

GOD, ANIMALS AND HUMANKIND AS AN INTEREST GROUP IN THE CTSA

In the last twenty years animal studies have undergone a stunning explosion in research and theory about the relationship between humans and other animals based on newly discovered knowledge about the nature of the animals themselves. This new knowledge about the animals as conscious beings desiring to live and avoid pain, capable of communication, as toolmakers, as reflexive thinkers, as subjects of emotion and as builders of culture shows that the demarcation between animals and humans is much less than previously thought. It endorses the Biblical statement in Genesis that animals and humans share the same breath of life, *nephesh chayah*. In various English bibles *nephesh* is translated one way when it refers to animals and another way when it refers to humans. It makes the current treatment of animals by humans and the relationship between animals and humans more and more questionable.

Often quoted statistics show that every year in the United States alone twenty million animals are killed by the biomedical and product testing industries often in what masques as science, one hundred thirty-five million animals are killed by hunters mostly for their amusement and ten billion animals are killed in horribly inhumane factory farming systems. This does not take into account the cruelty involved by the corporations operating in the entertainment industries requiring silly tricks by animals for mindless human titillation or the various animal-racing organizations. The cruelty and exploitation of animals by humans in these situations is so egregious as to be beyond description. Moreover, the ever-increasing human population consuming more and more of the earth's resources acerbates all this.

This has given rise to the need and, in the case of a rapidly growing animal rights movement, the demand, for a moral response about animal abuse. Some philosophers have taken up the cause but theologians have been mostly silent, including those teaching from a Catholic perspective. Although there has always been a small minority of Christians such as St. Basil, Archbishop of Caesarea, and the well-known St. Francis of Assisi, speaking in defense of animals, they hardly have been given more than lip service. In addition, it is questionable if the new Catholic Catechism can provide overall moral guidance because it does not seem to be a consistent statement on the subject.

As a young cleric in 1976, Anglican theologian, Andrew Linzey, began to write about animal rights from a Christian perspective. Later (1995) he published *Animal Theology* expounding his theory of "Theos-Rights" for animals that are God-based claims for justice. This rights-based theory based on several points: creation exists for its Creator; God is *for creation*; the 'for-ness' of God is dynamic, inspirational and costly and humans should be for what God has created.

All of this requires looking at the biblical sources with new eyes. It means realizing that the *dominion* given by the Creator to humans over animals is a stewardship in imitation of the kind of loving dominion that God exercises over humans. This shows that respect and compassion are the truly Christian approach to animals by humans.

Ultimately such a new Christian approach will reinforce the basic orientation of theology as a God-centered rather than human-centered discipline. It will show also how the violence humans inflict on animals redounds to us spiritually, physically and psychologically. In line with this it is often noted that as long as humans continue to shed the blood of animals there will never be any peace. In addition, the idea that animals have inherent rights requires differentiation from an ecological approach that considers animals to be for humans.

This new field is on the cutting edge. New theological works are being published. The American Academy of Religion has added a consultation on the topic. Such new theory needs investigation, reflection and research by experienced theological leaders including those teaching from the Catholic perspective. An integral part of role of this new field is to explore the relationship among God, humans, animals and all of creation in the human journey toward a fuller Christian life.

Forming an "interest group" in the Catholic Theological Society of America will stimulate such exploration and study. It will encourage its members to participate by adding their well-seasoned scholarship to this endeavor.

Elizabeth Farians