

Theology for the Dogs: Why Nonhuman Animals Matter to Creation

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All things bright and beautiful
All creatures great and small
All things wise and wonderful
The Lord God made them all.¹

In an age where global warming, environmental pollution, waning natural resources and species extinction are clear and present dangers, we need a theology that attends to humanity's relationship to and actions towards particular aspects of creation. This realization became more apparent to me at a recent Earth Day chapel in which the seminary community thanked God for giving us the earth, lamented our abuse of that gift and asked God to help us take better care of it now and into the future. As we worshipped, I was struck by the irony of praising God with the birds, squirrels and other animals only minutes before many of us would make animals part of our midday meal. Realizing the detachment between our words and deeds, my mind filled with questions. What does it mean to "care for creation" when our eating habits devalue the lives of some of God's creatures? How do we decide which parts of creation to preserve (humans, coral reefs, dogs, rainforests and spotted owls) and which to exterminate (cattle, wetlands, chicken, prairies and fish)? What ethical guidelines influence our relationship to the various members of creation and are those reliable from a Christian perspective? By the end of the service, I was even more convinced that Christians need a more robust theology of creation if we are to confront the looming ecological crisis and lead more sustainable lives.

One important starting point for developing a more complete theology of creation is to take animals and their relationship to humans more seriously. We cannot speak with integrity about our call to care for the earth and all that is within it without examining whether people's treatment of animals does or does not violate that mandate. Nor can we develop an ethic that values all living things without identifying the ways we act against animal life and determining

¹ "All things bright and beautiful" *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin: Brethren Press, 1992), #156.

whether such actions are valid. In short, I believe that theological reflection on creation is incomplete if Christians do not take seriously human and nonhuman animal relationships. Furthermore, this reflection should be grounded in Scripture, connected to Christian tradition and influenced by scientific research in order for it to effectively demonstrate humanity's interdependence with nature and our need to be better stewards of God's green earth.

DEFINING OUR TERMS

The term "animal" is derived from the Classical Latin word *animale*, which means "living being, being which breathes" and from *anima*, meaning "breath, soul."² Given this broad definition, ancient thinkers categorized human being as one animal among other animals. Aristotle and other philosophers who followed his thought "focused attention on the distinction between the living and the inanimate, including human beings under the genus 'animal' so that even the specific rationality of human beings is to be understood as animal rationality."³ Writing in the thirteenth century, Aquinas placed nonhuman animals, humans and angels on a spectrum with humans as "a middle ground between the animals and the angels."⁴ He acknowledged shared traits between humans and animals, namely their use of their senses, and between humans and angels, even as he attested to humanity's uniqueness.⁵ Similar lines of thought continued into the early sixteenth century with English and other European languages using "animal" to describe "a class whose members include spiders, bees, chimpanzees, dolphins *and* humans — among others, but not plants, inanimate beings, angels and God."⁶ The second definition that developed during this era and came to dominate modern Western societies made a sharp division

² Online Etymology Dictionary, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=animal>, (accessed May 16, 2007).

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 11.

⁴ Timothy M. Renick, *Aquinas for Armchair Theologians*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 19.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 17-19.

⁶ *Ibid.*

between human and nonhuman animals. As such the word “animal” came to be used primarily for the nonhuman animal class.⁷ Centuries later, popular usage has narrowed the meaning of “animal” further. Today, people often use it to refer to “only what has four legs [...] which means that [...] they not only do not think of humans but they exclude from their thinking such life forms as birds, insects, and snakes.”⁸

As the definition of “animal” has changed, so too has the value we generally place on nonhuman animals. When we say that a person “acts like an animal,” we mean that he is behaving in a primitive, uncivilized manner that is beneath his humanity. Similarly, when a person says she is being “treated like an animal,” she is not only saying she is dehumanized, she is also making a judgment about the way nonhuman animals are and should be treated.⁹ Both of these statements portray animals negatively and attribute to them something that is other than, outside of and degrading to human being. As a result, “people who struggle with the place of animals in the moral community — do they have a place there or not? — will often be tugged back and forth by deep emotions and unconscious attitudes that are odds with each other, reflected in our dual use of the term ‘animal.’”¹⁰ Perhaps this contradiction between seeing nonhuman animals as valuable and seeing “animal-likeness” as something to be avoided also explains the ambivalence some theological writings have towards nonhuman animals.

SURVEYING THE LANDSCAPE

In Creation & the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World

theologians, historians, educators and church leaders make a case for and present examples of

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Robert N. Wennberg, *God, Humans, and Animals: An Invitation to Enlarge our Moral Universe*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 23.

⁹ If dogs, for example, always received the best food, lots of love and attention, and – as in some cases – got the most luxurious living accommodations, then the statement, “I’m being treated like a dog” would be a positive one.

¹⁰ Wennberg, *God, Humans, and Animals*, 24.

Anabaptist concern for the environment. While this collection of essays is an excellent first step in articulating an Anabaptist approach to creation care, theological discussion on nonhuman animals is sparse. In “Creation, the Fall, and Humanity’s Ecosystemic Role,” Thomas Hiebert explores the Priestly and Yahwist creation accounts, and argues for a “healthy relationship” between managing the earth and serving the soil, though he emphasizes the latter.¹¹ As one might expect from the title however, the essay focuses on humanity’s role in creation and makes only a few passing references to nonhuman animals. Nonhuman animals are also noticeably absent in Lawrence Hart’s “The Earth Is a Song Made Visible.” Although he identifies resources within Native American spirituality that can form an Anabaptist theology of creation, his primary concern is “pollution and destruction of the environment,”¹² as well as right use of the land. Walter Klassen shows a similar concern for violence against the land and “human war against mother nature”¹³ in his essay “Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God.” Unlike Hart and Hiebert however, he mentions animals briefly, saying, “Whenever [...] we see a stone, a tree, an animal, or a person, we see the speech of God.”¹⁴ In Klassen’s view, Christians are called to live the peaceful reign of God in the present and that includes caring for the earth. As such, the Church’s work of reconciliation includes righting relations between humans and between human and nonhuman creation.¹⁵

In comparison to the authors above, contributors Dorothy Jean Weaver and Thomas Finger pay greater attention to nonhuman animals in developing their theologies of creation. In “The New Testament and the Environment” Weaver describes Jesus’ incarnation as a sign that

¹¹ Theodore Hiebert, “Creation, the Fall, and Humanity’s Ecosystemic Role,” in *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World* ed. Calvin Redekop (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 121.

¹² Lawrence Hart, “The Earth Is a Song Made Visible,” 170.

¹³ Walter Klassen, “Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Peaceful Reign of God,” 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

“material creation, the everyday ‘stuff of life’ is of utmost significance in the divine scheme of things.”¹⁶ Since God’s creative action occurred through the Word and that Word was embodied in Jesus, she argues that God deeply values the earth. Furthermore, because “God in Christ has paid the ultimate price in order to ‘reconcile [the cosmos] to himself ‘(Col. 1:20)” and Christ’s resurrection redeems and restores all of creation, it follows that Christians must participate fully in caring for God’s earth and all that is in it. For Weaver, this responsibility entails not only preserving plant and human life, but also seeking the wellbeing of nonhuman animals.¹⁷ Like Weaver, Finger builds an Anabaptist/Mennonite theology of creation on a Christological foundation, though he begins with Jesus’ death on the cross rather than the incarnation. Nevertheless, he too sees Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as evidence that:

[...] God comes very close to creatures and is deeply concerned about them indeed. During his ministry, Jesus shows special sensitivity to the weakest and most inconspicuous humans and nonhumans. On the cross, the suffering of all creatures are taken up into the Godhead’s experience. With the resurrection, God’s Spirit begins awakening a longing within all creatures for fuller participation in Life.¹⁸

It is this view of Jesus’ work on earth that can enable Christians to — as Finger encourages — see all nonhuman creatures as inherently valuable to God and worth preserving.

Although these reflections can lead to a more robust theology of creation and the place of nonhuman animals within it, they remain only helpful starting points. The ecological and scientific challenges facing Christians require a great deal more theological thought if we are to comprehend what it means to be good stewards of creation as all of the aforementioned authors

¹⁶ Dorothy Weaver, “The New Testament and the Environment,” 127.

¹⁷ Ibid., 130. Although I find Weaver’s Christological framework helpful her emphasis on the incarnation may also present some challenges to her theology. First, those who disagree with her environmental agenda may use the fact that Jesus became *human* and not a tree or a tiger to dismiss theologies and ethics that take nonhuman animal life seriously. Her emphasis that the incarnation is a sign that *all* matter in the earth is valued by God may stay this temptation, but this solution may be problematic as well as it might fan people’s temptation to value all matter, be it human, fly or rock equally. With these issues aside however I think Weaver has taken the right approach to attract Anabaptists, particularly Mennonites, whose theologies tend to be Christ-centered.

¹⁸ Thomas Finger, “An Anabaptist/Mennonite Theology of Creation,” 162.

suggest we do. Today, we are confronted with cloned sheep and genetically modified cows, challenging our fundamental definitions of what is and what isn't part of creation. Cattle, pigs and chickens are routinely used as commodities raising new question about what it means to "value" nonhuman creatures. Factory farming has been implicated as a contributor to global warming, water depletion and biodiversity loss,¹⁹ drawing an even closer connection between the way we treat nonhuman animals and the impact on the creation we share. Each of these pressing dilemmas creates a need for Mennonites and other Christians to re-consider what it means to "accept and use the resources of nature, society, and technology, so far as they sustain and enhance the quality of *human* life and the world around us in harmony with God's purposes."²⁰ Stewardship issues have gotten more complicated since Eden and our churches need more than vague calls to "bring rest and renewal to the land and everything that lives on it"²¹ and "respect the natural order of creation" to address them.²² More systematic theologizing about nonhuman animals and human responsibility to these beings must be part of our overall theology of creation.

BROADENING THE FIELD

Nonhuman animals in scripture

Perhaps the most obvious place to begin theologizing about nonhuman animals is the Bible. While Christians often cite Genesis 1 and 2 to show that nonhuman animals, like plants and humans, were created "good" and valued by God, there is other evidence in Scripture to support these claims. One such narrative is the story of the flood, in which God spared pairs of all nonhuman animal species — both clean and unclean — from destruction by directing Noah to take them aboard the ark. After they had been aboard the boat for one hundred and fifty days,

¹⁹ Henning Steinfeld and others, eds. *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options*. (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, 2006).

²⁰ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1995), 27. Italics mine.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 78

²² *Ibid.*, 25.

God is said to have remembered, not only Noah and his family, but also “all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him” and caused the earth to dry.²³ Once the water receded, God made a covenant with “every living creature [...] birds, cattle, and every wild beast as well,” promising never to flood the earth again.²⁴ Several psalms also communicate God’s care for and relationship to nonhuman creatures. For example, psalm 104 describes how God provides food and water for birds and wild beasts, makes a home for goats and a refuge for “rock badgers” and grows the grass for cattle. Jesus makes a similar point when he illustrates God’s attentiveness to the needs of humanity by likening it to God’s care for the lilies of the field and the sparrows. Israel was instructed on treating their oxen, birds and other nonhuman animals rightly, which not only reflected right relationship to creation, but also demonstrated right relationship with God and with neighbors.²⁵ Other Scriptures also articulate the place of nonhuman animals in God’s redemptive work in Jesus. Given that there are more explicit references to nonhuman animals in Scripture than there are to other crucial themes in Christian thought,²⁶ and that people’s attitudes towards and treatment of these creatures correlate with their attitude and treatment of the environment, I believe there are sufficient Biblical grounds to include more specific discussion on nonhuman animals in our theologies of creation.

Nonhuman Animals in Christian tradition

While the ecological pressures that compel Christians to speak about nonhuman animals are unique to our time, this topic has been debated within the Church for centuries. A wide range of Christian thinkers, including St. John of the Cross, St. Thomas Aquinas, Rene Descartes, Leo

²³ Genesis 7:24-8:1.

²⁴ Genesis 9:8-10.

²⁵ See Exodus 21:28-32, Deuteronomy 22:1-4 and 22:6-7 for examples.

²⁶ From a purely Biblical standpoint, it intrigues me that we have so many explicit references to nonhuman animals in the Bible and do not include them in our systematic theology, meanwhile the Trinity while undeniably crucial for Christian thought is only implicit in the texts.

Tolstoy, Karl Barth and Tom Regan have engaged in theological and philosophical debate on issues affecting nonhuman animals. For example, Dr. C.E.M. Joad's response to C.S. Lewis' *The Problem of Pain* illustrates how nonhuman animal suffering challenges Christian theodicy. Although Joad can accept Lewis' argument that human suffering is a byproduct of sin, he questions how theologians reconcile nonhuman animal suffering with their idea of a good God. The problem, as Joad sees it, is "how to account for the occurrence of pain (i) in a universe which is the creation of an all-good God; (ii) in creatures who are not morally sinful."²⁷ This concern provides one example of how thinking about nonhuman creatures complicates our understanding of God's work in the world. As people increasingly learn to value the environment and realize the worth of nonhuman creatures, these kinds of questions will continue to arise. Christians need to think about and address these issues intelligently, not only to engage in dialogue with others but also to clarify our own theology.²⁸

Like the problem of nonhuman animal suffering, Christian thinkers have also attempted to understand what it means for all of creation to be redeemed. Although John Calvin preferred not to make elaborate claims on this topic, he acknowledges that nonhuman animals long to participate in that redemption. In "Speculation About Animals," he writes, "Because the creatures [...] have a hope of being freed hereafter from corruption, it follows that they groan like a woman in labour until they have been delivered. [...] In short, the creatures are not content with their present condition, and yet they do not pine away irremediably. They are, however, in

²⁷ C.E.M. Joad, "The Pains of Animals," in *Animals and Christianity: A Book of Readings*. eds. Andrew Linzey and Tom Regan (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 57.

²⁸ As I think about this particular question, I am reminded of our lengthy discussion in systematic theology about the earth in general and whether or not it can ever be destroyed. With the realities of nuclear power and global warming, and the dire ecological situation facing human and nonhuman animals, and plants alike, it is no longer enough to simply say that, "creation will never be destroyed" or, as it does in the Mennonite Confession of Faith, that "God preserves and renews what has been made" (25). More and more I am convinced that we need to think through issues related to the present state and destiny of creation, including questions about nonhuman animal suffering and theodicy, in more detailed and deliberate ways.

labour, because they are waiting to be renewed to a better state.”²⁹ John Wesley writes more extensively about nonhuman animals and the new creation, saying:

[...] the whole brute creation will then, undoubtedly be restored, not only to the vigour, strength, and swiftness which they had at their creation, but to a far higher degree of each than they have ever enjoyed. [...] The liberty they then had will be completely restored, and they will be free in their motions. They will be delivered from all irregular appetites, from unruly passions, from every disposition that is either evil in itself, or has any tendency to evil. No rage will be found in any creature, no fierceness, no cruelty, or thirst for blood.³⁰

Although notable Christians like St. Augustine and C.S. Lewis have disagreed with this position, the debate feels more urgent today than in times past. Like Joad’s question on nonhuman animal suffering and theodicy, the belief that God will redeem creation will likely spark new and difficult questions. Does the good news of Jesus’ bodily resurrection apply to nonhuman and human animals alike? Do nonhuman animals have distinct “personalities,” as some advocates argue and, if so, will God resurrect each one?³¹ To be sure, we like Calvin may be forced to admit that answers to these questions are beyond our knowledge. However, Christians should draw this conclusion only after we have intentionally engaged these issues.

Nonhuman animals in science

A final reason why Christians must do more theologizing about nonhuman animals is that scientific evidence compels us to do so. Although our theology of creation tend to emphasize the uniqueness of humanity from all other creatures, science has increasingly shown that human and nonhuman animals have more in common than previously thought. As such, most of our

²⁹ John Calvin, “Speculation about Animals,” 100-101.

³⁰ John Wesley, “The General Deliverance,” 102.

³¹ For example, Farm Sanctuary (www.farmsanctuary.org), an organization that rescues and provides shelter for hurt and abused factory farm animals, gives the cattle, pigs, chickens and other farm animals they rescue individual names and seeks to tell each animal’s “personal” stories as a form of advocacy for other animals living in similar conditions. Pet owners also regularly talk about their cats and dogs as having unique “personalities” and of being “members of the family.” For arbitrary reasons, people seem to accept this understanding for pets but not for farm animals or nonhuman animals in the wild. However, if we extend this concept to all nonhuman animals, be they bee or bear, and seriously think about what this does or does not mean theologically, new interested questions arise.

theological distinctions between human beings and the rest of the animal kingdom are arbitrary or exaggerated. Such is the case in Joe R. Jones' *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*. Although Jones discusses human being as "creature among creatures" and identifies traits humans share with nonhuman beings,³² many of the characteristics he attributes exclusively to people also apply to nonhuman animals. For example, Jones argues that humans alone have intentional relationships and³³ linguistic and communicative capabilities. He also asserts that personal being is able to "make *decisions*, *choose* something, and *enact* choices."³⁴ Despite these claims, science has shown that chimpanzees and other primates, elephants and even dogs also share these and other human traits. For example, research has shown that dolphins have:

capacities for perceptual recognition, for perceptual attention, for a range of different responses to what is perceived and recognized as the same individual or a kind of individual and for a range of varying emotional expressions [...] dolphins exhibit curiosity in inspecting something that has engaged their attention. [...] Affection will be expressed towards some individuals who have been recognized, fear towards a certain kind of predator. Cooperation will involve the coordination of one dolphin's actions with those of others in pursuit of a shared goal.³⁵

Furthermore, dolphins have desires and emotions, make judgments, direct their actions to specific goods and as such "have reasons for acting as they do."³⁶ In *Dependent Rational Animals*, Alasdair MacIntyre uses this evidence to argue that these and other intelligent nonhuman animals also use reason and have beliefs.

Though human and nonhuman animals may have different levels of proficiency in their decision-making and communicative skills, and their way of relating is likely different from

³² Joe. R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 296. Some of the shared traits Jones identifies include value to God, sexual differentiation, interdependence, physical embodiment and distinctiveness from God (296-299).

³³ *Ibid.*, 302.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 305, 312.

³⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 23.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

human beings, the point is that Christians cannot draw the sharp lines between nonhuman and human creatures as we have in the past. This realization poses interesting questions and challenges to the way we talk about creation. Even though Jones finds likeness between people and nonhuman animals, his entire framework for describing personal and human being must now be reexamined. Scientific evidence about the “intelligence” of dolphins forces us to rethink what makes humans distinct from other animals. Subsequently, it also compels Christians to reevaluate and rearticulate what it means for humans to be “made in the image of God” and for nonhuman animals not to be. It calls us to respond to people who may use this evidence to argue that all animals, whether human or nonhuman, are the same. Similarly, it also calls us to know how best to use this evidence when people justify using and abusing nonhuman animals. These and the other issues raised by Scripture, by past and present debates within the Church and by science mean that we cannot ignore nonhuman animals in our theological reflections on creation.

CONCLUSION

Today the theological claims we make about nonhuman beings in particular and creation at large are facing new challenges. Questions that arise in our technological age compel Christians to clarify our theological positions. Clarifying our theological positions requires us to revisit the Biblical texts, re-examine the debates in our Christian tradition and learn from the scientific revelations that are reshaping our world. How we think theologically about nonhuman animals will shape the way we treat them. Such was the case with St. Francis of Assisi, who “considered the primordial source of things [...] calling creatures no matter how small, by the name of brother or sister,”³⁷ and whose acts towards nonhuman animals are legendary. However, how we treat nonhuman animals also has consequences for the way we relate to the environment.

³⁷ St. Bonaventure, “The Life of St. Francis,” 28.

Christians seeking to develop a robust theology of creation will take this connection seriously and integrate nonhuman animals into their work.

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