a basis for comparison and indicated relative investment in soil stewardship. Ethnographic insights also came from observing planting and harvesting, ordering inputs, making contracts, and planning meetings in the office. These were located at sites where structures of agrarian change met actor knowledge, skill, and values (Certeau, 2011). I also studied how farmers frame practices as ethical matters. Semi-structured interviews ascertained the relative importance or value given to different practices. Due to the difficulty of gaining access to the community, I used snowball sampling to identify Mennonite community members. Besides semi-structured interviews, I followed other researchers of large-scale farming (Hoelle, 2012; Adams, 2010) in recording off-hand remarks made by landowners, managers, and farmworkers that indicate distaste or preference for certain kinds of work, landscape aesthetics, or other ethical statements in order to understand the everyday ethics of farming (Brodwin, 2013). I then compared these everyday ethical statements with official discourse, as found in mission statements or labor contracts. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with agronomists, farmers' cooperative administrators, and non-Mennonite locals to better understand Mennonite farmers' place in the agricultural community.



Figure 1: Rio Verde. Source: Wikipedia.

The comparative ethnography of American-born non-Mennonite farmers in Western Bahia revealed a less structured community. They had migrated primarily in the early 2000s in search of cheap Brazilian farmland, in response to land scarcity and prices in the United States. They implemented a highly financialized (Ofstehage, 2018a) and flexible (Ofstehage, 2018b) form of agriculture. Their aim was to make a living and eventually to sell developed farmland with a speculative profit. In contrast to the Mennonite community, they formed a loose-knit group and generally adopted the business and farming practices of Brazilian soy farmers (Ofstehage, 2025).

5. Results

The Rio Verde colony traces its roots to John Holdeman. Holdeman, born in Ohio, emphasized the importance of adult baptism, spiritual childhood education, discipline for unfaithful members, and avoidance of worldly churches and associations. John Holdeman placed himself and his followers as the true church, and perceived a decay of the Mennonite Church and its betrayal of their theological foundations. Though initially his call for reform went largely unheeded, Russian Mennonites moving to Kansas and Manitoba in the late 19th century took up his call and empowered the movement (Hiebert, 1971). Holdeman Mennonites are physically distinguishable by their dress. Men wear beards and mustaches, striped or solid button up shirts, plain pants, and strictly avoid ties. Women wear long, high neck-line dresses, often with floral patterns, and wear black prayer caps (Arthur, 1986; Hiebert, 1971). Beliefs and practices are strictly enforced and those who do not adhere to them face excommunication (Dyck & Martin, 1990).

The first half of the 20th century was a period of transition and adaptation for the Holdeman Mennonites, transitioning from German to English, maintaining pacifist ideals and behavior in the face of compulsory draft in two World Wars, adapting to some "Americanization," and dealing with emerging technologies in farming and the household. Challenges emerged in the 1970s as they had to contend with the growing affluence of some members, higher land costs, questioning of the church's position as the "one true church," and growing engagement with outsiders. A purge of

members, to weed out those who did not meet strict theological requirements left many traumatized and shunned, they also responded to the encroaching worldliness encountered in public schools by forming their own private schools (Dyck & Martin, 1990).

Migration and early days

The path of Holdeman Mennonites from the U.S. to Rio Verde in the 1960s was driven by multiple factors. Their settlement in Brazil required adaptation to a different climate, different soils, and new pests, but they quickly established themselves as a vibrant farming community. Later, Brazilian farmers with more advanced technology and more capital came to displace Mennonite farmers in the region.

In the U.S. the community perceived schooling and other issues as a threat to their culture, community, and way of life. They determined that concerns about their ability to protect their children, worries about their pacifism in the face of the Vietnam War draft, and threats to their autonomy in school curriculum were unacceptable. Like other Mennonites they migrated to a seemingly unsettled place to strive towards cultural, religious, and economic autonomy. In Rio Verde they found some autonomy, but not without introducing changes to their culture and livelihood, and they had to accept the role of the market (Henderson, 2017).

Holdeman Mennonites migrated from Ohio, Georgia, and California to Rio Verde, Goiás, Brazil in 1968. According to interviews conducted by Heloisa Brito de Mello, this group migrated to escape an economic crisis in the United States in the 1960s, which meant increasing farm production costs. According to one interlocutor, Joseph:

With the economic crisis in the United States in the '60s, the cost of agricultural production kept rising, taxes were high, things were becoming unaffordable, then my father heard of lands in Brazil that were very cheap and very good for farming...so, he and some friends decided to go to Brazil, arrived here [Rio Verde] by chance, and stayed (Mello & Silva, 2011: 28, translation by author).

For Joseph, the economic crisis, or perhaps more aptly the agrarian crisis, challenged the community's way of life and Brazil's fertile and cheap land offered a way out. Other Mennonites cited cultural reasons for leaving the United States. As noted, the military draft at the height of the Vietnam War threatened their pacifist theology. Aside from schooling and educational standards, the color television appeared inescapable.

Other Mennonite groups took different actions to escape or confront economic change and unprofitable farming. Mennonite communities in Kansas and Manitoba, for example, fragmented several times due to increasing production costs. Some remained in farming but with intensification of production, while some became urban entrepreneurs or took jobs elsewhere. Migrants to Belize tried to maintain agriculture and community practices in a new country (Loewen, 2006). Although framed in terms of economics, profitability, and taxes, it appears that the economic crisis of the 1960s was more accurately an agrarian crisis for this Mennonite colony.

In 1968, as the quote above shows, representatives of U.S.-based Holdeman communities travelled to rural Brazil. They were looking for land, but more importantly autonomy to educate their children as they saw fit and to escape military service (Mello, 2012; Mello & Silva, 2011). The first representatives toured rural Brazil in a Volkswagen van and stopped in Rio Verde after an engine breakdown. After contemplating the community and agricultural potential in the area, they continued on to Mato Grosso. Their tour was stopped short by a torrential rain that washed out a necessary

bridge; they took this as an omen and returned to Rio Verde where they purchased a large tract of land for "three times the land value" from a local rancher. According to Charles Funk "when they arrived, some years before the southern Brazilians, there was nothing in the area. No agriculture at all and nobody knew that soy could be produced here." Unlike some other Anabaptists, Holdeman Mennonites hold land as individual property, a trend dating back to Mennonite migration to North America (Longhofer, 1986). The original group purchased 10,000 hectares and sold the land at cost to any new Holdeman Mennonite migrants. According to interviews with Mennonites, and as Charles Funk recounted the difficult early years to me at his son's kitchen table, this was a time when locals thought the newcomers had been foolish. Charles remembered their neighbors thinking that the Mennonites would "die of hunger," but "they were happy to sell so that they wouldn't have to pay taxes on the land anymore."

Expansion and contraction: Adaptation and change

In the first years, Mennonite farmers added a large amount of lime and nitrogen fertilizer to increase the macronutrients in the soil and planted rice to increase the soil organic matter.³ Charles and other Mennonites claim some credit for developing techniques to convert "worthless" Cerrado into a productive global breadbasket and have a good deal of pride in this. With little research on how to make Cerrado soils "productive," farmers in the region considered what became the Mennonite farmland to be unsuitable even for pasture. They credit their agricultural success to their "seriousness" and their agricultural skills. Most importantly, Mennonites who migrated to the colony from the U.S. state of Georgia brought with them experience "amending" highly acidic Georgia Red Clay soil with applications of lime. Georgian Red Clay soils (Jacobson, 2008) are a family of soils classified by the USDA as ultisols. Soils in Rio Verde are predominantly latassols (Braga *et al.*, 1997) and are very similar in genesis and chemical and physical properties to ultisols. They differ primarily in that ultisols contain a higher clay content which provides a higher nutrient capacity (Sanchez, 2019).⁴ Charles also credits the development of hybrid seeds in the 1970s which also increased yields.

In the 1970s and 1980s the Mennonite colony provided a model of farming that was widely emulated. In the early days the Mennonites had contact with soil scientists of Embrapa, the newly formed (1973) agricultural research corporation of Brazil and some of them credit these conversations for accelerating their learning process. However, according to Charles, the Mennonites were "passed up" soon after when a Brazilian government program, PRODECER, provided rural credit to farmers to expand into the Cerrado. *Gauchos* from the south of Brazil benefited, using farming techniques developed by Mennonites, and expanded soy production in Goiás. The *gauchos* "got ahead" of Mennonites in agricultural technology after 1975. Along with the pride in pioneering industrial soy production in the region, Charles expressed resentment at the perceived regression of the colony in comparison with neighboring farmers, implying often that the Mennonites succeeded through hard work and their knowhow, but others did so using capital, technology, and leaning heavily on government support (which the Mennonites declined). As the region's population increased, land went from US\$2.50 per acre (\$6.20 per hectare) in 1968 to US\$4,000-5,000 per acre (US\$9,900-\$12,355 per hectare) as of 2014.

By the early 2000s, the comparative advantage between local Brazilian farmers and Mennonites changed. Local Brazilian farmers and agronomists in Goiás blame this shift on the Mennonite's "backward" farming practices. Brazilian farmers had adopted no-tillage methods to

³ Unlike the Mennonite communities that Loewen worked with (2016), the Rio Verde Holdeman Mennonite community had no cultural or religious reservations against rice production.

⁴ Latassols are known in USDA soil classification as oxisols.

reduce their production costs, and to preserve soil moisture and organic content. Mennonites continued to till the soil before planting. Brazilians adopted improved seed varieties, while Mennonites continued to save seed for planting from year to year. Brazilians began to implement a *safrinha* (a short-season corn crop after harvesting soybeans) to increase profits and to raise soil organic matter. Mennonites continued to plant soy only. This began to change in the early 2000s as the colony almost wholly adopted no-tillage, genetically modified seeds, and use of *safrinha*. Although the rainfall amount in Goiás is sufficient for a *safrinha*, most Mennonites did not adopt this practice until the 1990s and some still had not adopted it in the 2010s. Charles, one of the Mennonites who does not implement *safrinha* recognizes that Brazilian farmers have shown it to be profitable but argued that it seems "a bit like cheating" to squeeze in a second crop, and unnecessary. By the time of my fieldwork Mennonites had also begun to engage more with field research demonstrations to understand new seed varieties and farming methods.

When I asked about differences in how Brazilians and Mennonites farmed, Jefferson pointed to similarities in engaging with the ecology of the Cerrado and differences in engagement with technology and machinery. Brazilians, he told me, all do no-till. "It's a necessity because of the tropical weather – it weathers the soil so much and you need to protect it." They adopted it on the colony about ten years ago (in 2005). "Twenty-five years ago," he told me, the Mennonite colony "were on the leading edge in the community" with the most advanced machinery and cutting edge of farming practices, but since then, they had been "left behind" by their "worldly neighbors." Jefferson explained, saying that the Brazilians were more interested in accumulation and worldly interests whereas the community was doing well, happy with what they had, and weren't driven to change or to expand. They fell behind for lack of drive for accumulation, Jefferson told me.

Mennonites haltingly adapted new methods of weed control as well. RoundUp Ready seeds are engineered to be unharmed by glyphosate, allowing farmers to kill broadleaf plants without affecting the soybean. Adoption of genetically engineered seeds was controversial in the colony when it arrived, but it was quickly taken up by all the farmers "...it's basically 100% [adoption] now," Jefferson told me. Jefferson in particular stressed the difficulty of managing tropical weeds and the high cost of herbicides. RoundUp Ready seeds were the one reason they could not escape the chemical treadmill, because weeds are just part of it: "you can't get out." He related this to God's expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden in which they were sent to painfully toil the land where thorns and thistles grew.

In a semi-structured interview with Charles Funk he noted that they started doing no-till in about 2000. They claim to be the first family to adopt it (others also claimed this title), but "they weren't really sure what they were doing." They learned the technique from Brazilian neighbors and continued with the practice until they lost the farm in 2005. A lot of people in the community resist any change, he reflected, they "stick with the tried and true" no matter. "People were disking up their fields just a few years ago," he says dismissively. They started implementing *safrinha* around 1993, but had little success with it: "we were never great farmers." They always had "dirty" fields because of the weeds they brought in using custom farming – often spray-resistant weeds. They would always have some great patches "to brag about," but their average yield was always lower than that of their neighbors. They went bankrupt shortly after, around the time soybean rust showed up in the area.

Wilson Funk, Charles' son, lives in a small house, a few hundred feet from his parents' home.⁵ He lives with his wife and operates a dirt working business which specializes in building earth

⁵ Wilson often refers to "the Mennonites" as an outsider. His parents are Mennonites and founding members of the colony and he grew up and continues to live in the Mennonite community in Rio Verde, but because he was not baptized into the faith as of the time of this research, he did not refer to himself as a Mennonite.

foundations for buildings and creating earthen dams. His father owned hundreds of hectares of land before going bankrupt and losing the land; around 2005 Wilson purchased a large tract of land in Tocantins. Tocantins, a state to the North of Goiás, is a frontier area for soy production where a number of Mennonites have purchased land in response to the cost of land in Goiás and in some cases because they were expelled from the Mennonite community. For various reasons, Wilson's investment in Tocantins farmland has resulted in severe financial and mental distress, leading him to rent the land out to Matt Jenson, a non-Mennonite farmer from Iowa, who lives in the municipality of Luis Eduardo Magalhães. The Mennonites of the colony, Wilson suggested, "are very conservative, adopt practices and technology, several years after Brazilians." In the past they didn't try to learn or understand agriculture. Wilson was the first to hire an agronomist for field recommendations. They had gotten more involved in meetings and crop demonstrations to respond to new challenges, like the spread of soybean rust. "People had serious problems (when soybean rust arrived) but didn't understand why and didn't know until it was too late." Brazilians found out in real time and responded quickly. In response, Mennonites in the community finally began to seek out expert agronomic advice: "...they don't mind asking anymore."

Gelassenheit, work, value

These ethics of *Gelassenheit* and stewardship sit uneasily next to each other in the Mennonite community in Goiás. Chatting by his tractor, Peter Claasen, who had been on the initial tour in search of cheap, productive farmland in the 1960s, explained his idea of a good farmer with reference to yield, clean fields, and materialism. Good farmers, for him, are judged by "having few weeds, managing weeds, having clean machinery, that kind of thing, having a high yield." The idea of a good farmer depends on your outlook on life." He offers his brother-in-law as demonstration of what a good farmer is not. His brother-in-law "had new machinery, lots of land and disparages others who drive around in old machinery and have less land...But [new machinery] is not the most important thing." He remembered a deacon visiting from Kansas who explained that in Kansas asking a neighbor their yield was like asking how much money they had in their bank account, but in Rio Verde "they're free about it, tell everyone. Same with head of cattle." A good farmer is open with information about yields and livestock numbers but refrains from bragging about them or disparaging others.

Herbert Claasen is the nephew of Peter Claasen. He lives in a house a few hundred feet from his father Aldo's home. Outside the house, the family had a mechanical milking apparatus, a pen for small farm animals, a larger enclosure for dairy cattle, and a still larger enclosure for cattle. Behind the home and past the pasture flowed a stream, dammed by the family for small-scale hydro-electric power. On warm days the children played in the artificial pond created by the dam. Herbert owns ten hectares of land, previously planted to soy, but he preferred making hay and dairying because he is "not much of a soy person" and also does not have enough land to make it profitable. He also believed hay is often more profitable than soy. He sold hay to the county which manages a horse-riding program for children with handicaps, and to the famer syndicate, as well as private horse owners. His father Aldo had warned him to avoid getting involved in a luxury crop, as the hay supported leisure activities instead of productive activities, but Herbert argued that it is not an issue if the end use is luxury, because he is just producing it.

Aldo has two employees in the hen barns, and hires temporary workers during very busy times, but avoids hiring full-time laborers as much as possible. He did have some other full-time workers a few years ago, but not anymore. He does not like to hire labor. When Aldo goes to town, he "almost feels embarrassed by the amount of land he has" because of how much land Brazilian farmers have. Many of their neighbors had land in excess of 1,000 hectares. While helping Herbert and Aldo do

maintenance on a tractor, I asked if farming is an important part of being a Mennonite. Aldo said no. "What's important is providing for the family." He continued, "If you don't provide for your family you're worse than an infidel." Herbert interjected to say that it says as much in the scripture, and that "you work by the sweat of your brow."

According to Herbert, Mennonites work in a "kind of cooperative except that most cooperatives are built around a common economic activity and don't care about ideology or religion." Here, he continued, they are built around a religion but have different kinds of economic activity. "The economics don't matter, it's the religion that matters." Looking for how *Gelassenheit* was expressed in Rio Verde via ideas of "hard work," one of my recurring questions was about the importance of hard work and farming to the community. Herbert picked up on this and, somewhat annoyed and pointedly, countered my remarks. "You've said a few times about working hard, that's not part of our teachings." It's about being productive and supporting your family, not about working hard.

While interviewing Rio Verde Mennonites, the topic of Brazilian and American farmers in Bahia often came up, typically in relation to their farming practices. Mennonite farmers often argued that Brazilians and Americans in Bahia were "hitched to the satellite," and they made fun of farmers with GPS-guided, self-driving tractors falling asleep at the wheel. Many of the Mennonites I interviewed argued that high-tech farmers come to depend on these technologies and suggest that this could lead a farmer to forget how to farm. They often challenged other farmers in their identification as farmers, questioning how one could be a farmer without "actually farming."

Land was also involved in discussion of providing for one's family while avoiding over-accumulation. While land is held individually, the community enforced restrictions on how much land any one family can own. Wilson explained, "We don't want people to focus too much on economics in place of God...in Brazil there is so much status around farming, you can tell who is who, in the US rich farmers wear work clothes and get dirty, here, peoples' vehicles and clothes set them apart." Accumulation of land, for Wilson and other Mennonites signaled misplaced priorities and values. If a farmer appears to accumulate an excess of land, community members may approach them to ask, "Why do you look to these things to bring you satisfaction?" If the problem persists, in the eyes of the community, expulsion from the community is possible.

The strict enforcement of norms and limits on land and capital, Wilson explained, is "not to keep people down, but to protect them from pitfalls of being wealthy and not needing anything." Wealth and land aren't frowned upon. "They're not worried about worldly, buy and sell life, it's a religious standpoint." He contrasted their positions with their neighbors. Brazilians farm a huge amount of land, rent, make money, have an owner, a team of *gerentes*, each has a core part of the farm, and sub foreman, who have workers. From a central office in town the manager visits their farm once in a while, but their primary work is in the office (see Almeida, 2017; Ofstehage, 2025).

At the time of research (2014), the community was suffering from a land deficit, made worse by lack of capital and the continual dividing up of farmsteads. Land prices in Goiás were approaching farmland prices in Iowa. One family, the Claasens, reported dividing their land of 160 hectares into a ten-person holding in which people can only sell to the other members, keeping the land in the family, but leaving each with only sixteen hectares of land. When I asked Herbert if selling land out from the colony was a problem. He said yes and told me of another Mennonite family who had recently migrated back to Tocantins, Brazil. "The family sold their land and left for Tocantins but didn't see fit for any young Mennonite families to farm the land." They set the price too high for any Mennonites to buy and they sold to a Brazilian, according to Herbert. Now they see outsiders harvesting or planting the land "right behind the church on a Sunday." For Herbert the sight of Brazilians farming within ear shot of the community church on Sunday mornings highlights the loss of control over norms of farming and a sign of community erosion. Yet, the Brazilian farmer is less

to blame, from Herbert's perspective, than the family who sold the land. While it is customary to offer land to anyone within the community first and then open it up to outsiders afterwards, some land has been sold outside the community. "I don't know why [the family who migrated to Tocantins] sold it to an outsider", Herbert said. Being on church land made it particularly offensive. When Herbert spoke of this, he did not sound angry, only perplexed.

The framing of land and capital in this Mennonite community is reminiscent of the defense of peasant communities more generally against the intrusion of outsiders, divisive social fissures along unequal access land and capital, and loss of a land base (Wolf, 1969, 1959). Barclay has noted the tendency of Holdeman Mennonite and Hutterite communities to minimize unequal land access, the over-accumulation of wealth, and sales of land to outsiders (Barclay, 1969); we can see this in the Rio Verde community in the community's aversion to public displays of wealth, consumerism, or materialism and in their avoidance of, and annoyance at land sales to outsiders.

While the Mennonites self-identify as pioneers in soy production in rural Goiás, they recognize their present status as minor actors in the regional agricultural economy. "We're not so materialistic," Wilson Funk (a second generation descendent of that first group), explained. The colony's disinterest in technology, capital, and land, according to Wilson, has led to them being "passed up" by neighboring Brazilian farmers from Southern Brazil and other foreigners with larger, technology-dependent and capital-intensive farms. Mennonites were early leaders in soy production and are now fighting for community survival by adopting new farming practices from Brazilian farmers, and looking elsewhere in Brazil for farmland.

6. Discussion

Mennonites adapted farming practices developed for Georgian Red Clay soils to the clay, acidic soils of the Cerrado using lime, high fertilizer doses, and a rotation progression from rice to corn to soybeans. Using these methods they converted what locals had used for pasture to productive soy production farmland. Southern Brazilians later came to the area and learned practices from Mennonites and Embrapa, the state-funded agricultural research corporation of Brazil. Later, Brazilian farmers and agronomists developed practices to conserve the soil and production costs and to maximize production – *safrinha*, hybrid seeds, and no-till farming. Due to what they call their conservative nature, Mennonites only adopted these practices once they saw them as necessary to their economic survival in the Cerrado.

While Mennonite farmers now incorporate genetically modified seeds, no-tillage, and *safrinha*, they do not use advanced farming technology such as GPS-guided tractors, nor have they fully embraced the full commodification of labor. Many insisted in interviews that the most important thing for farming is to provide for the family. Not only is the use of advanced technology and hired workers often regarded as unnecessary luxuries, but they are frequently regarded as leading to a loss of humility – something that colony members find antagonistic to community life. Further, use of technology and hired labor is frequently used to separate "real farmers" from farm managers. Their engagement with the Cerrado is a negotiation of the material realities of the Cerrado, the agricultural knowledge of Mennonite farmers, and the acceptability of certain practices to the theology held by the community. For Holdeman Mennonites in Brazil, a good farmer can attain a high yield, keep fields clean, and keep machinery as clean and well-maintained as possible, but does not get caught up in the material aspects of new machinery, land accumulation, and materialistic competition rivalry with neighbors.

Holdeman Mennonites model what Roessingh and Boersma call "selective modernization" (Roessingh & Boersma, 2011), adopting aspects of modern agriculture that they find supportive of

their community, theology, and economy, and forsaking those that are not deemed supportive. Thus, they found that working with the Cerrado land required certain agronomic practices using fertilizer and crop rotation, and later they found that supporting their households required lowering production costs using GMO seeds, no-tillage, and for some, *safrinha*. They live their religion in their production decisions, their engagement with the land, and their selective use of technology and markets. Their religion also guides them as they confront a shrinking land base and a need for a suitable home for their community.

Mennonite farming practices are the product of local agro-ecologies, agricultural knowledge, advanced agronomic research, economics, and theology – an assemblage that emerged in relation with the land, scientists, other farmers, religion, and their past lives. These results support Drew's thesis on the connection between faith and ecological encounters (Drew 2017), but also there are spaces of disequilibrium as noted by Jenkins (1986).

The Holdeman Mennonite community of Rio Verde, Brazil practice a lived religion (Ammerman, 2016; 2020; Beekers, 2020) through their adoption, rejection, and adaptation of specific farming practices in relation to central religious beliefs of pacifism, ascetism, and devotion to the community and family. The community members select crops, adopt farming practices, and engage with commodity markets through a lens of religious values.

7. Conclusion

Empirical evidence of the intersection of religion and agriculture in the case of the Mennonite community of Rio Verde, Goiás demonstrates the importance of considering religion in political ecology. This significance is selective in that not all, although most, communities engage with their environment outside of their religious convictions. This community is unique in both their religious conviction and in the extent to which their religion addresses concerns about daily behavior, from dress, to capital accumulation, to engagement with worldliness. The lens of lived religion is a particularly useful frame of reference to examine the extent to which communities live out religious teachings in their daily behaviors. This allows researchers to consider religious belief, everyday practice, and their intersection or lack thereof.

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