1 Animals and Theology

Christian theology has been, and largely still is, a thoroughly anthropocentric discipline: not only do its primary concerns revolve around modern human beings, the discipline almost universally endorses the idea that modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, are unique among animals in a way that means the interests of sapiens ought always – or at least, almost always – have priority over the interests of other creatures.[1] Relative to standard theological fare, there is little discussion of animals in the history of Christian thought. What discussions there are tend, as Ryan McLaughlin has highlighted, to concern 'animals as revelatory to humans; animals as subjects of communion with humans; [or] animals as resources to be used by humans' – which is to say, animals are discussed only inasmuch as they impinge on human concerns (McLaughlin 2023). The twin ideas that animals might be subjects worthy of theological reflection in their own right and that they might deserve serious ethical consideration did not feature prominently in the Christian tradition until the second half of the twentieth century. Prior to this, the dominant view was that animals had little-to-no intrinsic worth and could be treated in any way that furthers the ends of humans. Thomas Aquinas is representative here:

> Now all animals are naturally subject to man. This can be proved in three ways. First, from the order observed by nature; . . . as the plants make use of the earth for their nourishment, and animals make use of plants, man makes use of both plants and animals. It is in keeping with the order of nature, that man should be master over animals. Secondly, . . . as man, being made to the image of God, is above other animals, these are rightly subject to his government. Thirdly, we see in [other animals] a certain participated prudence of natural instinct . . . whereas man possesses a universal prudence . . . [t]herefore the subjection of other animals to man is proved. (Aquinas 1947, I, Q. 96, A. 1)

Aquinas was clear about what followed from this:

> The love of charity extends to none but God and our neighbor. But the word neighbor cannot be extended to irrational creatures, since they have no fellowship with man in the rational life. Therefore charity does not extend to irrational creatures. (Aquinas 1947, II-II, Q. 25, A. 3)

[1] Whether theology would have prioritised the interests of *Homo sapiens* over the interests of other human species, such as *Homo erectus*, had such species overlapped with theology's beginning, is a fascinating question we have been saved from asking because (in all likelihood) our ancestors drove to extinction those species they were coextensive with. Theological reflection on the fact that we are, in Yuval Harari's (2015, p. 74) words, "the deadliest species in the annals of biology" lies beyond the scope of this work.

> If a man's affection [i.e., the psychological attitude which moves one to action] be one of reason, it matters not how man behaves to animals, because God has subjected all things to man's power, according to Ps. 8:8 . . . and it is in this sense that the Apostle says that 'God has no care for oxen'; . . . God does not ask of man what he does with oxen. (Aquinas 1947, I–II, Q. 102, A. 6, ad. 8)

Aquinas does say that if one is moved to action by pity for a suffering animal, one should refrain from certain forms of cruelty towards them. But lest we think that Aquinas considered this cruelty wrong because of the distress it causes the animals, he corrects us: 'if a man practice a pitiful affection for animals, he is all the more disposed to take pity on his fellow-men', and for this reason, to 'inculcate pity' in the ancient Israelites, God 'forbade them to do certain things savoring of cruelty to animals' (Aquinas 1947, I–II, Q. 102, A. 6, ad. 8). The merely instrumental reason for avoiding cruelty to animals expressed here is morally problematic. Some of Aquinas' contemporary apologists have pointed out that elsewhere Aquinas makes remarks that can be read as suggestive of a more positive attitude towards non-humans. The enormous effort expended on excavating this thread of thought is unsurprising given Aquinas' semi-canonical status, but identifying a handful of comments in a 2-million-word corpus that, if interpreted 'correctly', support a more robust eschewal of cruelty does little to blunt the basic point, which is that a straightforward reading of Aquinas minimises concern for animals, and such a reading has had an immense influence on the Christian tradition.[2] Hence we find relatively recent writers in the Thomist tradition making such claims as:

> We have no duties to [brute beasts] – not of justice . . . ; not of religion . . . ; not of fidelity . . . ; We have . . . no duties of charity, nor duties of any kind, to the lower animals. (Rickaby 1901, pp. 248–249)

> Since animals have no rights they cannot suffer injury in the strict sense of the word. (Prummer 1957, p. 109)

> Since animals cannot experience 'good' in a rational way, it is only in a limited way that we can love them. Since animals have no free choice, this is the basic factor of distinction. . . . Animals show affection and loyalty, but in a trained or programmed sense. . . . Fundamentally, animals cannot be a part of the human community; . . . animals are not capable of sharing in [eternal beatitude], and thus we cannot properly extend Christian love to animals in this way. (Westberg 2015, p. 244)

[2] McLaughlin (2023, pp. 14–15) gives a helpful overview of the debate on whether Aquinas' theology can be read in an animal-friendly manner.

This negative attitude is not confined to the Catholic Thomist tradition nor to the Catholic tradition more widely. As Pieter Slootweg has shown, during the period 200–1600 C.E., the conviction of the 'triumvirate of Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas' that 'animals should be excluded from proper moral consideration' was pivotal, with the result that animal suffering was 'considered morally irrelevant by all' (Slootweg 2021, pp. 30–32). Some Protestant thinkers, such as John Calvin, denied that non-human animals experienced any feelings at all (Slootweg 2021, 29 fn. 161). That non-human animals were denied reason and excluded from moral concern meant there was little impetus for thinkers to develop theological treatments of animals. And this only began to change in the eighteenth century (Slootweg 2021, pp. 116ff). Given this inheritance and its enduring influence – even today theological students typically cut their teeth on the likes of Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin – it is no surprise to find, for instance, the renowned Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson suggesting in 1999 that the animal rights movement is founded on an 'anthropological nihilism' which leads ultimately to Nazism (Jenson 1999, pp. 56–57).

It is true that, if we mine deeply enough, we can find discussions of animals by Christians that appear to be more positive in character. Writings on the lives of the saints contain celebrations of compassion towards non-humans and sometimes depict saints as interacting positively with animals. Similarly, the richly illustrated medieval bestiaries present detailed descriptions of non-humans and their behaviour which, in some cases, reveal accurate attention to the lives of non-humans. There is also the strange phenomenon of putting animals on trial which, it might be argued, reveals a substantial view of the capacities of animals (more on this in Section 4.6). These minority reports show that it is too simple to say that the Christian tradition exhibits either an exclusively negative attitude or a wholesale disregard of non-human animals.

Yet, while this diversity in the tradition should not be overlooked, nor should we overdo any claim that its existence mitigates the thrust of the dominant theological position, a position which excludes from view the concerns of non-human animals. Indeed, on closer inspection, there is ambiguity in these minority reports. Ingvild Gilhus, drawing from the work of Steve Baker, notes that just as the animals depicted in fairy tales and children's cartoons are 'not animals in any meaningful way, only a medium for messages that concern humans', so something similar might be 'at work in Christian antiquity' (Gilhus 2006, pp. 6–7). When hyenas, geese, and frogs are portrayed as agreeing, promising, and obeying, in response to the spoken commands of saints (Waddell and Gibbings 1995), they are being imbued with a linguistic comprehension they do not possess, and so not being accurately represented as the animals they are. Similar misrepresentation occurs when non-humans are put

forward as exemplars of particular moral traits. Works which portray animals or animal behaviour as virtuous or vicious and, on such grounds, attempt to draw moral lessons for humans only confirm the anthropocentrism of the tradition, even if they simultaneously witness to a minority view that lauded showing compassion towards animals.

Alongside this ambiguity in the minority reports is a more straightforward point, namely, that it is the dominant theological tradition, as opposed to the minority (primarily literary) traditions, that has wielded and continues to wield vast influence on the belief and practice of Christians everywhere. Millions of believers spanning numerous traditions have spent hours immersing themselves in Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin, but Ælfric's *Lives of the Saints*? Less so. Key theological ideas of the dominant tradition – that humans are made in the image of God, that creation is ordered around humans, and that the universe is ever progressing towards the final redemption of humans – permeate Western thought and culture, even in its secular forms. The pervasive influence of theology as compared with hagiography or bestiary is perhaps why C. S. Lewis did not encounter much objection when he wrote in 1940 that '[b]easts are to be understood only in their relation to man and through man to God' (Lewis 1940, p. 142), and why few of his contemporary readers bat any eyelids upon encountering this statement.

A very good case can be made, then, for affirming that the vast majority of Christian theology is speciesist in the following sense: the interests of human beings are given undue weight over the interests of creatures belonging to other species (Berkman 2014, p. 14). As John Berkman has argued, however, it may be too kind to call theology speciesist. The label 'speciesist' suggests that Christian theologians have paid attention to non-human animals and argued that human interests should take precedence over those of non-human animals. The reality, argues Berkman, is closer to a 'moral nihilism' about other animals: most theologians have been indifferent to the interests and concerns of non-human animals (Berkman 2014, p. 16). I want to suggest that even the charge of moral nihilism may be too kind, since it fails to capture the negative implications of the dominant theological tradition. As A. Richard Kingston noted in 1967, with only 'a few noble exceptions theologians have done far more to discourage than to stimulate a concern for the lower creatures' (Kingston 1967, p. 482). The dominant theological understandings of what it is to be human produce a qualitative divide between sapiens and all other animals, a divide which implicitly denigrates the worth of other animals so that, whether or not Christian theology is essentially speciesist, it must be conceded that the Christian tradition has, in fact, helped to make possible the widespread maltreatment of animals. Kingston cites to this effect A. Jameson, who observed in

1854 that 'the primitive Christians by laying so much stress upon a future life, and placing the lower creatures out of the pale of hope, placed them at the same time out of the pale of sympathy, and thus laid the foundation for an utter disregard of animals' (Jameson, as cited in Kingston 1967, p. 482). This worry was famously articulated by Peter Singer, who argued in 1975 that the Christian claim that human life *and only human* life was sacred, 'served to confirm and further depress the lowly position nonhumans had in the Old Testament' (Singer 2002, p. 191), and while some have suggested that Singer's argument was too quick, one does not need much acquaintance with the history of Christian theology and practice to see there is some substance to the critique.

By the eighteenth century the belief that all animals had been created solely for human use had come to be widely rejected, but theological considerations of non-human animals in their own right remained sparse until the second half of the twentieth century. In 1956, C. W. Hume published *The Status of Animals in the Christian Religion*, where he noted that '[d]uring the past thousand years consideration for animals has, on the whole, lain outside the purview of Christian theology', but '[i]n quite recent times . . . several Christian communions have taken official cognizance of animals' rights' (Hume 1956, p. 1). After Brigid Brophy instigated the modern animal rights movement with her 1965 article 'The Rights of Animals',[3] theological engagement with non-humans picked up, due in no small part due to the work of Andrew Linzey (1976, 1987, 1994, 1998, 2009a). Other important works include Jay McDaniel's *Of God and Pelicans* (1989), Stephen Webb's *On God and Dogs* (1998), David Clough's *On Animals* (2012; 2019), Ryan McLaughlin's *Christian Theology and the Status of Animals* (2014), Eric Meyers' *Inner Animalities* (2018), and Clair Linzey's *Developing Animal Theology* (2022).[4] These and other thinkers have explored what it would mean to treat animals as subjects worthy of theological reflection. Unfortunately, this work, largely 'neglected by the theological world' (Linzey 1994, p. vii), has had 'little effect on the actions of religious leaders' (Farains 2011, p. 102), and little effect on religious believers in general – an illustration of the point made above about the immense influence on the Christian mind of figures like Augustine and Aquinas. Two thousand years of anthropocentric theological sediment is not easily overcome.

The speciesist and nihilistic stances towards animals exhibited by most theology are problematic for several reasons. First, animals are the subject of a life, and many have needs, desires, and are sentient, possessing an interest

[3] See Richard Ryder (1989, pp. 5–7) for details of Brophy's influence.
[4] There has also been much recent interest in the philosophical problems posed to theism by animal pain and suffering. See Murray (2008), Creegan (2013), and Dougherty (2014).

in what happens to them. Second, animals are a significant part of God's creation, which gives prima facie reason to think they are valuable to God in a way that demands attention. Third, the dominant stance cannot justify, but only reinforces, the current ethical practice of Christians – this is a problem because current ethical practice exhibits several inconsistencies. Fourth, given what we know about the way the life on earth evolved, knowledge of other animals contributes to our understanding of our own humanity. This is true not just because we human beings are biologically continuous with other animals but also because, as Eric Meyer (2018) has stressed, human concepts are formed using difference, so our understanding of what it is to be human depends in part on how we conceive of non-humans.[5]

These issues are difficult to treat in a judicious manner because, as Mary Midgley put it, 'a sense of unreality often blocks our attempts to understand our moral relations with animals' (1983, p. 9). James Rachels explains:

> [E]ven as we try to think objectively about what animals are like, we are burdened with the need to justify our moral relations with them. We kill animals for food; we use them as experimental subjects in laboratories; we exploit them as sources of raw materials such as leather and wool; . . . Thus, when we think about what the animals are like, we are motivated to conceive of them in ways that are compatible with treating them in these ways. (Rachels 1990, p. 129)

Indeed, motivated reasoning is rife both in our thinking about other animals and in theology, and is hard to challenge. Making significant progress may require the development of what Berkman (2014) calls *theological ethology*, a theological subdiscipline focused on animals that would feed into and form part of a systematic theology. In this work, I aim to adopt something close to the method of Andrew Linzey's *animal theology*, as succinctly described by Clair Linzey:

> Animal theology is an attempt to view the Christian tradition through an animal-friendly lens, while retaining a critical approach to the tradition with regard to its concern for animals. Animal theology is involved, like feminist theology, in a process of looking again at the Christian tradition to reclaim and rebuild insights and voices concerning our relationship with animals. (Linzey 2022, p. 3)

A note on language is required. The words and concepts we use, the way we describe things, and our habits of language affect *what* we think about and, to some degree, *what it is possible* for us to think about. Moreover, our words and

[5] For more on the relevance of non-human animals to Christian doctrine, see Clough (2012, pp. xii–xiv).

concepts are rarely neutral. They evoke what cognitive linguist George Lakoff calls a *frame*: a set of associations, beliefs, and sometimes behaviours that attach to a term and which typically embed myriad value judgements. Lakoff gives the following example:

> On the day that George W. Bush arrived in the White House, the phrase *tax relief* started coming out of the White House. It was repeated almost every day thereafter, was used by the press . . ., and became so much a part of public discourse that liberals started using it. Think of the framing for relief. For there to be relief, there must be an affliction, an afflicted party, and a reliever who removes the affliction. . . . When the word tax is added to relief, the result is a metaphor: Taxation is an affliction. And the person who takes it away is a hero, and anyone who tries to stop him is a bad guy. (Lakoff 2014, pp. 1–2)

This is an example of a politically skewed frame because it plays into the interests of those who desire and stand to benefit from low taxation, or the minimalist state with which it is often associated. If taxation was referred to as *dues*, *societal contributions*, or *cooperation costs*, a very different frame would be evoked, and with it an alternative set of value judgements.

When it comes to non-humans, we human animals have for millennia used language to both distance ourselves from and lower the status of other animals. The terms we use for animals routinely become insults when applied to humans. This is true for general terms, such as the noun 'beast' (which has the secondary meaning of 'an annoying or cruel human person') and the adjective 'beastly' (which means 'unkind or unpleasant'),[6] and for more specific terms, such as 'chicken' (as in, to chicken out), 'fishy' (to be a cause of suspicion), 'rat' (as in, to be a 'dirty rat' or to 'rat on' someone), and 'hog' (as in, to take more of one's share of something).

This might seem straightforward, even trivial, but it barely scratches the surface of the importance of language. Carol Adams (2010) has argued that the way human language occludes our abuse of animals is pervasive and systematic. Adams applies Margaret Homans' notion of the *absent referent* to the topic of non-human animals. One of Adams' fundamental insights is that our use of language serves to disguise the nature of our interactions with other animals such that the living, breathing animal which becomes food for us and, in particular, the *death* of that living, breathing animal, become *absent referents* during the act of eating (Adams 2010, p. 13). Put otherwise, our habits of language make it extremely difficult for us to refer to the killing and death of the animals we consume. This makes it hard to think clearly about them:

[6] As Keith Thomas reminds us, it is "no accident that the symbol of Anti-Christ was the Beast" (1983, p. 36).

> The 'absent referent' is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product. The function of the absent referent is to keep our 'meat' separated from any idea that she or he was once an animal, to keep the 'moo' or 'cluck' or 'baa' away from the meat, to keep something from being seen as having been someone. (Adams 2010, p. 13)

Adams' analysis is sophisticated and powerful. It explains the disconnect between the living, breathing, experiencing animal and the meat it becomes, and it highlights why and how the image of meat can come to be used to refer to women, or aspects of women's experience, in a manner that confirms 'the connection between the oppression of women and the oppression of animals' (Adams 2010, p. 13). Unfortunately, I cannot do justice here to Adams' analysis; however, I can at least describe some of the ways '[a]nimals are made absent through language that renames dead bodies before consumers participate in eating them' (Adams 2010, p. 66).

To begin with, then, we do not refer to the bodies of the animals we kill for food as dead bodies or corpses – if they referred to at all, they are called *carcasses* or *produce*. We do not talk about eating animal flesh or animal muscle but of eating meat, which 'our culture further mystifies ... with gastronomic language, so we do not conjure dead, butchered animals, but cuisine': the dead pig becomes bacon or pork; the dead cow becomes steak (Adams 2010, p. 66). And of course, once we've killed baby animals, we never refer to them as baby animals but as veal or lamb (Adams 2010, p. 66). The species that humans have bred to be more submissive, to gain weight quicker, to produce more eggs, and so on are referred to as *farm animals*, a label on a par with *sea creatures* in suggesting that *being on a farm* is the position ordained for such animals in God's cosmic hierarchy. The living, breathing animals are also lost from view in the numerous euphemisms that are used to hide what we do, or cause to be done, to the animals we consume. Henry Mance reports that some in agriculture describe the sending of animals on their hours-long journey to slaughter as the animals 'going off farm' (Mance 2021, p. 48), as if the animals are just popping out for a bit. Others refer to the slaughter of 'spent', four-year-old dairy cows – in reality, not spent, but utterly exhausted and stressed due to repeated forced impregnation, having their calves taken from them, and being fed large doses of antibiotics and growth hormone to maximise their 'efficiency' – as 'reforming' the cows (Ricard 2016, Ch 4 fn. 6). When manta ray, hammerhead sharks, puffer fish, green turtles, and sea horses – to mention just 5 of the 145 species that could have been cited – are caught up in the mile-long trawler nets designed to catch bluefin tuna, they are often referred to simply as 'bycatch', a term that Jonathan Safran Foer suggests is the quintessential example of the metaphorical use of the word 'bullshit'