

THE VEGETAL ROOTS OF RELIGION: MEDITATIONS ON THE INTERSECTION OF CRITICAL PLANT STUDIES AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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The Seed

The humanities have turned. Or perhaps—like a plant—they have spiraled, curved, circumnutated outwards and up, grasping more of the world as they grow.¹ “New materialist” and “posthuman” thinkers such as Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Janet Bennett, Bruno Latour, and Donna Haraway invite us to consider the agency of nonhuman beings and allegedly “inanimate” things. Like plants bending towards the sun, the “nonhuman turn” enacts a Copernican revolution away from what many long considered the exclusive center of subjectivity: humans. Scholarship once preoccupied with human social relations, power, and signification now also orbits questions of nonhuman ontology, and

¹ The term “circumnutate” was coined by Charles Darwin in his 1880 book, *The Power of Movement in Plants*. “Circumnutation” refers to the spiral or elliptical pattern plants’ stems or tendrils make as they grow upward.

how to reckon with the winged, leafed, slimy mass of matter that comprises Earth.

Sprouting from the nonhuman turn is the field of critical plant studies, which considers plants as agents in their own right. Critical plant scholars think not *about* or *for*, but rather *with*, plants.² Thinking with plants requires not only bringing human inquiry to bear on plants, but more importantly, remaining receptive to how plant life complicates and transforms the very nature of that inquiry. Indeed, in his seminal book *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Michael Marder demonstrates how apprenticing to the alterity of plants causes us to rethink thought altogether, rendering it plantlike (2013).

Critical plant studies is bolstered by a recent surge in cutting-edge science that reports the complex ways in which plants communicate, sense, and make sense of their environments. Michael Pollan's 2013 *New Yorker* article "The Intelligent Plant" first brought these conversations into mainstream discourse; since then, the success of books such as *Braiding Sweetgrass*, *The Light Eaters*, *Entangled Life*, and *Finding the Mother Tree* speak to growing popular demand to be inspired by other species. This contemporary research in many cases resonates with wisdom that has been safeguarded by Indigenous and folk traditions, as well as ignored or repressed strains of ecological thought within major philosophical and religious traditions.

And yet, despite growing attention to materiality, the study of religion has been slow to embrace critical plant studies, lagging the fields of anthropology, literary studies, and philosophy.³ If "materializing the study of religion means asking how religion happens materially," perhaps critical plant scholarship invites us to consider how religion happens *vegetally* (Meyer et al 2010, 209). In other words, how might the study and practice of religion metamorphize under a close apprenticeship to plant life?

What may be at stake, if we follow Marder, are the very categories foundational to philosophical and religious thought. Plants, by their very physiology, accomplish a "lived destruction of [Western] metaphysics" (2013, 53). To take a simple yet profound example, plant morphology rejects the classic etymological definition of individual—that which cannot be divided and live. As anyone who has propagated a *pothos* knows, division for a plant is life. Unlike

² The phrase "to think with" here borrows from the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who (in his study *Totemism*), remarked that "natural species are not chosen because they are 'good to eat' [*bonnes à manger*] but because they are 'good to think' with [*bonnes à penser*]." (1962, 132).

³ Notable book-length exceptions to this claim include ethnographic accounts of how spiritual communities interact with plants, such as *People Trees* by David Haberman (2013), Munjed Murad's 2022 dissertation "A Tale of Two Trees: Unveiling the Sacred Life of Nature in Islamic and Christian Traditions," as well as philosopher Michael Marder's meandering account of Hildegard von Bingen's spiritual ecology (2021).

animals, which have highly specialized parts, plants iterate and reiterate interchangeable units. Animals achieve their final physiology in embryonic form; plants constantly change shape. Plants privilege perpetual becoming over being.

Inspired by the structure of plants, the meditations below reach but never arrive. They form not a continuous individual argument about the study of religion and plants; rather, they proliferate thoughts that successively sprout and fall, yielding to new life.

“All Genesis is Phytogenesis”

In the beginning, some say, the world was not for us. First, there was chaos. Then bang, then rock. No air, no inhale, no lungs, no organism. According to Genesis 2:7, God formed humans from dust and breathed the breath of life into our nostrils, a cosmogenic CPR. The abiotic assented to the biotic. Stardust alchemized into cells. Life woke up with a choke.

At what point did humans become possible and why? And on whose account? Biologists trace human origins to the Great Oxygenation Event, that fateful genesis of air two billion years ago. Before the event, the atmosphere as we know it did not exist. Not until tiny alchemical cyanobacteria photosynthesized sunlight, spitting out oxygen as waste in their wake. Accumulated O₂ molecules formed a downpayment on life. Plants' exhales awaited our inhales. Creation, one might say, held its breath.



Photo by [Ganesh Dhamodkar](#), Under the Bodhi Tree, CC BY 4.0, [Wikimedia Commons](#)

“The life of plants,” says philosopher Emanuele Coccia, “is a cosmogony in action, the constant genesis of our cosmos” (2018, 10). In a similar vein, Marder claims that “all genesis is phytogenesis” (2023, 8).

Was it God, then, or plants, or both riding side-saddle, that first breathed the breath of life into the world? The breath-giving reality of plants may be why so many cultures have situated a tree at the root of reality. Trees, like gods, self-fashion. They make and remake worlds.

The Upanishads speak of the *asvattha* tree (*Ficus religiosa*) at the center of existence: “All worlds are contained in it, and no one goes beyond” (Hall 2019, 36). Norse mythology tells us of an ash tree, Yggdrasil, with limbs “spread out over all the world and stand above heaven” (Ibid., 37). These cosmic trees root in dark and reach towards light. They bridge the terrestrial and the celestial, spanning countless intermediary realms. Their spanning transmits life: plants “live both above and below ground, joining Skyworld to the Earth. Plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and they give it away” (Kimmerer 2013, 9).

Surveying the persistence of the “cosmic tree” across a variety of religious cultures and contexts, Mircea Eliade concluded that “the tree represents . . . the living cosmos, endlessly renewing itself” (1958, 267). But the very fact that plants did and do create our world—generating the conditions that sustain breath—invites critical plant scholars to forgo the language of representation in favor of *substantiation*.

Writing about the ritual offering of copal tree resin in contemporary and historical Indigenous communities of Mesoamerica, Rebecca Mendoza recounts how, in one account of Aztec creation, four gods sacrifice themselves to transform into four trees, which act as “cosmic antennas” reaching from lower to upper realms. When Indigenous communities cut copal trees to harvest resin for incense, the tree bleeds. This blood does not represent. It *substantiates* an underlying dynamic, monist reality: “Trees,” says Mendoza, “are a permanent manifestation of creative forces, and tree resin is the blood of cosmic bodies that manifest as sturdy wood trunks. Inside copal trees, energy forces are flowing” (Mendoza 2023, 9).

The copal tree, and the phytogenesis behind other cosmic trees, invites us to do what Eliade ascribed to “primitive understanding:” (1958, 269) that is, to know that plants do not merely *symbolize*, they enact. This thinking is “primitive” only insofar as it is primordial—words that share the Latinate root *primus*, a linguistic root that points to a metaphysical root: first, existing or persisting from the beginning.

All genesis is phytogenesis.

The Religious and Racialized Roots of Plant Panic

When colonizers arrived in the Americas, they encountered peoples with deep relationships to and practices with plants. Some worked with plants to heal the sick, others to converse with the dead or find lost community members. Many engaged psychoactive plants in important rituals: in Mexico, the Aztecs revered *ololiuhqui* (*Ipomoea tricolor* syn. *Turbina corymbosa*, a species of Morning Glory), *peyote* (*Lophophora williamsii*), and *teonanácatl* (*Psilocybe* mushrooms). Indigenous peoples of the Amazon worked with the San Pedro cactus (*Echinopsis pachanoi* syn. *Trichocereus pachanoi*), *ayahuasca* (a combination of, typically, *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*), and *yopo* (a hallucinogenic snuff made from *Anadenanthera peregrine*) (Johnstad 2023, 6).

Faced with peoples who located the sacred squarely within the material, colonizers deemed them primitive and their plants demonic. The Catholic Church responded with strict prohibition. Said a friar who was charged with seizing *pipiltzintzintlis* from the people of Xochimilco in 1698:

We come to take this herb from those natives. It is not permitted, nor is it good that they drink this herb because with it they see many vile and evil things and visions and when they take it they speak with demons and other vile monsters. This herb is prohibited and forbidden by the Inquisition (Chuchiak, 2012, 312).

What so terrified the Spaniards? Was it the fact that so-called primitive peoples accessed powerful and strange states? That they opened doors to realities that evaded the conquistadors' perception? Or was it because they open these doors not by contemplating the ethereal heights of God, but by allying with what sprouts from the dark depths of soil?

Who is afraid of cactus, mushroom, and vine?

At the very least, plant panic was racially motivated and religiously supercharged; its fruits long outlasted the Inquisition. One hears echoes of the 16th century in this 20th century commentary on cannabis, used by Indigenous (women) *herbolarias* in Mexico:

The horror that this plant inspires has reached such an extreme that when the common people . . . see even just a single plant, they feel as if in the presence of a demonic spirit. Women and children run frightened and they make the sign of the cross simply upon hearing its name. The friars hurl their excommunications against those who grow and use it and the authorities persecute it with such fury that they order it to be uprooted and

burnt, imposing cruel penalties on whom they find it. In a word, they believe that it is a weed that has come from hell. (Campos 2012, 165)

As Nelson Maldonado-Torres has pointed out, “The prehistory of modern racism has been linked to the emergence of Christianity not only because it was the religion of the Roman Empire, but also because of its increasingly global project of expanding the reach of ‘the true religion,’ a project that intensifies and becomes increasingly intolerant beginning as early as the eleventh century” (2014, 641). It is no coincidence that this intolerance focused on peoples with deep relationships to plants and fungi, as well as to animals, spirits, and other more-than-human beings. Might we then also say that the prehistory of modern racism is inextricable not only from the emergence of Christianity, but also its concomitant “horror” towards plants and fungi?

A Vegetal Ressourcement

It is tempting, and not altogether misguided, to locate the “root cause” of our ecological crises at the feet of Christianity. Lynn White, Jr., famously did (1967). Undoubtedly, certain interpretations of Christian theology helped birth frameworks for human exceptionalism that drive species extinction: to wit, dominionism, which contends that humans can use other creatures how we wish; Cartesian dualism, which severed mind from matter and restricted the former to humans; and the *scala naturae*, or great chain of being, that placed all life in a hierarchy of perfection towards God—with plants and animals falling below *Homo sapiens*.

It is equally tempting, at first glance, to characterize Christian scripture as portraying plants as categorically passive. For example, Matthew Hall calls this portrayal a “deliberate move to expand human claims on the natural world while avoiding moral consequences [of such claims]” (Hall 2011, 55).

And yet what is Christianity? And what is a plant? Why compare a prickly bear to a date palm? The category of Christianity (and of any religion), much like plant life, is internally diverse, contested, always evolving, and shaped by local ecology. As scholar of religion Mary-Jane Rubenstein puts it, while sometimes it seems that the easiest way to “locate creativity, animacy, or divinity” within the material world would be “to appeal to traditions that lie outside the Greco-Roman-Hebraic lineage we incoherently call the Western Canon,” it is also true that there may be “counter-ontologies internal to the traditions such reanimations seek to critique” (2018, 69-70). Writ botanically: Christianity is a diverse ecosystem. We can always find unexpected blooms and neglected weeds thriving amid what first appears as a hostile theological monocrop. We must only look to find them. We must nurture them when we do.

The study of religion is ripe for what I have elsewhere termed a “*vegetal ressourcement*” (2024). *Ressourcement*, a term most often associated with the Catholic *nouvelle théologie* movement of the mid-twentieth century, refers to an attempt to retrieve aspects of a tradition ignored by dominant intellectual forces (Flynn and Murray, 2012). In addition to reckoning with the colonial legacy of plant-panic, we might also seek to revive forgotten (pl)an(t)cestors within the very traditions we seek to critique.

The Spiritual Lives of Plants

Let us reconsider those passive plants in Christianity. The cross upon which Jesus Christ was crucified was, after all, a tree. According to the anonymously authored Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* (ca. 8th–10th c.), the tree was sentient: “alive, aware, reacting to the Crucifixion” (Murphy 2013, 125). Not only that, but the tree suffered martyrdom alongside Christ: “They drove dark nails through me,” the tree announces in *The Dream*, “They mocked us both.” The tree’s active participation in the Crucifixion raises a profound question: do plants have religious lives?

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling once quipped that if plants were conscious, they would worship the sun as their god. And who can say they don’t? The physiology of plants in many ways resembles unceasing prayer. For example, plants are heliotropes. They feed on light. They consume their creator, rendering vegetal life a kind of continual sacrament. And because sunlight and CO₂ are readily available, plants live a sessile lifestyle. They do not need to run to find food or flee predators. Their stillness requires that they maximize their surface area to imbibe more light, water, and air. Like patient mendicants, they remain firmly planted, arms outstretched, surrendering ever more of their being to their maker. Plants don’t just pray without ceasing; they body forth an unceasing prayer.

Inspired by Schelling, the 19th century German polymath Gustav Theodor Fechner suggested that plants enjoy a kind of spiritual life in their interactions with the sun (1848). In a particularly moving passage in his treatise on plant-souls, Fechner imagines plants’ heliotropism—directional growth towards light—as divine accompaniment, resonating with countless Biblical allusions to walking with God.⁴ Elsewhere he points out that, unlike humans with our delicate eyes, plants can meet their maker (God/the Sun/light) face-to-face. One thinks of Moses, coming down the mountain with his face burned from the fiery

⁴E.g., Genesis 6:9 “Noah walked faithfully with God.”; Micah 6:8: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”; Galatians 5:16: “So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

countenance of Yahweh. But plants enjoy yet one additional spiritual advantage, says Fechner: God literally becomes them. “Light becomes a plant” (*Licht wird Pflanze*) (60). Plants are the sun’s flesh—the incarnation, earthbound corporeality of divinity.

Plants have stood, in countless traditions, as not only emblematic of spiritual life, but paradigmatic of it. Against Hall, Sam Mickey (2019, 4) explores how the “playful effortlessness” of lilies in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are exemplars for how “the goodness and wisdom of God” are found not in power but in weakness. In the works of Zhuangzi, a tree “provides a perfect exemplar for Daoist action. It attempts nothing and is fully accomplished” (Mickey 2019, 7). Buddhism has a long, rich history of debates over plant sentience, which take on a particular intensity in Zen Buddhism. For the Japanese Tendai monk Ryōgen (912-985), plants not only have spiritual lives, but they *are* the spiritual life. Their sprouting, leafing, reaching, and withering mirrors the four phases practice: desire [for enlightenment], religious practice, bodhi, and nirvana (Rambelli 2001, 17-18).

Attending to the Plantness Within

Why does any of this matter? You might expect me to appeal, as is the trend, to the ecological crises facing humanity. I might argue that centering plants in religious scholarship and practice is necessary to reverse species extinction, protect habitats, and address climate change. But by claiming that critical plant studies will solve complex societal problems, we risk overpromising and underdelivering at worst. At best, this claim glosses over vital steps that connect knowledge with organized collective action. But most importantly, this position instrumentalizes plants: *we will consider them only insofar as they will save us from ourselves*. We will use them as tools for civilizational salvation.

But perhaps the intersection of critical plant studies and religious scholarship affords a profound opportunity to turn inward. Perhaps it invites us to tend to our inner wilds as much as our outer ones. As Monica Gagliano asks, “How can a plant readily know us when we are hardly aware of the plantness within ourselves?” (2018, 15). Plants’ stillness demands patience; their subtleties reward close observation. When we contemplate them, we don’t change the world. We change. We grow to become more capacious. As the plant-crazed Johann Wolfgang von Goethe famously remarked, “Every object well-contemplated opens a new organ of perception in us” (FA 1.24:596). Centering plants within the study of religion offers a reevaluation of forms of attention that allow us to meet reality in its profligate, multiform weirdness, and reconsider humans’ place in it. And isn’t this the driving impulse behind so many contemplative traditions? Plants, long overlooked as passive elements within many religious traditions, emerge as

dynamic agents that can transform our understanding of divinity, materiality, and our experience of being human. Studying them may not change the world, but it will no doubt change us.

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