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Flower Power?

[Articles by Carl R. Trueman](#)

A recent tweet from Union Theological Seminary in New York City indicates that the institution, which once boasted luminaries of the intellectual stature of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, is now encouraging an innovative penitential practice: confessing sins to plants. To quote the 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?” Sadly, the seminary does not report how the plants responded to these belated confessions.

This represents something I have pointed out to students many times over the years: Liberal theology may well be rooted in highly sophisticated theories and articulated by extremely intelligent people, but it tends to result in liturgical practices that are at best banal and at worst childish. Talking to plants is a fine candidate for the latter category. Better the robust atheism of a Bertrand Russell or a Christopher Hitchens than the infantile antics of a typical liberal Christian.

What exactly do these people think they are doing when they confess to these plants? What sins have they committed against them or about which these shrubs and herbs would be concerned? On the grounds that most, if not all, of these penitents eat plants of some kind, are we expected to be sympathetic to the self-lacerating confessions of those whom the herbaceous community would no doubt regard as serial killers of the worst kind, who have no intention of mending their ways? To the question of what I confess to the plants in my life, my answer is “Nothing”—and to date, no plant of my acquaintance has raised a concern about my silence.

I am being silly, of course, but my silliness raises a serious point. I have little doubt that the faculty and students at Union would regard me as a hidebound, dimwitted, and possibly even dangerous fundamentalist—because not only do I recite the Nicene Creed every Sunday, but I actually believe that it expresses metaphysical and historical truth. Yet at Union they are confessing to beings that have no consciousness and no awareness. Is that any more adult or reasonable? The plants neither benefit from these students’ confessions nor respond to them. Such acts of confession are really a form of pseudo-spiritual onanism, for the only benefit the individual can possibly gain from this is some kind of therapeutic satisfaction. Singing in the bath might be just as helpful, more modest in its metaphysical claims, and (most important) a little less infantile.

I can only feel sorry for the people involved. This is not simply because they are paying good money to Union Theological Seminary for the privilege of not being taught any proper Christian theology or orthodox practice. Nor is it because I find it embarrassing to see grown people—intelligent people—behaving like benighted infants. The real reason I feel sorry for them is because they are being robbed of the possibility of actual forgiveness. Confession is not a monologue. The Christian practice of confessing sins is a dialogue, and must be so. The Christian confesses his sins and the priest or minister pronounces forgiveness. This may be understood differently by Roman, Eastern, Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed churches, and it may take place in the privacy of a one-to-one setting or the corporate context of a public worship service, but the dialogue is critical.

Sin is confessed so that it can be forgiven. The mere act of confessing, as therapeutic as it may be, is merely half of the action. That is clearly true in non-religious settings. If I confess to my wife that I

have sinned against her in some way, I will find no relief until she says she forgives me. How much more is it therefore true in a religious context, where sins against God are the primary focus? The individual needs to hear words of forgiveness which come from God, albeit via a priest, a minister, or a Christian friend. A sin confessed merely to a plant is a sin which cannot be forgiven, for the simple reason that plants cannot forgive any more than they can be offended.

Our churches will be empty in fifty years, and the reason is before our very eyes. The generation of seminarians being trained today will become ministers and pastors who have nothing to say—and most people have more important things to do on a Sunday than listen to those who have nothing to say but who want to be paid for saying it. As Psalm 115 indicates, those who worship idols will become like those same idols. The lesson in this? Talk to plants and listen carefully—very carefully—to their reply, for that will be the content of the message you preach.

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