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## Dirty Theology: Protecting the Soil as an Act of Worship

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### Abstract:

*When considering the role of religion in the fight against violence and injustices, soil has not been a prominent, or even minor, focus for most Christians. However, we are currently witnessing the anthropogenic degradation of our soil, caused primarily by our industrialized agricultural practices. This violence perpetrated against the ground is critically important to address because our lives as human beings are deeply dependent upon healthy soil. As Christians, a soil-based theological anthropology connects us to the soil on an even deeper level, reminding us that we are formed from this ground and have a sacred responsibility to love and care for the soil.*

**Keywords:** Ecological theology, soil, *adamah*, Genesis 2, environmental justice, agriculture

### Introduction

What is dirt? This may feel like a simple question. However, the answer is surprisingly complex. The reality is that dirt is a complex network of life and death, simultaneously universal and unique. It is the basis of ninety-five percent of the food we consume and the home for billions of creatures.<sup>1</sup> Soil is involved in all of our global life cycles.<sup>2</sup> It is the land on which we walk, dance, and grow. Yet, since the beginning of human civilization, many societies have disrupted the natural cycles that protect and replenish our soil. With the advent of agriculture around ten thousand years ago, humans began to manipulate and manage their surrounding soil.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the centuries, many of our ancestors passed down a message that we could control the Earth beneath our feet. When our belief in soil domination met with the technological

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<sup>1</sup> OCC, *Healthy Soils Are the Basis for Healthy Food Production* (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2015), <http://www.fao.org/3/i4405e/i4405e.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Kiss the Ground*, directed by Josh Tickell and Rebecca Tickell (Ojai, California: Big Picture Ranch, 2020), <https://www.netflix.com/title/81321999?s=i&trkid=13752289>.

<sup>3</sup> David R. Montgomery, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2012), 31.

advances of industrialization and later the “Green Revolution,” the heinous abuse of our global soil system became common practice. Chemicals leach through our dirt, deforestation leaves our topsoil to simply blow away, and monocropping destroys natural balances of vital soil nutrients. However, we do not have to accept these damaging practices as merely “the way things are.” We can choose a different narrative.

The creation story in Genesis 2-3 offers Christians a reminder of our integral connection to the soil. We are born out of the dust, shaped by the Creator’s hands, and gifted with the breath of life. When our earthly lives come to an end, we are given back to the dust, absorbed into the soil which made us. Soil is not simply an organic material resting on the Earth’s surface. It is the substance of life. When Christians reconnect to their earthy roots, they can embrace a heritage of loving the land and the soil. This love asks us to notice the violence our human family is causing towards dirt and the Earth more broadly, and it calls us to a shared responsibility of protection and care. We can practice our faith and uphold the Creator Spirit’s divine indwelling in Earth and ourselves when we act to replenish, rebuild, and restore our soil.<sup>4</sup> Human action is violating the harmonious balance of the soil. We are called as Christians to protect and care for this ground from which we came.

### **What is Happening Below Our Feet?**

Soil is a basic building block of life, particularly our human lives. Soil is typically only one to three feet thick, with topsoil, the section responsible for growing most of our food, often only a few inches thick.<sup>5</sup> While our human skin makes up one-thousandth of our “height,” the

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<sup>4</sup> For further discussion on the Creator Spirit and ecology, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality 1993 (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Montgomery, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations*, 23.

soil only makes up a ten-millionth of the Earth's radius.<sup>6</sup> Soil is a shockingly delicate skin that is the difference between human flourishing and extinction. When soil is healthy, it is a "self-regulating biological factory."<sup>7</sup> Healthy topsoils can support diverse plant life, which, in turn, feeds the soil. The plants' root networks also help protect the soil from water or wind erosion.<sup>8</sup> As these plants naturally die, their organic material is slowly absorbed into the dirt and decomposed by the many microscopic creatures living in the soil, feeding our "underground livestock."<sup>9</sup> It is in these healthy soils that humans can grow the best possible food. The soil's natural ability to recycle organic material and harvest minerals locked within the Earth feeds plants a rich, nutrient-dense diet. When we eat these well-fed plants, we become well-fed ourselves. With healthy soil, the Earth gifts us healthy and flavorful food, representing the ground from which it grew.

Not only does healthy soil help to feed billions of creatures living in and on it, but it also provides support to many of our global life cycles. For example, when our ground is in equilibrium, it acts as a key member of the water cycle. The soil becomes a natural filter, purifying our freshwater.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, clean water vapor transpires off plants growing in healthy soil, which helps to create future rain.<sup>11</sup> This water vapor also protects us against solar radiation, helping to keep global temperatures in check.<sup>12</sup> Healthy soil also plays a significant role in the global carbon cycle. The Earth naturally distributes carbon—across the atmosphere, in living creatures, and within the soil—but the ground is by far the largest "carbon pool," containing

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Hillel, *Out of the Earth: Civilization and the Life of the Soil* (London: Aurum Press, 1991), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Nicole Masters, *For the Love of Soil: Strategies to Regenerate Our Food Production Systems* (New Zealand: Printable Reality, 2019), 38.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>10</sup> Mary E. McGann, *The Meal That Reconnects: Eucharistic Eating and the Global Food Crisis* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press Academic, 2020), 96.

<sup>11</sup> Tickell and Tickell, *Kiss the Ground*, 21:23.

<sup>12</sup> Masters, *For the Love of Soil*, 108.

more carbon than all plants and the atmosphere combined.<sup>13</sup> Carbon from decomposed organic matter is trapped in the soil and kept out of our atmosphere. Proper “sequestering” of carbon within our soil is potentially one of our most powerful solutions for global warming.<sup>14</sup> Carbon-rich soil is also healthier, “improving nutrient cycles, water holding and quality, [and] requiring less need for inputs and artificial props.”<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately for our Earth and all who live within it, humans have been mistreating the soil since settling into stationary communities approximately ten thousand years ago.<sup>16</sup> While many Indigenous communities have long worked to protect the balance of their ecosystems, including the soil, most societies have not been so thoughtful. Many of our human activities harm the ground, particularly those we have developed since the Industrial Revolution. The single largest contributor to unhealthy soil is our agricultural practices. It is no surprise that modern farming violates the soil it depends on, given that it grew out of the violence of war.

Industrial agriculture, born in America and Western Europe at the end of World War II, has systematically devalued and ravaged our soil: “when the war ended, all the energy that went into fighting the enemies in the world went into fighting the ‘enemies’ on the farm.”<sup>17</sup> After the war, munitions factories that no longer needed to manufacture chemical-based bombs quickly transitioned to producing massive amounts of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides.<sup>18</sup> The new dependency on these chemicals wholly reshaped the farmer’s relationship with the ground. Meanwhile, the American farm subsidies program, which began as a protection for struggling family farms, transitioned in the 1960s to financially reward large-scale, conventional, and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 66-7.

<sup>14</sup> McGann, *The Meal That Reconnects*, 139.

<sup>15</sup> Masters, *For the Love of Soil*, 68.

<sup>16</sup> Montgomery, *Dirt*, 31.

<sup>17</sup> *Kiss the Ground*, Tickell and Tickell, 14:28.

<sup>18</sup> Montgomery, *Dirt*, 197.

monocropped agriculture.<sup>19</sup> As the “Green Revolution” barreled ahead with its genetically modified seeds, farms became larger and more dependent on mechanization and synthetic intervention. To make matters worse, Americans and Europeans exported these practices around the globe. We have long hailed industrialized farming as a savior. In reality, it is thinly veiled ecological injustice that destroys local and sustainable agricultural practices and forces many small farmers to join the urban poor.<sup>20</sup> Industrial agriculture capitalizes on short-term gains in crop output at the cost of the land’s long-term health. The few farmers who are left no longer see soil as a delicate partner but instead as a dead resource to be managed and controlled.

Because of soil’s intricate and sensitive relationship with all other members of our global ecosystem, the industrialization of agriculture causes a wide variety of deleterious effects. Every time a farmer chooses to spray toxic pesticides, heavily irrigate their land, or practice monocropping, they negatively affect the soil and a whole host of other creatures and systems that work together to keep our ecosystem in check. When we attempt to map the negative consequences of industrial agriculture’s mistreatment of soil, we quickly realize that soil’s relationship to Earth is incomprehensibly complex. Healthy soil maintains itself and sustains all life. In contrast, damaged soil creates unintended consequences that can harm and potentially destroy our human existence. As Wendell Berry says, “to damage the Earth is to damage your children. To despise the ground is to despise its fruit; to despise the fruit is to despise its eaters. The wholeness of health is broken by despise.”<sup>21</sup> Perhaps it is time to leave this damage and despite behind and rebuild a relationship with our soil that rests in harmony, respect, and even love.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>20</sup> McGann, *The Meal That Reconnects*, 66-8.

<sup>21</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 106.

### Adam out of Adamah

Humans, particularly those living in North America, have knowingly or unknowingly accepted a story of soil exploitation. We have been led to believe that abusing the soil is not only our right but the way forward in a never-ending march of progress that promises bigger and better lives for all humans. However, this is not the only narrative available to us. Biblical traditions offer a different connection with and expectation for the soil. To begin, the story of Adam and Eve provides an understanding of human personhood that is integrally connected to the ground:

The Lord God formed man (ā-dām) from the dust (‘ā-pār) of the ground (‘ā-dā-māh), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being (Gen. 2:7, NRSV)<sup>22</sup>

Adam is formed out of adamah, out of the ground. This play on words highlights a deep understanding by the ancient Israelite authors that the human story begins with dirt. Without knowledge of modern science or the biological interconnectedness of all life, these Israelite authors still grasped a profound truth of our earthly nature. When God breathes the breath of life into Adam, humans become “soil inspired by spirit.”<sup>23</sup> The human identity is forever linked to our dirty beginnings.

In assembling a soil-based theological anthropology, Walter Brueggemann’s exegetical work on the second creation story provides us with many starting points to develop a deeper understanding of the human condition. Brueggemann emphasizes our “human creatureliness”

<sup>22</sup> All Scripture quotations are from The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version, copyright © 2018 by Oxford University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Ted Peters, “Markers of Human Creaturehood: Soil, Spirit and Salvation,” *Science and Christian Belief* 30, no. 2 (2018): 138, <http://0-web.b.ebscohost.com/grace.gtu.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=14&sid=d73f0623-1cac-43d7-9071-4c6aa258fdc1%40pdc-v-sessmgr03&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=ATLAI FZU181022000455&db=lsdar>.

and unpacks what this identity implies for our earthly lives.<sup>24</sup> The human is and always will be “genuinely an ‘Earth-creature,’ subject to all the realities and limitations of materiality.”<sup>25</sup>

Genesis reminds us that we are members of creation. We are earthlings. We are entirely dependent on these earthly bodies to live the life we were gifted. While our earthly existence is “very good” (Gen. 1:31, NRSV), it is also fragile, much like the soil from which we are formed. We are delicate in our dustiness. After the Fall, our earthly limitations became more evident:

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground (‘ā-ḏā-māh), for out of it you were taken; you are dust (‘ā-ṗār), and to dust (‘ā-ṗār) you shall return (Gen. 3:19, NRSV)

Not only is the human formed from the dust of the ground, but she will return to dust when she dies. Humans are material creatures marked with the physical joys and struggles of bodily life. No amount of spiritual seeking will permanently elevate us beyond our dependency on the soil. Humans are of the Earth. Even the word “human” comes from the Latin word “humus,” meaning Earth or soil.<sup>26</sup> We cannot be separated from our earthly origins.

Humans are not only creatures of the dirt, connected to all other members of creation through our earthly foundations. We are also given a sacred responsibility to care for and protect the soil from which we were formed:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it (Gen. 2:15, NRSV)

This passage has often been interpreted in a similar negative manner as the call to “subdue” and “have dominion over” the Earth (Gen. 1:28, NRSV). As a result, many people implicitly believe in a divine right to destroy the soil for short-term human benefit. Our Earth is currently

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Remember, You Are Dust,” *Journal for Preachers* 14, no. 2 (1991): 5, <http://0-search.ebscohost.com/grace.gtu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000837310&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas W Mundahl, “From Dust to Dust: An Exploration of Elemental Integrity,” *Word & World* 6, no. 1 (1986): 96, [http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/6-1\\_Land/6-1\\_Mundahl.pdf](http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/6-1_Land/6-1_Mundahl.pdf).



witnessing the repercussions of this violent reading, whether that be the destruction of our soil, rising global temperatures, or any number of other ecological traumas. However, alternative interpretations are available. The commandment of Genesis 2:15 rejects any abuse perpetrated against the soil when we combine it with the belief that all creation comes from and depends on the very soil we are asked to till and keep. A soil-based theological anthropology instead asks humans to “accept the work of caring for the garden.”<sup>27</sup> This looks like honoring the boundaries of the soil, limiting our human interference to ensure that the soil can renew itself naturally.<sup>28</sup> Care also means we must share the bounty of the soil with the rest of creation.<sup>29</sup> If all members of creation, including those too small for us to see, cannot access the healthy soil they need, humans have failed to fulfill their God-given role as the keepers of the Earth and the dirt.

The second creation story offers a narrative that yokes our lives to the life of the soil. We are formed from the dust and live in a fragile yet beautiful earthly glory. Our dusty bodies link us to the birds, flowers, rocks, and soil with whom we share our planet. As humans, we are given the task of caring for our kin, with specific attention paid to the care of the ground. We only properly perform our duty to the Earth and to God when we recognize the boundaries of human activity. Our role is not limitless exploitation but conscientious protection nourished by the intertwined nature of our relationship with the dirt. From dust to dust, we are only flourishing in our role as keepers of the Earth when we care for our soil.

### **Care for Creation: Embodying Eco-theological Attitudes toward the Soil**

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<sup>27</sup> Brueggemann, “Remember, You Are Dust,” 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

We must rebuild our connection with the soil. As Christians, we are gifted a different story that speaks of a deep relationship with and care for the ground. But we cannot simply admire the soil and all it has given us. Action must be taken around the world to right the destructive practices we continue to uphold. We must reintroduce many traditional and Indigenous agricultural and land management solutions if we want to save our soil. For those driven by Christian faith, these actions can be supported by our renewed narrative of a soil-based theological anthropology.

Many promising approaches exist to manage our soil resources sustainably, particularly as it pertains to agriculture. One rising solution rests on the rediscovery of regenerative agriculture, a system that mirrors the agricultural practices many Indigenous communities have long utilized. Regenerative agriculture focuses on practices that the best farmers throughout history used to protect and nurture their soil: no-till, cover crops, perennials and trees, and compost or mob grazing.<sup>30</sup> When these practices are combined, the natural strength of the soil can return, benefiting billions of creatures in and around the Earth, including us. Regenerative agriculture allows humans to care for the soil while the soil simultaneously cares for us. Extensive changes are needed in our global agricultural system, but the billions of people living in urban and suburban areas of the world also have a responsibility to change. We can choose to purchase our food from local farmers who make sustainable decisions for their soil.<sup>31</sup> We can also protect and connect with the soil on our own land, regardless of size, by shifting to “eco-lawns” or sustainably growing some of our own food.<sup>32</sup> Simply getting our hands in the dirt—learning what it needs to thrive—helps us to commit to better practices on a global scale. Finally,

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<sup>30</sup> *Kiss the Ground*, Tickell and Tickell, 1:11:09.

<sup>31</sup> McGann, *The Meal That Reconnects*, 130.

<sup>32</sup> Montgomery, *Dirt*, 201.

we can demand better legal protections for the soil that require all members of our communities to treat the ground with respect and that fund the repairs needed for already damaged soil. It is not the task of farmers alone to fix the broken system humans have created. We are all responsible for our soil's health. It is an act of ecological justice to care for the ground, one to which we are all called.

The practices mentioned above (and many more) should be adopted by faith communities as well. Cultivating a love for the soil that formed us—and the Earth more broadly—must be reintegrated into the spiritual practices of Christians around the world. There are many ways in which a church community can nurture love, respect, and care for our dirt. Churches can source food for the Eucharist and other shared meals from reliable local producers or grow sustainable gardens themselves. Worship can be held outdoors to help our faith communities get to know their local surroundings, building appreciation for their ecosystem and the soil that supports it. In addition to external actions, we can internally cultivate a love for our Earth and our soil through worship and praise. As Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si*, “When we can see God reflected in all that exists, our hearts are moved to praise the Lord for all his creatures and to worship him in union with them” (LS 87). Praising with the soil requires that our leaders preach on the many biblical stories related to the ground and on soil justice more broadly, connecting our sermons and faith narratives to the soil. We can include blessing ceremonies for the Earth and the soil into our weekly worship, uniting the churchly calendar with our seasonal one. Laments mirroring the cries of the Psalmists can also be offered. Integrating soil into our worship will open our hearts to this crucial and beloved member of God's creation.

Finally, we can include soil in our prayers and hymns, cultivating our love through our lyrical words. Each community can compose its own prayers and hymns that connect to the

specific soil of their area, either using existing texts as guides or creating original works. Below, I offer a prayer adapted from Saint Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Sun* and inspired by Pope Francis's reminder that "anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by the spring to drink, or played outdoors in the neighbourhood square; going back to these places is a chance to recover something of their true selves" (LS 84). With these words, I give thanks for the soil of my childhood home, a small farm in Michigan:

Praised be you, my Lord, with all your creatures,  
 especially Sister Soil,  
 who feeds and loves me, giving me sturdy ground below my feet.  
 She is kind and patient,  
 sharing life even with those who have not yet learned to love her in return.  
 Praised be you, my Lord, through Brother Roots,  
 who you send through the soil to nurture our plants,  
 offering his bounty of water and nutrients to the leaves above.  
 Praised be you, my Lord, through Sister Fungi,  
 and the delicate tendrils she spins throughout the ground,  
 holding the soil in perfect unity,  
 both welcoming and secure.  
 Praised be you, my Lord, through Brother Carbon,  
 brought to the soil through the creatures above,  
 and resting there, safely tucked away in the dark.  
 Praise and bless my Lord, and give thanks, and serve him with great humility.

### Conclusion

Soil is more than a brown and black material hiding beneath our buildings, sidewalks, and lawns. We rely on soil to provide almost all our food. We depend on soil's contributions to the water and carbon cycles. Without soil, the Earth would be inhospitable to most complex life forms, especially the delicate and dusty *homo sapiens*. But soil is more than simply a resource. It is a member of God's creation. We are rooted in dirt, formed by the Creator from the dust of the ground and returning to dust when we die. Our identity is inseparable from the soil. Because of this interconnection, God tasked us with protecting the land. Yet, we as a global community have

failed to uphold our sacred responsibility. It is time for us to once again love the ground, to speak out against soil injustices, and to repair the harmed Earth. Our story began with dirt, but it will only continue if we restore our shared soil to its natural glory.

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