

Religions and Soil

Nikola Patzel (Germany), chair of IUSS working group “Cultural patterns of soil understanding”, and Winfried Blum (Austria), Secretary General of ISSS/IUSS 1990-2002, Professor emeritus at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU Vienna)



International Union of Soil Sciences

All religions are aware of soil. But different religious corpora and traditions address it differently, and consequently they carry diverse cultural patterns of soil understanding. The main difference between religious perspectives on soil (matter, nature) is, whether it is considered having divine qualities, or seen as a dependent creation or even a transient illusion. Soil being alive and divine, is, e.g., the belief of Buryat shamanistic culture of Baikal region; other varieties of this belief are found in Hinduism, with the Dogon in Mali, or the Andean peoples. For Judaism, Christianity and Islam, soil is not acknowledged to be divine; nevertheless it is often addressed as a “mother”.

Some flashlights on different views on soil moulded by religious beliefs:

1. Soil as the first matter (prima materia) of anthropogenesis: e.g., Greek religion, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, some African beliefs.
2. Soil as a healing and strengthening agent: almost generic in folk beliefs of various cultural areas; expressed for example in customs of geophagy, or body painting with earth colours, or rituals of putting new-borns on the ground.
3. Sacred soil being part of, or vesture to a divine body like “Mother Earth”. This corresponds, e.g., to the Sanskrit-origin term bhumiputra “son(s) of the soil”, used in some countries also for conceptualizing identity. Attention may be devoted to the Earth’s ‘skin’ not to be violated: Buryat Shamanism and others. Or she is seen as a divine female entity which is fecundated by a heavenly sower e.g. in Hinduism and other Indo-European religions, or with the Dogon in Mali: earthly ploughmen may identify with this symbolism.
4. Soil seen as a feminine donor, attributed predominantly by chthonic properties e.g., Hindu Dhartī – or as well by cosmic elements: e.g., the Andean Pachamama; a divine Mother, who in many cultural areas has to be recompensed and conciliated by offerings and sacrifices, to prevent her from “taking revenge” for human withdrawal of plants by punishing humans with starvation and death.
5. Soils and the intestines of the earth being seen as a realm of chthonic or just local spirits are an official or off-the-record belief in all religions. In Christianity historically mingled with ideas of the earth being Satan’s dwelling place, and the demonization of the ‘pagan’ worship of nature.
6. Soil being a symbol of “mere dust”, an ephemeral world – nevertheless supporter of life – which hides the reality of the divine: e.g., in Buddhism, some Shinto schools, as well as in folksy Christianity.
7. Soil (living matter) as a place of ongoing creativity, the creative agent being identified in different religious areas with elemental beings, different divinities, or a cosmic spirit.

Religious patterns, mentioned only very fragmentarily here, also have so-called ‘secularized’ consequences, as on the opinions on tilling, e.g.; or if soil life is conceptualized, e.g., as cogwheels of a machinery, as a carrier of spirit, as a cradle of life. It is recommendable for soil scientists and for anybody concerned with soil to know about the varieties of religious understanding of soil nature, and its cultural and practical consequences.

Exemplary reference: *"Sols et sociétés, regards pluriculturels" (soils and societies, cross-cultural perspectives)*, by R. Lahmar and J.-P. Ribaut, Paris 2001.