**Erinn Staley**
Ph.D. Candidate, Religious Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
"Seeking Women's Religious Reflections on Practices of Sustainable Agriculture"
Scotland and the United States

**Women, Religion, and Globalization Summer Grant: Final Project Report**

With the support of the Women, Religion, and Globalization Project, I was able to spend Summer 2009 working on a project entitled "Seeking Women's Religious Reflections on Practices of Sustainable Agriculture". The aim of this project was to discern whether and how women practitioners of sustainable agriculture understand their food production and consumption practices to be religious practices: to shape or be shaped by their views of God, what it is to be a human being, and how people ought to live.

Prior to undertaking this project, I observed in the United States' media an increase in attention to issues related to sustainable food. At the same time, I noted that many of the middle-class people with whom I interact were altering their food consumption practices to be more environmentally sensitive. By participating in a local church's book group on the theme of sustainability, I had the opportunity to think theologically with people about why and how to change our patterns of consumption. In addition to altering where we shop and what we purchase, most members of the group also value the experience of growing things, whether a single pot of herbs on a kitchen windowsill or a backyard garden with several rows of vegetables, as a way of engaging creation. Together we wondered if we were idealizing the experience of agricultural labor, and this question provided part of the impetus for this project.

Having listened to the theological reflections of a group of consumers whose participation in food production is a leisure activity, I wanted to learn how people who grow food as at least part of their labor reflect on that practice. In particular, I sought to understand how women practitioners of sustainable agriculture think about that activity and whether they, like the Christians seeking to consume more sustainably-produced food, think about it in religious or spiritual terms.

I visited five sites in the United States and Scotland, which provided me with opportunities to interact with people from outside of those locations as well. Four of the sites were communal and one was a family farm; three of the sites named some religious or spiritual orientation, one of which was ecumenical Christian and two of which were non-sectarian and eclectic. My primary method of investigation was informal interviews with practitioners, and I also participated in agricultural labor to experience, albeit briefly, some of the embodied dimensions of food production.

For me, the most striking theme of conversations with people who grow food was their identification of what they do as a lifestyle. This included viewing the very labor of growing food as a lifestyle as opposed to a job and understanding the choice, for example, to have a farm certified organic as a lifestyle rather than a business decision. Additionally, this is a lifestyle with the potential to both subvert and reinforce the gender roles and division of labor typical in the countries in question; for some, growing food involves such an enormous amount of work that all members of the household or community must participate in heavy manual labor and share other responsibilities as well, while for others, women became involved in food production because their husbands chose to pursue farming. Finally, I observed that because the people with whom I spoke tended to view their food production as a lifestyle, they did not view it as an

object for religious or spiritual reflection. This is not to say that they did not identify as religious or spiritual people; rather, it seems to me that their practices of spirituality and sustainable agriculture form an integrated worldview and way of life in which practices are not subject to belief or reflection but occur together.