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Plant Rights, Screaming Vegetation, and a “Biocentric” Worldview

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Several years ago now, I was appearing on a national network interview program and found myself discussing capital punishment with a woman who, during a commercial break, indicated that she had recently seen a combine going through a wheat field. She was horrified. The wheat was being cut down by thousands of stalks a second. She felt grief for the wheat, she revealed.

No one person on the panel knew what to do with that off-hand statement. I think it is safe to say that none of us had ever grieved over the intentional harvesting of vegetation.

Now, ethicist Wesley J. Smith indicates that an ethics panel in Switzerland has decided that “the arbitrary killing of flora is morally wrong.” Writing in the current edition of *The Weekly Standard*, Smith explains that the idea of “plant rights” is now a matter of serious consideration among the Swiss.

The background to the current panel is a constitutional clause adopted years ago in Switzerland that demands Swiss citizens to recognize “the dignity of creation when handling animals, plants and other organisms.” Until just recently, no one seems to have expected that this would lead to a plants rights movement.

As Smith explains, the Swiss panel came up with a radical conclusion based in a radical worldview:

A “clear majority” of the panel adopted what it called a “biocentric” moral view, meaning that “living organisms should be considered morally for their own sake because they are alive.” Thus, the panel determined that we cannot claim “absolute ownership” over plants and, moreover, that “individual plants have an inherent worth.” This means that “we may not use them just as we please, even if the plant community is not in danger, or if our actions do not endanger the species, or if we are not acting arbitrarily.”

Smith rightly points to this kind of logic as “a symptom of a cultural disease that has infected Western civilization, causing us to lose the ability to think critically and distinguish serious from frivolous ethical concerns.”

The very idea of “plants rights” indicates a loss of cultural sanity. Until now, this cultural confusion has been most evident in the animal rights movement — a movement that presents some legitimate ethical concerns but pushes its ideology beyond sanity. The failure to distinguish between human beings and the larger animal world is a hallmark of a post-Christian culture. The extension of this ideology to vegetation is a frightening sign of mass delusion.

Wesley Smith gets it just right:

Why is this happening? Our accelerating rejection of the Judeo-Christian world view, which upholds the unique dignity and moral worth of human beings, is driving us crazy. Once we knocked our species off its pedestal, it was only logical that we would come to see fauna and flora as entitled to rights.

So, now Swiss ethicists are working up protocols on “plant dignity” and determining scenarios that might qualify as a violation of “plant rights.” The Swiss panel’s report, “The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants,” is a wake-up call. The adoption of a “biocentric” worldview is a leap into irrationality. Good arguments can be made for responsible agricultural practices that honor God by demonstrating care for creation. But the ideology of “plant rights” and the suggestion of something like an inherent “right to life” for vegetation is beyond all reason.

The most tragic dimension of all this is that a culture increasingly ready to euthanize the old, infanticize the young, and adamant about a “right” to abort unborn human beings, will now contend for the inherent dignity of *plants*. Can any culture recover from this?

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