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THY (ANIMAL) KINGDOM COME, OUR WILL BE DONE: Animal Rights Theology in the Twenty-First Century

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SYNOPSIS

The animal rights movement has enjoyed widespread publicity and popular acclaim but has done little to abate the animal use in American culture. Since Harold O. J. Brown's CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL article seventeen years ago, U.S. animal use has increased more than 25 percent despite the incessant calls for the abolition of animal use, and the pragmatic efforts of animal rights groups to use compromise toward the same end. Faced with this daunting reality, and fueled by philosophers such as Peter Singer, who proclaimed that Christian theology is responsible for animal abuse, the movement has sought to redefine Christian theology in support of its cause. Animal rights apologists and theologians misappropriate and misquote Scripture. They take biblical verses out of context and arbitrarily overlook the corpus of Scripture that allows and commands eating and using animals, and they take Christian ideas such as dominion and fill them with unorthodox meanings. In light of these developments, Christians should examine those claims against the light of Scripture and systematic theology, and rediscover the responsibility and joyful freedom given by God as we relate to animals.

When Harold O. J. Brown first wrote of animal rights and Christianity in these pages back in 1996, he scarcely could have foreseen the extent to which his analysis was prophetic. He correctly anticipated that animal rights were an attack on human dignity and a denigration of human exceptionalism. But a great deal has happened since then. Animal rights ideology, faced with vestigial Christian cultural bulwarks such as *dominion* and the *Imago Dei*, could only advance so far. Indeed, philosophers such as Peter Singer and Bernie Rollin noticed that even in a post-Christian culture that had largely forsaken its historic doctrinal moorings, people retained ideas such as human exceptionalism as the rationale for animal use. Singer lamented that many such Christian presuppositions inhibited the spread of animal rights (see below).

ANIMAL PRAGMATISTS WIN THE DAY

In the years since Brown's article, the animal rights movement has changed. Back in the 1990s, James Jasper and Dorothy Nelkin listed three factions within the movement: the "welfarists," the "pragmatists," and the "fundamentalists."[1] Welfarists were the least extreme. They believed that animals deserve compassion and protection but differentiated between species. They advocated minimizing animal cruelty and other programs that many evangelicals could support. Alternatively, pragmatists believed that animals deserved moral and legal consideration in balance with human interests, and their strategy of cooperating, negotiating, and accepting short-term compromises served their agenda of reducing and eliminating existing uses of animals. Interestingly, Jasper and Nelkin noted that the pragmatists' beliefs were infused with abolitionist zeal: for them, ending animal use would be a gradual cultural drift brought on by compromise rather than a tectonic social shift caused by revolution. Conversely, the fundamentalists openly argued that animals have absolute moral and legal rights. They sought immediate abolition of all animal exploitation as they condemned those who exploited animals as morally abhorrent.

Stymied Strategies

Interestingly, since the 1990s these distinctions have eroded as groups from across the animal protection spectrum have learned to cooperate and to employ political pragmatism in the cause of animal liberation. In *Rain without Thunder*, Gary Francione concisely analyzed the triumph of pragmatism.[2] He noted that the ideological purity derived from secular ideology that was necessary to abolish animal use was schismatic: if the movement emphasized absolutist claims, it would be marginalized, while emphasizing incremental gains through political negotiation and compromise meant accepting the very system that exploited animals. Importantly, Francione predicted that such compromising strategies would not end animal use but only legitimize it, thus frustrating the movement and causing it to search out new methods.

How right he was. Instead of a social upheaval abolishing animal use, the past two decades have seen a tremendous increase in animal use. For instance, Americans eat eight billion chickens per year! The early animal rights movement, which was marked by self-righteous zeal, burned itself out. Its highly symbolic acts, such as burning down farms or throwing red paint on grocery shoppers, may have garnered publicity but also landed activists on FBI terrorist listings and marginalized its extreme elements. Poignantly animal use increased despite abolitionist effort. In response to that marginalization, the pragmatists promised a tamer, more legitimate vision of "victory by social acceptance" as society hopefully adopted their agenda.

The pragmatists won out, subsuming other more radical groups under the penumbra of compromise, with their vision of incremental change tailored to an incrementalist American political system. And yet, like their fundamentalist colleagues' best efforts, despite pragmatism, people still ate animals without the faintest hint of guilt. This created a problem of means: if abolishing animal use is the end, then the movement had to look for other, more persuasive arguments.

Enter religion: as the anarchist/philosopher Joseph Proudhon noted, all political arguments are at their core religious.[3] Thus the animal rights movement, confronted with stalled progress in its quest to end animal exploitation, followed Singer's call: "I think that mainstream Christianity has been a problem for the animal movement [because it creates] a huge gulf between humans and animals...Judeo-Christian teachings that animals do not have souls, that humans were created in the image of God and are granted dominion over animals creates a very negative influence on the way in which we think about animals."[4]

Thus, with the most respected philosopher in the animal rights movement blaming Christianity, it was only a matter of time until Christian theology was targeted.

ANIMAL RIGHTS' PRAGMATIC HERMENEUTIC: THE CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

Any understanding regarding animal rights advocates' use of religion must begin with three core concepts that have undergirded and supported animal use throughout modern history: dominion, human exceptionalism, and divine permission. In Christian thought, *dominion* has formed the basis for the human use of animals. That idea emerges from Genesis: "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (Gen. 1:28 ESV).

The Hebrew word for dominion (*radah*) connotes the idea of stewardship provided by a lord or overseer who has authority to act. In other words, God gives the right to people to use His creation—including animals—for human benefit, but not without taking into consideration the needs of the animal. But this raises the question of how people should actually treat animals, that is, what dominion looks like in everyday practice.

Importantly the Lord's prescriptions concerning animal treatment are quite specific in some cases in the Old Testament, but under the New Covenant in the New Testament, many of those prohibitions are explicitly overturned in favor of human freedom. Independent of the believer's view of continuity or discontinuity between Old and New Testament, the church has understood that when God was silent as revealed in the Bible, human reason and conscience guided the treatment of animals. In other words, dominion carried not only responsibility *to* God and authority *from* God but also freedom *before* God.

The second concept that has undergirded Christian thought is human *exceptionalism*—that is, that people are different than every other creature, and although part of the created order, they are uniquely created in the image of God— the *Imago Dei*. Historically the book of Genesis was viewed as supporting that people were unique, in that only they were created in God's image, possessing a limited number of divine attributes such as gregariousness,[5] creativity, eternal life, and self-awareness. Likewise only they had the capacity to sin. But most important, only people had souls and were thus eternally accountable to God.

Third, divine permission in the Bible makes it clear that people may use and kill animals for human benefit. As stated before, only *some* animals were off-limits to Jews, while the production and consumption of others was not only permissible but also commanded. God Himself commanded Abraham to slaughter animals and cut them in half so that He might pass through. God Himself provided the substitutionary ram in the place of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. And God Himself commanded that the Temple sacrifice involve the killing of animals. Indeed the uniform biblical motif narrates that without the spilling of blood, there would be no remission of sins. In any conservative reading, the Old Testament is infused with divinely permitted or commanded bloodletting.

In the New Testament, the motif gains strength and clarity as Christ Himself becomes the sacrifice for sins. And it is clear that in a fallen world, the result of sin is death, and that death cannot be eliminated except for the second coming of the Christ. From Jesus eating lamb at the Passover, to His provision of fish to feed people, to His allowing a legion of demons to enter three thousand pigs, Christ provided ample examples of killing animals. But a post-Christian culture witnessed to by a doctrinally ignorant evangelical church is not well equipped to defend those core presuppositions.

Animal Rights Theology

In the past few decades, animal rights philosophers and theologians agitated for a "new understanding" of the Bible that would prove advantageous to their cause. But these efforts were largely marginal to the animal welfare debate as society grappled with defining animal abuse. Put simply, nobody was listening to fringe arguments that Christianity *actually taught* animal rights. But Singer's epiphanies about Christian presuppositions were a clarion call, and both intellectuals and animal rights groups have turned to religion as a tool to persuade consumers about the immorality of animal exploitation. The HSUS even opened a Faith Outreach effort to persuade churches and congregations of the righteousness of the new animal hermeneutic. As Stephen Vantassel and Nelson Kloosterman wrote:

Putting religion in service to the agenda of the vegetarian/ animal food ethic has penetrated the fabric of Evangelicalism. This co-opting of religion, theology, and Bible-quoting in service to animal food morality is no longer restricted to some faddish cleric blessing pets in church and composing the associated litany. It has now acquired a semblance of intellectual and institutional endorsement among those presenting themselves as Bible-believing Evangelicals.[6]

Matthew Scully, a Roman Catholic, answered the call. Scully's *Dominion* popularized the idea that the traditional reading of Genesis did not support the American idea of widespread animal use. Scully's argument internalizes Singer's contention that classic Christian ideas had to be reinterpreted. Simply put, Scully took the language that *supported* animal use, turned it upside down, and used it against Christians. He argued that since we are fellow creatures, dominion requires that we respect animals' creaturehood. Thus the hierarchical view of dominion was leveled,

placing people and animals on the same plane and requiring people to care for animals at some level as equals.[7] Subtle and nuanced, his argument uses the language of dominion to relocate our stewardship responsibility *from God to animals*, and removes divine permission to use animals freely according to conscience, instead replacing it with moral guilt for doing so. His argument is fraught with cultural bias and is myopic in its understanding of animal suffering, but is nonetheless appealing exactly because it uses traditional Christian theological terms.

Concurrently, attempts by animal rights groups to redefine and co-opt Christian support for animal use intensified. HSUS founded its "Religion and Animals" campaign (later to become its "Faith Outreach Program"), and Campaign leader Christine Gutleben even noted that HSUS intended to "empower theology that opposes the exploitation of animals."[8] In other words, the "end" is abolition, and the "means" is any theology that gets them there. Furthermore Scully, in an apologetic distributed by HSUS, notes, "A kindly attitude toward animals in not a subjective sentiment; it is the correct moral response to the objective value of a *fellow creature*"[9] (emphasis added).

Similarly, Matthew Halteman, a professor of philosophy at Calvin College, answered the call. He makes the case for vegetarianism, claiming that "compassionate eating" can facilitate Christ's peaceable kingdom. Halteman argues that people are called to treat animals as fellow creatures *because* we have dominion over them. He also argues that God's future redemptive plan calls people to participate actively in reflecting the coming Kingdom. While not explicitly postmillennial, his appeal borders on millenarian ideals about reversing the effects of the fall. Indeed, he hints that humanity's role in the eschaton involves personally rejecting the creational curse noted in Romans 8.

Animal rights arguments such as Halteman's generally follow a relatively monolithic and dogmatic track. First, they make a direct albeit subtle attack on human exceptionalism, in effect arguing that people are the same as animals. This stands in stark contrast to orthodox doctrine, such as that in the Belgic Confession's Article 12, which sees a layered and differentiated creation in service to man and to its Creator: "We believe that the Father, by the Word, that is, by his Son, hath created of nothing, the heaven, the earth, and all creatures, as it seemed good unto him, giving unto every creature its being, shape, form, and several offices to serve its Creator. That he doth also still uphold and govern them by his eternal providence, and infinite power, for the service of mankind, to the end that man may serve his God."

This statement posits that humanity is special in its relationship to both God and creation: yes, God created everything, but only man is made in His image, and that although creation is sustained by God, *it is done so to serve man so that man may in turn serve God*. There, in a single statement, is a doctrinal distinction that offends animal rights theologians: there *is* a hierarchy in creation, man *is* special, and creation *does* serve man. Furthermore, rather than having responsibility *to our fellow creatures*, we alone have *responsibility to a holy God from whom we draw life and to whom we owe worship*.

The Nature of the Beast: How Animal Rights Theology Makes Its Case

Importantly Vantassel and Kloosterman have shown how animal rights theology uses familiar Christian language, replacing its original meaning with an entirely different meaning. In their article "Compassionate Eating as Distortion of Scripture," Vantassel and Kloosterman critique Halteman's position. The authors show how Halteman misappropriates Scripture, proof-texting and quoting passages without context. The subtext of their critique mimics the adage "a text without a context is a pretext," as they conclude that Halteman seems to be selectively quoting Scripture to forward the cause of animal rights more than the cause of Christ. Similarly, Vantassel and Kloosterman note that Halteman arbitrarily uses Scripture to make his case. Nowhere does Halteman mention where God causes death or commands it as in the Garden to cover Adam and Eve, or the Temple sacrifice (Gen. 3:21; Mark 5:13; Luke 5:6), or where Jesus Himself causes the death of pigs or cooks fish for the disciples.

Finally they illuminate Halteman's faulty logic and abuse of secondary sources. Halteman specifically targets industrial agriculture as the culprit of abuse, and yet if confinement or abuse is the issue, then eating animals from compassionate farms would be acceptable. But Halteman, in a fatal lapse of rhetoric, shows his hand in that death itself is the offense. In his worldview, Christians are to remove personal culpability for causing the death of animals from their lives.

Likewise when Halteman quotes St. Basil because he purportedly venerated creation and animals, the quote comes from a source that does not exist. Vantassel and Kloosterman dryly note, "The problem, however, is that this prayer cannot be found anywhere in the writings of St. Basil of Caesarea, although several have mistakenly ascribed it to the Liturgy of St. Basil. This appeal to St. Basil attempts to place historic Christianity in service to the new food morality, but is little more than a vegetarian legend. It has no basis in historical fact, and yet has migrated even into The Encyclopedia of Applied Animal Behaviour and Welfare, based solely on a secondary source."[10]

Their critique also provides a valuable template in understanding animal rights theology: the animal rights pragmatists misappropriate Scripture in service to their agenda, misquoting verses or taking them out of context; they arbitrarily proof-text Scripture, making selective use of the Word while overlooking the clear teachings that man may joyfully use and eat animals; and they use faulty logic and abuse secondary sources. Indeed, in reading Vantassel and Kloosterman, one is left with the impression that the savage wolves have entered the fold, using whatever arguments necessary to persuade posttheological believers that their inherited preconceptions about animals are morally wrong.

MEETING BIBLICAL DOMINION AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME

In the face of such sophisticated arguments, well-intended Christians may well ask, "What is the correct view of animals, and how should I act toward them?" First, man is unique in that only he is created in the image of God. This is the nonnegotiable continental divide in the animal rights debate. As Brown noted all those years ago,

animal rights at its core is a rejection of human exceptionalism. The *Imago Dei* starkly declares the special nature of man and his special relationship to God.

Second, although all creation was good, man was given a special place and power within creation in relationship to God. As the Belgic Confession so beautifully reminds, all of creation is intended to serve man, so that man may in turn serve God. In the wisdom of God, His creation, although stratified and hierarchical, is focused on Him and His glory. The animals serve man, enabling man to serve and worship God. This truth is independent of the effects of sin. Put another way, just because sinful men abuse animals *doesn't mean* that the theology of hierarchy is askew or that men should not use them. In their zeal to protect the creation, animal rights activists have thrown out the theological baby with the fallen bath water.

Similarly believers are reminded that since the fall, something must die for them to live. Indeed the Bible notes that since the fall, all of creation is marked by death (Rom. 8: 20–22). The Bible is filled with descriptions of the necessity of death, from the killing of animals for food and as a blood sacrifice, to the commands to eat given to New Testament apostles and disciples (Acts 10:12–25), to the example of Christ both killing animals and giving them to others to eat (Matt. 8:30–32; John 21:1–12). And more importantly, believers are given warnings about being watchful about ascetics and false teachers who place them under dietary restrictions: "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:1–5 ESV).

The Believers' Responsibility to Stem Suffering

When all is said and done, believers are responsible to God for how they worship Him. All of creation is given to man to use, but not for his own purposes. All man is, has, and does is provided by God so that the believer can in turn bring glory to Him. That includes sustenance from creation, and that sustenance includes animals. Many animal rights activists are rightly appalled by the effects of sin upon the world and the very real suffering that the fall has wrought on the created order. But they lack any biblically based doctrinal understanding: they deny the theology of the created order and the consequences of the fall, thus denigrating Christian freedom and Christ's redemptive power.

Any secular movement such as animal rights that confronts sin and its consequences faces an ontological crisis: how to explain and end animal suffering. If Proudhon is correct that all politics is ultimately religious, coupled to Singer's claim that Christianity is the barrier holding back movement success, then the movement's pragmatism can be seen clearly as an attempt to usurp Christian doctrine in service to its cause. The pragmatists' hopes of redefining traditional Christian doctrines in order to further the cause of animal rights is misplaced, inaccurate, and damaging to

Christians who have freedom to express their love of their Creator by the prudent and worshipful use of His creation, including animals. Any teaching to the contrary should be resisted.

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NOTES

1 James M. Jasper and Dorothy Nelkin, *The Animal Rights Crusade: The Growth of a Moral Protest* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

2 Gary L. Francione, *Rain without Thunder: The Ideology of the Animal Rights Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

3 Alex Prichard, *Justice, Order and Anarchy: The International Political Theory of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

4 David Stonehouse, "'Godfather' of Animal Rights Out to Counter Christianity: Belief That Humans Are Superior to All Other Beings Is Promoted through Bible Teachings, Ethicist Argues," *The Ottawa Citizen*, July 5, 2002, A1.

5 By gregariousness, Christian theologians mean more than merely seeking out the company of members of similar species; they mean the drive toward meaningful relationship.

6 Stephen M. Vantassel and Nelson D. Kloosterman, "Compassionate Eating as Distortion of Scripture: Using Religion to Serve Food Morality," *Evangelical Review of Society and Politics* 5, 1 (2012): 33–48.

7 Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002).

8 http://www.humanesociety.org/about/departments/faith/, September 18, 2011.

9 Matthew Scully, "A Religious Case for Compassion for Animals," *The American Conservative*, May 23, 2005, 1–20.

10 Ibid.