

PLANTS, POLITICS & PRAYER

By Simon Cross



A TWITTER STORM

In September 2019, the micro-blogging site Twitter erupted in to one of the many micro-furies for which it is famous, when Union Theological Seminary (UTS) a theological college in New York, USA, known for its progressive and liberal theology, posted that a group of seminarians had ‘confessed’ to plants. Here’s the text of their tweet:

Today in chapel, we confessed to plants. Together, we held our grief, joy, regret, hope, guilt and sorrow in prayer; offering them to the beings who sustain us but whose gift we too often fail to honor.

What do you confess to the plants in your life?

The response to this simple tweet, which was accompanied by the picture above, was both immediate and vehement. Christian Twitter, which is generally waiting to be outraged at something, exploded in to a fury of outraged righteousness. “Idolatry!” Some cried, without any apparent evidence of a specific idol. And then there were claims that this ritual amounted to ‘Gaia Worship’, or some unspecified version of “paganism” – a word widely misunderstood but used repeatedly nonetheless as a kind of anti-Christian bogeyman; then there were various jokes about the popular Christian cartoon ‘Veggie Tales’ while other wags simply made wry and dismissive references to ‘Church Plants’.

The very few weightier critiques set the ritual out as a betrayal of historic Christian teaching, a displacement of the historic idea of God, with a newly deified sense of plant life. Although the criticism began on Twitter, it didn’t end there but spread further afield too, with editorials and blogs appearing here and there across the internet to denounce the very idea of confessing to plants.

AN EXERCISE IN MISSING THE POINT?

But was all of this outrage and mockery simply an exercise in missing the point? In an age of habitat loss on a vast scale, when rainforests are disappearing at an unfathomable rate, and our own ‘green and pleasant land’ is becoming increasingly the colour of concrete, do Christians and people on the whole need to re-appraise our/their relationship with the natural world? Was there any significant critique of the theology behind the ritual? And was all of the outrage directed at UTS ultimately a reaction to a political statement?

The question of our relationship with the environment is a very present one, climate change is a direct threat to our world, and there is a growing recognition that ‘business as usual’ is not ok. But there’s more to this too, because our understanding of the way in which the natural world works is actively changing, as scientists deepen their investigations in to and understanding of the hitherto unknown ways in which plants, in particular trees, both cooperate with one another, and communicate with each other.

“One thing is that mother trees suckle their children, they feed the young tree just enough sugars produced by its own photosynthesis to keep it from dying. Trees in a forest of the same species are connected by the roots, which grow together like a network. Their root tips have highly sensitive brain-like structures that can distinguish whether the root that it encounters in the soil is its own root, the root of another species, or the roots of its own species... we have measured with radioactive-marked sugar molecules that there is a flow from healthy trees to sick trees so that they will have an equal measure of food and energy available.”

(From an interview with Peter Wohlleben, author of *The Hidden Life of Trees*. ¹)

Studies have also shown that trees in a forest “communicate” with one another via a complex network of fungi, nicknamed by some Biologists as the ‘wood-wide web’ ², and even send each other food and resources in order to support one another during times of growth or stress. Some suggest that a forest full of trees might then be seen as a kind of commune, with the trees sharing resources, protecting one another, and working together for the good of the whole. Plants are a good deal more sophisticated than they have been understood to be. While it feels at times uncomfortable to use anthropomorphic language when it comes to understanding non-human beings, perhaps we should ask ourselves why this is, and whether it is not at least partly because it prevents us from being able to keep the kind of emotional distance that more clinical ‘scientific’ language does.

STAYING CLASSY

Perhaps one of the least appealing characteristics of humans is our tendency to classify, to make distinctions between groups of people for instance, or between types of animals (those that are fine to kill, and those that aren’t for example) and more widely between types of living being. We operate, effectively, a type of class system, one that allows us to make ‘useful’ distinctions. We then ensure that this is passed on by teaching it to our children from a very early age, we speak of

¹ <https://nph.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1469-8137.2009.03069.x>

² https://e360.yale.edu/features/are_trees_sentient_peter_wohlleben

wise owls, brave lions, and disgusting slugs. Of pretty flowers, and annoying weeds. In the UK we make various decisions based on the cultural values assigned to the type of animal, and become outraged when/if another culture doesn't share our own classification system. We find ourselves shocked at the barbecuing of tortoises for instance, or the consumption of dog or cat meat, preferring instead to industrially raise, slaughter, process and eat chickens, sheep, cattle and pigs. While this sort of distinction is at least relatively widely acknowledged, it is less common to recognise that we apply our somewhat arbitrary distinctions more widely across the non-human species of the world. The theory seems to go that plants are the lowest form of 'life' because they don't have brains – insects with their small brains are of a higher order, birds and animals are higher still, and of course humans are at the top. Within this class system more subtle distinctions are made, the more human like the animal, the higher the class, perhaps.

Of all the religious traditions, it is Jainism which has come closest to acknowledging this – with adherents restricting themselves to a relatively austere of vegetarianism which prohibits the consumption of plants such as potatoes which have to be uprooted (killed) in order to harvest their tubers. The Jains at least have an acknowledged system for deciding whether a plant is being harmed or not, it too has its flaws of course, but it's a start. Jains also make a concerted effort not to harm insect life, something which conventional agriculture with its heavy reliance on insecticides, for instance, actively goes against. For many Jains it is only acceptable to drink filtered water, in order to try and reduce the amount of living beings within the consumed water.

Christianity on the other hand has done little to acknowledge the issues inherent in human treatment of the natural world. Like other religions of empire, it has grown rich and fat off the exploitation of the earth's resources. There was something in the vehemence of the attacks on the Union Seminarians simple tweet which seemed to bespeak an underlying unease at being called out, betraying perhaps an unidentified or unacknowledged unease at the way in which we blithely ignore the harm we do to the world around us on a moment by moment basis. Our lives are so heavily reliant on the destruction of plant and animal life, that it becomes unthinkable to address this in any significant way.

DESPERATELY SEEKING SOMETHING

Looking for robust theological critique of this act of 'confession' was a somewhat fruitless task. As previously mentioned, there was a general sense for some that plants were being treated like 'gods' but this was hard to substantiate. As part of this critique, a number of people claimed that they believed confession should be made to God alone, for only God has the power to forgive. This idea is problematic on a number of levels, most obviously that it's self-evidently untrue. We

confess to one another all the time, and we forgive one another all the time: this is even Biblical, with the epistle of James giving a clear command to ‘confess your sins to each other’. Others claimed that we should only confess to that which could understand our confession – in other words we should only confess to humans or God (as understood in a specific way). This seems to be a very basic understanding of confession, based on the primacy of spoken or written language, our attitude of confession and repentance should surely be recognised as more profound than the spoken word. It’s also much too simplistic and mechanistic, as if the only purpose of confession is to be granted some sort of absolution, rather than to change our own attitude and behaviour. And it’s that last point which is perhaps the most important, the reduction of confession to something that will benefit the one making the confession, rather than an holistic act which changes the way one lives, in order to benefit everyone and everything.

It would be disingenuous of me to suggest that all the critique of this ritual was directed in this way, some more thoughtful critics bemoaned the ‘optics’ of the tweet by which they meant the appearance of a trendy young white person sat in front of a collection of houseplants and some bark chippings. This was, they felt, bound to give ammunition to critics who would use it as a stick to beat the environmental movement with. If there is any validity in this, it surely is more of a critique of the distorting nature of social media, than of the activity itself, which of course had a much wider context.

So if the theological critique was lacking, and the reality is that we do need to readdress our relationship with the plant world, what about the idea that this was at heart a political issue, rather than a religious one?

THE POLITICS OF EXTRACTIVISM

In a brief defence or explanation of the by now famous confession ritual, UTS pointed out that it was carried out as part of a course which sought to respond to the issue of ‘extractivism’ by means of ritual and liturgy³. Extractivism is a term that refers to the removal from the ground of economically precious resources for the purpose of trading them (minerals, oil, precious metals, and timber for instance). This issue is at the heart, one might say, of our present environmental crisis. Mining and deforestation leave extraordinary scars on the landscape of our planet, and their long-lasting side effects are felt across the world and out in to space. It is the means by which we are slowly killing ourselves, along with various other species, in a desperate attempt to accumulate wealth. Contemporary (late) capitalism still relies heavily on the ongoing nature of extractivism, in

³ <http://uts.fishersnet.net/course/info.php?id=1216>

order to fuel growth in the production of consumer goods. It is this, critics argue, which is so deeply damaging to the earth. When you look at the ritual through this lens, it becomes obvious that this act was as much political as it was religious. The intention was to challenge the participants, and those who saw the Tweet, to readdress their own relationship with the natural world. That so many people immediately took umbrage at this provocation spoke of the way in which the challenge was received beyond the walls of the institution itself.

If justification were needed, and I'm not at all sure that it is, this would surely be enough to explain the reasoning behind this process of confession, or of realignment of ourselves with the world upon which we depend, and yet we abuse so thoroughly and thoughtlessly. Ritual of this sort is necessarily symbolic, it serves to demonstrate our commitment to a changed way of living, and in this specific instance it speaks of a recognition that we not only depend heavily on the earth around us, but that we largely do so without consciousness of or care for the impact that our dependence has. This sets out the nature of the ritual as at once political and religious, ideas which are, I would argue, impossible to separate. Religion is political just as politics is religious, both have to do with the idea of the sacred, and how best to give worth to that sacred thing. In the various critiques of the confession ritual this political dimension was largely unacknowledged, which in itself is telling. Individualised consumption is something of a religious and secular sacred, which gives it great political power. To challenge it in this way was perhaps always bound to elicit a backlash, but the critique that we fail to honour the gift of plants feels all too valid, maybe more of us should be confessing to plants.

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