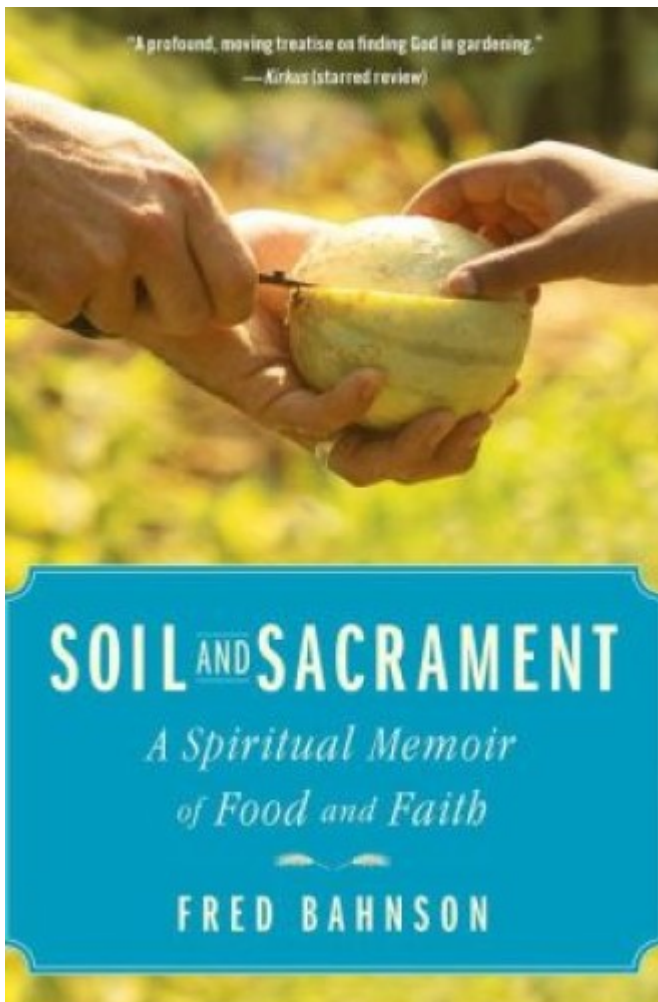


Earthy vocation

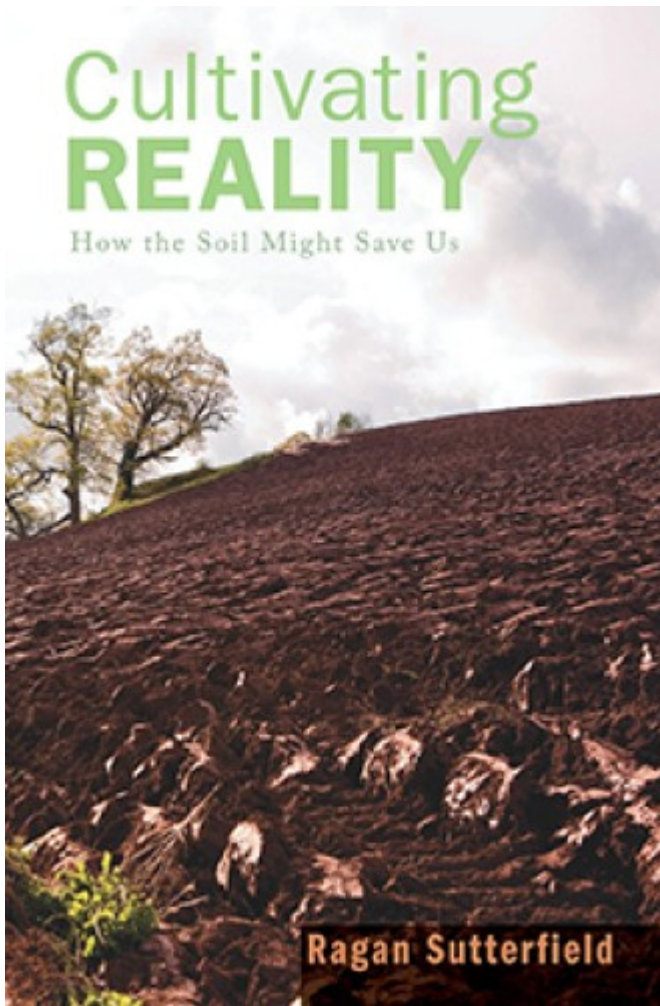
by [Richard Gilbert](#) in the [February 19, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Soil and Sacrament

By Fred Bahnson
Simon & Schuster



Cultivating Reality

By Ragan Sutterfield
Cascade

The sight of Muslim students butchering lambs at my farm left me reeling, but I was alert enough to notice that my visitors possessed Islamic rituals, rules and prayers that honored the lambs' supreme sacrifice. I realized that I did not have any tradition of my own that might guide me in such an activity. The experience reminded me how American society has shorn food production of its spiritual dimension. Land abuse and animal cruelty result when creating food becomes a series of separate mechanical tasks.

Fred Bahnson and Ragan Sutterfield explore this issue from different directions—Bahnson sojourns among farmers in faith communities, while Sutterfield traces human ties to the land through history.

Bahnson sees a natural affinity between spiritual and country matters, which is why monasteries and retreat centers of all kinds so often involve the growing of plants and animals. Bahnson profiles four farms connected to faith communities, interspersing his account with the compelling story of his own agrarian-faith journey, which culminated in leading a garden ministry at a church. After four years in that position, he became head of the Food, Faith, and Religious Leadership Initiative at Wake Forest's School of Divinity.

Seeking models for a life that cultivates both the spirit and the land, Bahnson links his farm profiles to seasons of the church year. He starts in Advent at Mepkin Abbey, a Catholic monastery in South Carolina's low country. There he finds that the largely silent Trappist monks, an ascetic but colorful crew, have just switched from producing eggs to growing mushrooms. After rising at three o'clock for the first of the day's seven prayer services, Bahnson reads for two hours—he favors staples of monastic spirituality, such as *Thoughts in Solitude* by the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, but also studies a mushroom grower's guide—and then helps haul shiitake-encrusted logs from a water bath.

Eastertide finds him at Lord's Acre, in the mountains of western North Carolina, a food pantry garden started by several Protestant churches and led by a former writer for *Mother Earth News*. There he's told that "food is the physical embodiment of prayer" and witnesses outreach to a recalcitrant melon thief.

At Pentecost he makes his way to Tierra Nueva, a Pentecostal ministry with an organic farm and a fair-trade coffee initiative that supports "people on the margins," including migrant workers and violent convicts in Washington State's lush Skagit Valley. He roasts coffee beans with a former meth cook and lays a prayerful hand on a homeless man.

Finally, for Sukkot, the harvest celebration that follows Yom Kippur, he pitches in at Adamah Farm, a vibrant Jewish organic enterprise in the Berkshires of Connecticut. Like the other farms, Adamah's name is biblically resonant: God created Adam from *adamah*—humus—the root word of which is *dam*, or blood. Thus, writes Bahnson, there's "a sense of living matter that connects blood, soil, and humans."

Each day at Adamah begins with davening—prayer—and Bahnson finds himself uttering in Hebrew the same lines from Psalm 51 that he'd recited with the monks of Mepkin Abbey. The Jewish praise of God, however, strikes him as "much more tribal,

physical, and urgent.” As Bahnson sings and sways with a score of Jewish gardeners and goatherds inside a red yurt, he feels the emotional and historical richness of Judaism in his spine.

“Once we were connected with the land and the flow of seasons,” one of Adamah’s leaders says. “Now we’re known as the People of the Book, but once we were also the People of the Land. Because of exile, and because Jews weren’t allowed to own land in Europe, we grew disconnected from the land. Now we’re rerooting ourselves, which makes our faith that much more powerful.”

Bahnson is a skillful reporter, able to capture and dramatize key moments, and a graceful writer who deftly weaves in his personal history even as he describes the gardens and their inspired caretakers. I wished for more on my own passion, livestock—but Bahnson dislikes farm animals. I identified with his admission that his gardening strengths are in planning, soil preparation, and planting rather than harvesting and cooking. In farming as in everything else, it takes all kinds.

Bahnson’s role as both gardener and pilgrim unifies *Soil and Sacrament* and lends it drama. “Working with the soil opens us inward,” he writes, “where we find a God eager to lavish upon us God’s mercy and compassion and love. Soil also opens us outward, where we learn to receive the fruits of this good earth, and where we also discover that ours is not the only hunger. Soil work reveals the joyful messiness of human life where we find others who need us, and whom we need in return. How we hunger is who we are.”

Arkansas farmer Ragan Sutterfield wants churches to embrace this kind of agrarian thinking. Although humans are able to flourish because of a few inches of topsoil on the earth, mainstream churches “erase the realities of dirt,” Sutterfield declares. “The ‘spiritual life’ has become its domain and whether explicitly stated or not, salvation has come to mean the deliverance of souls and not bodies, persons not planets.” He summons an array of spiritual and agrarian thinkers—especially Wendell Berry—to support his points.

In Sutterfield’s careful reading of Genesis, Adam was given a humble vocation—to “keep the garden” as a servant, not a steward or manager. “Rather than fleeing from biblical views of creation, we should embrace them more fully,” he writes, “not simply in the light of Genesis, but the full biblical witness that shows, again and again, a creation that God loves and a people who are ignorant and lost without

God's limits, discipline, and guidance." Though religion is often blamed for exploiting nature, Sutterfield thinks the blame belongs mostly to followers of John Locke, who believed that God gave the world as "raw material to be made valuable by English Protestants."

Sutterfield explores the period before the adoption of large-scale agriculture in the Fertile Crescent some 10,000 years ago, and he examines the less extractive and more intimate communal practices of our Paleolithic ancestors. To those who would dismiss such a look backward as irrelevant, he points to the hazards of subsidized industrial agriculture, with its vulnerability to global fluctuations in supplies and prices. The challenge for Christians and others is to leave "the property mindset of a consumer society." Understanding dependence on the land and our responsibilities to it should be the business of the church, because "human life makes no sense without humus."

Food production and distribution may already be transforming faith communities. Bahnson notes that Adamah Farm is affiliated with Hazon, an environmental organization that runs America's largest faith-based community-supported agriculture program: almost 10,000 members spend \$2 million a year at dozens of organic farms, only a handful of which are Jewish.

This agrarian-consumer renaissance already is transforming food pantries from purveyors of tins cans to hosts of a seasonal harvest table. In my hometown, a university-owned garden plot, tended by workers from many churches, supplies vegetables to a food pantry staffed by church members and other volunteers. Many are called to help fill empty bellies—and not everyone must grow a tomato. Some will plan, some will till, some will plant, some will tend, some will pick, some will haul the harvest, and some will distribute it. Many hands do make light work—and change the world.