

Organic farmer viewpoint: Has the “Food Movement” become a religious cult?

I have a confession to make: in late August, I attended a conference sponsored by Big Ag.

Wait, it gets worse...I went because I was invited to take part in a panel discussion.

But that's not all. One of my fellow panelists was a conventional farmer who grows thousands of acres of crops, many of them GMOs. Another was a Monsanto employee.

~~Rob Wallbridge is third from left~~
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According to some, the fate of my credibility, if not my very soul, is now open to question. After all, the anti-GMO community was all a-buzz a few weeks ago when it was [revealed](#) that Michael Pollan, Marion Nestle and Anna Lappe had been invited to participate in a Monsanto-sponsored television series. They all reportedly declined, in no uncertain terms, once the role of the Evil Empire was revealed.

But why?

It seems as though food politics is on the verge of becoming religion; if we haven't already, we're about to split into sects and factions, driven apart by ideological dogmas that have nothing to do with reality. Worse still, we reject what in a religious context would be considered ecumenical/inter-faith activities: the antis attacked Monsanto for trying to support a TV series: Pollan and Lappe expressed shock and horror that they'd been invited to participate in an activity funded by another “church.”

The result? Each group ends up “preaching to the converted”. Or worse yet, preaching to the choir. A priest who preaches to the choir turns her back on the congregation, the populace, to speak only to those who will sing hymns of praise.

I've long noticed this tendency at mainstream agricultural events. The keynote speakers are usually chosen for their ability to reinforce the status quo and rally attendees against those who express concerns. It's alarming to see the reactions posted on social media: “f*** David Suzuki” or “every mother who buys organic food should be tied to a chair and forced to listen to this speaker” are examples of common sentiments. The underlying notion is that consumers need to be “educated” into a sense of acceptance or better yet, gratitude: choices and diversity are unnecessary, elitist luxuries.

But for proof that the “progressive food movement” does the same, we need look no further than the recently announced “Food For Tomorrow” Conference organized by the New York Times. Ironically, despite the “Farm Better. Eat Better. Feed the World.” tag line, none of the speakers are active farmers, and the \$1,395 registration fee ensures that few farmers will be there to learn to “farm better” anyway! Luminaries like Pollan, Nestle and others seem to have no qualms about participating in exclusive events like this, so why do they refuse to engage in forums where their perspectives may be less well-known? Do they really have that little faith in the strength of their convictions or their personal credibility that they refuse to be seen in the company of “unbelievers”?

My experience at the [AgChat](#) Foundation [Cultivate & Connect Conference](#) was an overwhelmingly positive one. The participants, comprising practically every type of farmer and rancher under the sun, heard from an incredibly diverse range of speakers. Foodie bloggers, chefs committed to sourcing local, organic food, urban food policy coordinators, even an Olympic athlete, shared the stage with farmers, agricultural extensionists and industry representatives. Yes, there were tense moments, collective gasps, uncomfortable murmurs, and lively hallway debates — understanding different perceptions and confronting biases (our own and others’) isn’t always pretty. But most people understood that we cannot expect others to accept our perspective if we refuse to consider theirs.

The different backgrounds, diverse areas of expertise, and varied (sometimes conflicting) viewpoints resulted in a more complete, nuanced understanding of the topics than any of us could have ever achieved on our own. In my opinion that should be a chief goal of all who communicate on food and agricultural issues. Rather than cloistering with the like-minded to codify ideas and thoughts into unchanging dogma so that we can worship it and fight wars over it centuries later, I’d prefer to collaborate with all stakeholders and find opportunities to move forward, to seek understanding, to find solutions to the challenges facing us. Surely, we should be able to expect the same from the leaders of the “food movement.”

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