

Doing Dirty Theology: How Ensoiled Humans Participate in the Flourishing of All Earthlings

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Abstract

Traditional theological ideas, language and imagery tend to take their cue and inspiration from the Beyond: from heaven; the transcendent realm and all that is ‘above us’ that we might inspire to attain. But, given that all life arises from and is dependent upon the soil/earth, what possibilities might exist for new ‘ensoiled’ forms of thinking and practice? We are all earthlings and groundlings and our human qualities and spiritual sensitivities and aspirations must, in an evolutionary sense, arise from our connectivity to the soil and earth. What then can the soil and the life it contains teach us about living harmoniously as part of a community of planetary flourishing? This article will explore how a theology influenced by the soil – an ‘edapho-theology’ – might offer fresh perspectives for re-engaging with the need to create a sustainable future for all life on the planet.

Keywords

Soil, earth, viriditas, new theological matrix, edapho-theology, ensoiled thinking, planetary flourishing

Scratching the Surface

I am sitting in my garden during the Covid-19 lockdown. In the early morning sunlight, I watch the moisture rising from the damp grass. Where the bare earth is still wet and shaded under a nearby bush, I see a couple of worms emerging slowly and arduously from the depths below. It strikes me that the worms are entirely at one with the soil and, without it, they are nothing. They are in the soil and the soil is in them. The soil is the

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very stuff and *ground* of their being. The soil sustains them like a mother. They are children of the earth. They are *ensoiled* creatures.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) writes in her *Physica*,

The earthworm is very hot. It grows in the same viridity in which grasses begin to sprout. It grows in that noisy greenness and, because of its clean nature, it has no bones. It is good, and useful, like other useful things such as cinnamon. Earth has moisture in it, which is contained in something like veins, so it does not flow out. When the rain is about to fall from the air, this moisture feeds the coming rain, which will fill its veins. The earthworms understand this replenishing of the earth's veins and come forth.¹

Hildegard believes that soil not only comprises 'viridity' or 'greening power' but that this greenness is 'noisy'. This chimes with her other observations about the soil, the earth or the ground beneath her feet which she describes as having 'many powers in it'.² She describes the various types of soil by their colour which may be 'green', 'white', 'black' and 'red': for each is a different blended balance of moisture and dryness, warmth and coldness that she calls 'sweat and moisture and juice'.³ And it is this combination of 'humours' that she understands creates the greening power that causes the seeds to germinate and so bring forth and engender different kinds of 'fruitfulness': the sweat bringing forth 'harmful' or toxic plants; the moisture, plants that are edible or useful; and the juice, the grapevines and fruit-bearing trees. She concludes that 'the soil is alive with the fire of God'.

Hildegard's prescientific attempts to make sense of cause and effect, of photosynthesis and the evaporation and water cycle, of the nitrogen cycle, of the nature and inter-relatedness of – and 'correspondences' between – what was beyond her sight and the knowledge of her times, is nevertheless very much an *authentic recognition* on her part that what lay beneath her feet is the source of life for all that which exists above ground. Indeed, that the four elements of earth, fire, air and water were thought to be found in various combinations in all life forms: and that these fundamental 'humours' were what bound everything together. A shared molecular code, in our own terminology. And so it is unsurprising that, through her own deep connection with the soil as a gardener and herbalist cultivating plants with healing or entheogenic qualities, the 'greening power' of the soil, earth and ground are major themes in Hildegard's thought.

She famously writes that 'The Word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all creativity' and she tells her readers to 'gaze at the beauty of earth's greenings'. She further suggests that 'holy persons draw to themselves all that is earthly' and that 'the truly holy person welcomes all that is earthly'. And when she says that 'people were meant to be green', she is describing the loss of human connection with the soil and earth that resulted from the loss of Eden.⁴ For, back in that garden-orchard, humans recognised and welcomed their earthiness and their naked embodiment represented their at-oneness with the earth.

1. von Bingen H (1998) *Physica trans Throup, Priscilla*. Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 235.

2. von Bingen (1998) *Physica trans Throup*, 102.

3. von Bingen (1998) *Physica trans Throup*, 100.

4. Fox M (1983) *Original Blessing*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company.

Digging a Bit Deeper into the Ground

While those soil scientists used to getting their hands well down into the soil use the term ‘pedology’ to classify the ‘science of soil genesis, classification and distribution’,⁵ the term ‘edaphology’ is used to describe the *influence* soils have on all living things and on the use humans make of the soil and the land more generally.⁶ Unfortunately, since the Reformation at least, it would appear that Western thinking – and theology in particular – has been little influenced by any meaningful awareness or positive appreciation of the soil or earth.

That the soil is literally and viscerally the *ground of being* for the worms, for instance, is distinctly at odds with the way in which the philosopher Martin Heidegger – and the theologian Paul Tillich after him – understood the language of (G-d⁷ as the) ‘Ground of Being’. Despite the fact that the German ‘grund’ means ‘soil’ and ‘earth’ as much as it might connote an existential ‘foundation’. As Catherine Keller has pointed out, Western philosophy and theology have reduced the earthiness of ‘ground-as-source-of-life’ to mere abstract onto-theological ideas about ‘origin and absolute foundation’.⁸ Philosophy and theology, she writes, have been quite literally, ‘deterritorialised’ – severed and uprooted from the ground – (‘lost their greening power’ Hildegard might have said), while ‘soil’ and ‘earth’ have been deemed far too *dirty* to serve as insightful, revelatory or worthy of bearing, birthing or inspiring anything remotely suggesting the pure light and radiant glory of the divine realm. The orthodox and acceptable theological language, metaphors and ideas that have been so carefully scrubbed down and purified by the church cannot be allowed to be *soiled* by contact with the earth. As Keller eloquently notes, soil is never ‘the matter of a divine epiphany’.⁹

Yet, if Christian theology is to have anything meaningful and creative to offer to meet the challenges of the Anthropocene age in which – with evident increasing instability – we live, then it needs to be ‘ensoiled’ once more. The soil and earth need to be cherished and celebrated again and so help us to change the way we live. We need an ‘edapho-theology’ – a theology influenced by the soil – to help us, in Radford Reuther’s oft-quoted words, to bring about an urgent (and much overdue) ‘conversion of thought to the earth’.

Hitting Rock Bottom and Finding the Ingredients for an Edapho-Theology

Down here, it is dark and damp. This is the face of the bedrock, the matrix or parent material from which, over thousands of centuries, the soils and minerals emerge. Bedrock may be igneous, formed from the magna deep down in the earth and spewed out from

5. Schaetzl RJ and Thompson ML (2015) *Soils: Genesis and Geomorphology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 6.
6. Whittow JB (2000) *The Penguin Dictionary of Physical Geography*. London: Penguin Books.
7. Throughout this essay, except when quoting others, I acknowledge the unknowability of divinity by following the Jewish practice of omitting the vowel.
8. Keller C (2007) Talking dirty: ground is not foundation. In: Kearns L and Keller C (eds) *EcoSpirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*. New York: Fordham University Press, 63–76.
9. Keller (2007) Talking dirty, 66.

volcanos millennia ago; sedimentary, like chalk, formed of the bodies of long dead sea creatures whose exo-skeletons sank down to form layers on the floors of ancient seas; or metamorphic, produced by the chemical or pressurised transformation of other rock types. All life proceeds from this parent material; but it would be a mistake to imagine that that is where life stops. A recent study has revealed the ‘deep biosphere’, more than 3 miles beneath the surface of the Earth/earth, that is home to an estimated 16.5 to 25 billion tonnes of micro-organisms that survive at very high temperatures and without oxygen.¹⁰ And moreover, there is every possibility that, with improved technology, life will be located even deeper still, raising the question as to whether there is any place on the Earth or in the earth where life of some kind is not to be found.

Above the bedrock and an intermediate ‘calving’ layer of fragmented and disintegrating rock is the subsoil that holds nutrients and minerals to nourish the deep taproots of trees and plants. Above this is the layer of topsoil that serves to draw water down from the surface for the taproots and draw nutrients up to feed the plant life and the innumerable and mostly still-unidentified quantities of micro- and macroscopic life forms that teem everywhere in the soil. Finally, on the surface is the humus, that mysterious mulch that comprises material in various stages of decay and that, in its turn, is drawn down by those ‘useful’ worms into their soily burrows where it is further transformed, dissipated and dissolved back into base nutrients ready to begin the cycle all over.

The reality is that these layers or ‘soil horizons’ represent a dynamic continuity of life that begins in, and breaks forth from, the fissiparous bedrock; flourishes in – and rises up through – the soil; and then out into the communities of life on the Earth/earth and in the atmosphere above. They facilitate a natural process that recycles water and carbon in a continuous exchange which has neither beginning nor end. A process that also sees the plants drawing carbon from the atmosphere for storage under the earth; feeding on the minerals and decaying bodies of plants and animals; releasing oxygen back into the atmosphere; and so providing energy for all the living things that, in due course, dissolve back into carbon to be drawn down once again into the earth.

It is hardly surprising then that Schaetzel and Thompson describe the soil and its dynamic character as the ‘biologically excited layer of the Earth’s crust’¹¹ the most complex medium of all Earth’s systems in which unimaginable quantities of life teem and which contribute to the nourishing of all life under, on and above the surface. Yet, tragically, this dynamism is being chronically depleted, worn out by management regimes of continuous planting; deep ploughing; quick-fix chemical treatments that poison the soil and kill ‘non-food’ plants species; drain-off from floods caused by rivers and streams that are artificially dammed, culverted, diverted and blocked; and eroded by the wind for want of ground cover to stabilise and nurture the soil.

Consequently, to secure an abundant future of all life on the planet, the soil needs once again to take centre-stage in our desire for sustainable agricultural, food production and distribution systems. Just as importantly, however, the future of all life on the planet also depends on our willingness for the soil to once again inform the thought processes by

10. Dengler R (2018) Scientists discover staggering amount of life deep below Earth’s surface. Available at: <https://astronomy.com/news/2018/12/scientists-discover-staggering-amount-of-life-deep-within-earth>

11. Schaetzel and Thompson (2015) *Soils*, 8.

which we locate and understand ourselves living sustainably and interdependently into the future with all other life forms on the planet. We need to grow and nourish the soil so it can feed life. But we need to *think soil* so that we can break through the moribund, shrivelled and earth-impooverished layers of our dominant and sterile philosophies and theologies in order to find practical, meaningful, flexible and nourishing modes of thinking that – informed by awareness of our kinship with the rest of the living world *and* its soils – will lead us towards the more healthy, integrated and sustainable future we all need.

How Can Ensoiled Thinking Help Us Grow an Edapho-Theology?

Most of us fail to give soil a second thought. We suffer from the condition, diagnosed 40 years ago by Philip Joranson and Ken Butigan, known as ‘soil flight’. A condition that results in part from our having long ago lost the memory of our intimate relatedness to the earth and to our ‘soil parents’¹² but also by dint of a linguistic accident, whereby the Middle English ‘drytt’, meaning ‘excrement’, encouraged the negative connotations about the living soil or earth that we now associate with ‘dirt’, deadness, disease and contamination. As Norman Habel has recently pointed out, we treat the soil ‘as dirt’.¹³ As a direct result, people may well avoid even touching the earth with their bare hands because, as we tell our children, ‘it’s full of germs’.

Well, yes. The earth is bursting with life. But not necessarily ‘germs’! As has often been said, there are more organisms in a handful of good soil than there are humans on the face of the planet. To be a little more specific, in that same handful, there are approximately 10 billion bacteria; tens of thousands of protozoa; 1000s of nematodes; a random proportion of the average 250 worms per square metre; scores of kilometres of almost invisible microscopic roots; 100s of insects and soil mites; and unknown billions of viruses. No wonder, then, that many people will instinctively drop their handful of soil for fear of what is in there, but invisible to the naked eye. And little do they know that, of the 100 trillion bacteria living in an adult human body, most are *the very same ones* that are also found in the soil! For we are kin, the soil and us. We are earthlings, earth creatures, groundlings, ensoiled creatures. And, in the words of the late pedologist Francis D Hole, we are ‘TNS’. ‘Temporarily Not Soil’!

But look again at that handful, spadeful, bucketful, trenchful or fieldful of soil. There, invisible to our sight in the darkness, something extraordinary is happening. The ‘greening power’ in the soil is pulsing with life. Soil biota creep, crawl and swim through the soil feeding off decaying material and each other. Roots twist and turn to find water and nutrients. Minerals are transformed and exchanged. Water and carbon irrigate and infuse the soil with nourishment and breathe into its porosity. The soil thrives as a single living integrated community of complementarity. The soil lives because it co-operates. It co-operates to live. It is a non-hierarchical matrix of inter-connectivity and a complex network of life-generating relationality. In its darkness, the staggering and immeasurable

12. Joranson PN and Butigan K (1984) *Cry of the Environment: Rebuilding the Christian Creation Tradition*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Co, 340–341.

13. Habel NC (2020) *On Being an Earth Being*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 112.

diversity of life is self-sustaining. It prospers because its essence is insistent thriving and generous hospitality to each living component. It generates a superabundance of flourishing that it shares without distinction. The soil has so many ways to influence our theological thinking!

Doing Dirty Theology

With an apparently different focus, Marcella Althaus-Reid once talked of doing ‘indecent theology’.¹⁴ But the central transferable point she was making is that traditional establishment theology is far too ‘decent’, disembodied, self-serving and depleted of sustenance to be life-giving. In similar vein, Sallie McFague had famously described such theology as full of ‘tired clichés’,¹⁵ while Alex Wright notes that theological vocabulary is ‘hopelessly out of phase with that of the people and lives to which its message is directed’.¹⁶ And, to my mind, a theology that seeks to be more relevant, embodied, outward-looking and life-nurturing needs to go back to the soil to get its hands dirty in the quest to find nutrients – language, metaphors, ideas, rituals and practices – that will encourage new-growth theological reflection and ensoiled praxis. An edapho-theology that seeks its inspiration in the soil, the womb of life.

How Might We Begin to Develop Such a Theology?

First, by welcoming and embracing the darkness in and under the soil, the earthy matrix which is alive with life-giving potential. The writer of Psalm 139 is clear that the divine is present in both light and darkness – wherever those are found – and notes that, even if she or he wanted to escape G-d, darkness would be no place in which to hide, because G-d is already there:

*even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

And the Psalmist elucidates still further to describe humans as being created *both* in their mother’s womb *and* in the darkness under the soil/earth:

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;

you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

14. Althaus-Reid M (2000) *Indecent theology*. London: Routledge.

15. McFague S (1975) *Speaking in Parables*. London: SCM Press, 23.

16. Wright A (2002) *Why Bother with Theology?* London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 8.

Wonderful are your works;

that I know very well.

*My frame was not hidden from you,

when I was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

By using the synonymous parallelism common to the Wisdom School, the Psalmist emphasises the lack of contradiction or conflict between the two ideas. And, though the exact process of conception is acknowledged as a 'fearfully and wonderfully' mysterious, the hidden 'depths of the earth' are clearly celebrated as the source from which all life emerges. In the mind of this Hebrew poet, there is no reason to shy away from recognising our beginnings in the earthy darkness.

In contrast, even though it understands G-d to have made both the darkness of night (Genesis 1:4–5) and the soil/earth (Genesis 1:9–11), Christian theology, for its part, has largely eschewed both as sites of divine presence and activity. In its traditional theological worldview all that is good, holy and godly is always light, radiant, bright, brilliant, dazzling and shining. Darkness has become entirely allied with ideas about doubt, loss of faith or direction, uncertainty, faithlessness, inconstancy, ignorance, temptation, disloyalty and, ultimately, even apostasy. Nor has the soil/earth fared better. For becoming a disciple requires being 'born again', 'born of the Spirit' and not of the womb, nor of flesh and blood, nor of earthiness (cf. John 3:4–6; 1 John 1:12–13). The soil/earth is understood to be part of the fallen world, cursed by G-d (Genesis 3:17) and to be scorned by the 'true' disciple in favour of more heavenly things.

The rejection of the darkness has largely been justified and perpetuated by Jesus' comment to his disciples 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life' (John 8:12). So it has been easy enough, subsequently, to associate walking in the darkness with weak, stumbling, failed or false discipleship. But, in clinging tenaciously and uncritically to this one dominant idea, Christian theology has promoted a dependence on the 'clear light' of certainty and the 'bright lights' of triumphalism as tacit prerequisites for belief. Christians should confidently proclaim what they know to be unquestionably true! And such bright, self-evident, certitude has no need for the 'dark arts' and 'dirty dealings' of doubts, questions, hesitation, discernment, scepticism or unknowing. There is no place in this scheme for an apophatic theology of 'not knowing' that revels in, and is nourished by, darkness and mystery, and that knows the value of exploring the dark or the joy of being encountered by what lies deep within.

Likewise, the problematizing of earthiness. For, in hierarchical and binary societies, everything which is understood to be superior, to be aspired and submitted to, respected, obeyed, hallowed or venerated is always 'above' the ordinary and mundane. Such is the persistence of Platonic thought allied with a biblical cosmology. The stars and their influence over us; ideas of power, dominion and authority; the traditions of royalty, highness and majesty; even the bishop's throne, the magistrate's bench or the chairman of the

board. Earthiness – or down-to-earthness – in our historic worldview, connotes only lowliness, humility, crudeness, imperfection and worthlessness. How can ‘dirty soil’ inspire anything?

Such influences are at work in the central Christian belief of the resurrection of Jesus. There was to be no bodily decay in the soil for him, only ascension to the bright and highest heavens! Yet we forget that his resurrection took the form of an emergence from an underground tomb in the darkness before dawn. ‘Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark’ (John 20: 1). And though Jesus was resurrected in the darkness of a tomb may happily symbolise the mysterious process of the act itself, it also offers an opportunity to understand the darkness as a medium for wondrous revelation. Just as he was born from the darkness of his mother’s womb, so he was resurrected in the darkness under the earth. For such soily darkness is where mysterious things are (re-) generated and revealed. Soil is where we all emerge from into new life.

But the language of being ‘born again’, or ‘from above’ (John 3:3), can also, of course, be interpreted as the experience of revelation, inspiration and transformation. A coming to see and think things afresh. A gestalt moment. Consequently, a rereading of scripture to reclaim the revelatory nature of the subterranean darkness of the soil/earth would, for example, expand our understanding of the critical role soils played in ancient civilisations and offer a counterbalance to the contemporary ‘soil flight’ of Christian theology.

Thus, G-d’s words to Isaiah “I will give you treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places” (Is 45: 3) could be read as more than an allusion to hidden booty awaiting capture. The description of the inner depths of the earth in Job 28 might support a greater appreciation of the mysterious generative potential of the soil and the earth as the source of the extraordinary discovery of the mysterious and still-to-be-named things hidden there. The story of Noah ‘a man of the soil’ (Genesis 9:20) and Uzziah ‘who loved the soil’ (2 Chronicles 26:10) might earth our understanding of our own connection to the soil; as might a rereading of the parable of the sower from the perspective of the ground or the kingdom of heaven being ‘like a treasure hidden in a field’ (Matthew 13). And a recent analysis of the character of the soils mentioned in the bible offers a transformative insight into human–soil interactions in different periods of the biblical narrative.¹⁷

Second, there is staggering diversity and radical abundance in the soil. Leaving aside the astonishing numbers of biota we noted earlier in our handful of soil, we might also marvel that there are 11,400 *known* species of grasses in the world. (Species, not varieties!) There is more life, and more species of life forms, dwelling in and under the soil than above it and seemingly separate from it. And critically, as Anne Primavesi has pointed out, ‘these organisms . . . appear as the most important things on earth/Earth’.¹⁸ These ensoiled creatures have so much to teach us about how to live as ensoiled beings.

Specifically, we need to learn that these known and still unknown micro- and macro-biota live as kin. Alongside each other, on each other and inside each other. Just like our

17. Hitzhusen GE (2013) Theological and religious approaches to soil stewardship. In: Lal R and Stewart BA (eds) *Principles of Sustainable Soil Management in Agroecosystems*. London: Routledge & CRC Press, 285–302.

18. Primavesi A (2000) *Sacred Gaia Holistic Theology and Earth System Science*. London: Routledge.

own human bodies, they are *alliances* of life forms. But they live in non-hierarchical networks of interdependence. They share together in the creation of the common ground in which they live and of which they are an inseparable and intrinsic dimension. Their diversity and abundance are the central and dynamic aspects of the soil and the basis of all life on the Earth. Yet their presence is nowhere a part of standard Christian theology, which has reduced its operational narrative, not just down to the story of *human* development, but to that of ‘one chosen people’ in a particular time and place and – narrower still – to a story about ‘conquest, land acquisition, oppression and violence . . . sanctioned on the assumption of God’s love for some people and not others’.¹⁹ And, we might add, ‘and of one species and not others’.

Retelling the story from the perspective of the soil/earth – as what Primavesi calls an ‘Earthscape’ – allows a richer and more intellectually, scientifically and morally honest account to emerge. Such an account relocates humanity back within an only recently remembered history of being one species among countless. Certainly, different and special – *like all the others* – though not implicitly superior or in any way more deserving. But rather, one that is rather wonderfully and essentially bound up within a greater community of earthlings.

This same edapho-theological narrative allows for new perspectives and questions with which to interrogate traditional attitudes, perspectives and behaviours. It enables us to approach with fresh discerning eyes – and so dethrone – the historically privileged White, Christian, straight, land- or business-owning VIP male. Welcoming him back to live in a human community that is delightfully rich in diversity of ethnicity, belief, gender and experience. Where everyone is equal and living interdependently as kin with all other creatures. For an edapho-theological approach is one that, like the soil itself, favours no one creature from one particular part of the earth over another. Every creature is welcome for, in the soil, there are no outsiders or insiders, only shared habitats created by all those who dwell there.

Consequently, for humanity, edapho-theology brings a new inclusive dynamic to understanding those who come from different places or whose faith, skin colour or lifestyles are different, and so to the nourishing a more holistic civil society. An edaphotheology helps us address the issues of access to resources, food distribution, waste disposal and pollution, and so promote an earthy understanding of the common good. And an edapho-theology, inevitably, enables us to deliver a more informed response to climate change, habitat destruction, the health of our seas, lakes and rivers, forests, agricultural land and of the soils themselves.

Third, there is also clearly a culture of radical hospitality in the soil. And, therefore, also of mutuality, co-operation and generosity. There is no apartness, aboveness or dominance in the soil. Only togetherness. For all are guests of the soil. Each life form contributes and receives as its nature allows. In good soil, there is no competition, just food for all. And, as Primavesi also points out, this coincidentally lends a fresh and urgent perspective to ideas about ‘evolution as a chronic bloody *competition* between and among individuals and species’.²⁰ For everything in the soil is part of a co-operative matrix where

19. Primavesi (2000) *Sacred Gaia Holistic Theology and Earth System Science*, 21.

20. Primavesi (2002) *Sacred Gaia Holistic Theology and Earth System Science*, 18.

all life feeds, and is fed by, everything else. How then might an edapho-theology change our attitudes to migrant workers, economic migrants, asylum seekers, the unemployed and poor, the marginalised, the disabled and those unable to contribute ‘economically’?

Fourth, there is an insistent and ineluctable thriving and ever self-renewing flourishing in the soil. And the soil will help the whole planet to thrive if we treat it with respect. New evidence from many parts of the globe reveals that reintroduced traditional practices of soil care can not only produce truly astonishing fruitfulness but, even more remarkably, reverse decades of soil abuse. Judith Schwartz in her *Cows Save the Planet* and Courtney White in his *Grass, Soil, Hope* describe multiple examples of the soil’s role in increasing carbon storage, the unmaking of deserts, the control of droughts and floods, the return of native wild plants, the regeneration (resurrection?) of dead soil, and the increase of (non-GM) crop yields. As well as astonishingly rapid achievements in improving biodiversity and the depth and quality of the soil.²¹ All this as a result of *thinking* soil.

Is it possible, then, that adopting edapho-theological approaches to theological questions and narratives might have a similar impact on human thinking and action? Is it possible that such an approach empowers us to ask whether we are ‘made in the image and likeness of G-d’ (Genesis 1:26) because we are rational or because we are earthy?

Beyond Human Flesh: Ensoiled Divinity – Dancing

Finally, there is divine presence in the soil. And if divine presence, then glory. How could there not be? Divinity is there in the deep, down to the bedrock and beyond. The dazzling organic glory of the soil shimmers with life in its dark epiphany of the divine. And here G-d is finally revealed, in Keller’s words, as ‘the groundless ground, the matrix, depth and tehom of the universe . . . The earth itself is the ground [so] let every grounding metaphor acknowledge its place’.²² For the soil is essentially sacramental and filled with life and grace. Its ceaselessly regenerative character transforms deadness into life and decay into abundance. Its mysterious restorative and revivifying nature – inherently *creating, redeeming and sustaining* – carries the mystery of the G-d who was ensoiled before ever being enfleshed.

Indeed, Satish Kumar identifies the soil (representing the whole natural environment) as part of ‘a new trinity for our time’. One of the three essential imperatives of twenty-first-century thinking, alongside ‘soul’ (personal well-being) and ‘society’ (human values).²³ Thus, the rediscovery of our essential inter-relatedness and interdependence with all living things, symbolised by the life of the soil itself, takes its place alongside the ongoing well-being of *all life forms* (lest we forget!) and the shaping of human values. Together, these three imperatives offer a contemporary choreography for the dance of life: soil, soul and society in a dynamic and evolving perichoretic relationship of kinship, respect and mutual nurture.

21. Schwartz JD (2013) *Cows Save the Planet and Other Improbable Ways of Restoring Soil to Heal the Earth*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing. White C (2014) *Grass, Soil, Hope: A Journey through Carbon Country*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing.

22. Keller (2007) *Talking dirty*.

23. Kumar S (2013) *Soil, Soul, Society. A New Trinity for Our Time*. Brighton: Leaping Hare Press.

But the dance began with very hesitant steps when the original radical draft preamble of the Earth Charter of 2000 was replaced with a less earthy version. ‘We are the Earth, the people, plants and animals, rains and oceans, breath of the forest and flow of the sea . . .’²⁴ became ‘Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life’.²⁵

This stepping back from fully taking our place alongside our partners in the soily circle dance of life would suggest we prefer the role of bandmaster rather than eager participant. We like to think our humanity entitles us to have one foot outside the circle. But our perceived authority is typically mostly hubris and the persistent destruction of our earthly home. We routinely forget that authority (Latin ‘auctoritas’) has its soily roots in ‘augeo’ meaning to nourish, nurture and make flourish. If the Covid-19 pandemic is to teach us anything about what it really means to have ‘authority’, then we must heed the call of the soil.

As conservationist Thomas Lovejoy has recently commented ‘the lesson from this pandemic is not to be afraid of nature, but rather to restore it, embrace it, and understand how to live with it’.²⁶ Engaging with the soil in this way will enable us to begin to get to know those billions of unknown viruses, referenced earlier, so as to discern the nature of the relationship each has with its environment. For, as Lovejoy goes on to point out, ‘all that biodiversity is essentially a gigantic library of solutions, pretested by natural selection and evolution, to various biological challenges’. Although perhaps the greatest among these challenges is that of beginning to read this ‘ecological scripture’ to ensure not only the flourishing of all life – for which a rich diversity is non-negotiable – but, critically, to enable us to know how to live in balance and harmony with all Earth/earth’s ecosystems. For it is increasingly obvious that it is our behaviour and lack of respect that, in Lovejoy’s words, is ‘causing strong ripples of change in all ecosystems and probably tipping the balance in favor of pathogens currently unknown to us’.

So that Ensoiled Humans Participate in the Flourishing of All Earthlings

Long ago Hildegard saw that ‘God has built the human form into the world structure, indeed even into the cosmos’.²⁷ She recognised the intimate connection between the human’s soul and the world’s soil. And between the human’s soil and the world’s soul. All that we are arises from and has connection with the soil, with the result that, at this significant moment in our history ‘our own inner soils cry out for a rich inner life and a grounded diverse community’.²⁸ We are *ensoiled* beings.

24. Primavesi A (2014) *Exploring Earthiness: The Reality and Perception of Being Human Today*. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 133.

25. <https://earthcharter.org/read-the-earth-charter/preamble/>

26. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/05/to-prevent-pandemics-stop-disrespecting-nature/>

27. Uhlein G (1982) *Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Co, 105.

28. Shapiro E (1995) Restoring habitats, communities, and souls. In: Roszak T, Gomes ME and Kanner AD (eds) *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 224–239.

But why should this innate connectivity surprise us? For, if we arise from the soil, then the roots of our human attributes must inevitably be found there, ‘written into the prior physical process of evolution’: including our spiritual sensitivities and aspirations.²⁹ Indeed, as soil scientist Bruce Ball has pointed out ‘soil is a metaphor for human behaviour’.³⁰ Its organic matter is our vitality; its virtue of porosity is ours of openness to new experience; its need for deep topsoil is ours for a rich spiritual life and, insofar as we are willing to, in Juranson’s words, ‘let the soil express its own soilness to us’,³¹ we will discover a deeper understanding of where we come from, who we really are and the possibilities for a future in harmony with all other living things. For while we have hitherto always found part of our identity by reflecting over centuries on our relationships with other humans, we can only learn but still more by *deepening our relationship with the soils around us*. For the future flourishing of all earthlings, ourselves included.

Something of this journey of awakening to ensoilment is explored by eminent Australian scholar of the Hebrew scriptures Norman Habel as he describes his own long path to the joyful discovery that he is ‘an Earth being and not just a human being’³²:

the Creator Spirit

animates the land and

imparts a Spirit

to the land itself and

to all land beings . . .

. . . At my spiritual core is a mystery called life, silent life.

invisible life;

a pulsing Presence

supported by numerous life forces, surrounded

by millions of living beings each with a Spiritual core called life.

The climax of this discovery is his invitation to participate in an Aboriginal ‘Sacrament of the Ochre’ in which his body is anointed ‘with five ochres – white, gold, red, orange, purple – each with a spiritual significance’:

29. Joranson in Joranson and Butigan (1984) *Cry of the Environment*, 207.

30. Ball BC (2013) Spiritual aspects of sustainable soil management. In: Lal R and Stewart BA (eds) *Principles of Sustainable Soil Management in Agroecosystems*. London: Routledge & CRC Press, 257–284.

31. Joranson in Joranson and Butigan (1984) *Cry of the Environment*, 352.

32. Habel (2020) *On Being an Earth Being*.

five marks, five coloured ochres,

five symbolic skin sites on face and neck,

ensuring a spiritual connection between Mother Earth and her children.

He describes the sacrament as an ‘imparting of spiritual impulses connected with Planet Earth– impulses that stirred my inner spirit affirming my identity as an Earth child’. And he goes on to ponder whether marking with white ochre might one day be used at the Christian rite of baptism to restore the link between an individual’s inner Spirit and the ‘spiritual deep’ within the Earth, much as anointing with soil on Ash Wednesday is increasingly being used not to affirm our sinfulness but the recognition of the primacy of the fact of the ‘original blessing’ imparted to and embedded – *ensoiled* – within creation.

Still Sauntering on

But as scientists report that ‘the sixth mass extinction is happening faster than expected’,³³ are such gestures far too little and far too late? While I fear that a theology that takes its lead from the soil will be far too radical for many, I have to hope that some will listen. After all, I need to be able to look my grandchildren in the face and tell them that I tried!

I am back in my garden lockdown on a late but still hot afternoon. It is small space that I have come to know in great intimacy. I walk slowly around its different micro-environments looking closely for signs of growth and change, however small. I ‘saunter’ (French ‘sainte terre’) around this ‘holy ground’ and so receive its blessing on my own inner soiliness that, perhaps, I can share with others. I breathe in the gift of its flowery scents and stretch out wide. Time to water the dry soil and perhaps encounter those ‘useful worms’ again. I suspect they have more to tell . . .

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Note

* Psalm 139, *New Revised Standard Version* (1977), Oxford : Oxford University Press.

33. Kottasová I (2020) The sixth mass extinction is happening faster than expected: Scientists say it’s our fault. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/01/world/sixth-mass-extinction-accelerating-intl/index.html>

