

# Animals in Christianity

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**Laura Hobgood-Oster, *Holy Dogs and Asses: Animals in the Christian Tradition*, University of Illinois Press, 2008.**

A new field is growing in breadth and stature within the academic discipline of religious studies: animals in religion. One ground-breaking contribution to this emerging sub-discipline is Laura Hobgood-Oster's book *Holy Dogs and Asses: Animals in the Christian Tradition*.

Like its slightly older companion field, religion and ecology, the animals-in-religion sub-discipline pioneers a new approach for religious studies. In this new paradigm, scholars combine dedication to careful research with a passionate commitment to use that research in promoting environmental responsibility and respect for nonhuman creatures. Both areas of study rightly critique religious traditions for devaluing the other-than-human natural world *and also* mine the traditions for proof that nature and nonhuman creatures do have moral value.

Thus these new sub-disciplines should engage the interest of religionists and secularists alike. For good or ill, religious commitment motivates the behavior of billions of people around the world; and evidence of religions' exhortations to "tread more lightly on the earth" can be a powerful incentive to people of faith to behave more respectfully.

*Holy Dogs and Asses* is a stunningly effective example of this engaged scholar/activism. Anyone—religious or non-religious—who cares about the future of the nonhuman inhabitants of our planet can only be grateful for work such as this that provide incentives for people from various faiths to treat the earth and its creatures more gently.

The book is a gem for many other reasons as well. First, Hobgood-Oster tells riveting stories about the place of animals throughout the history of Christian faith and practice. She recounts extra-canonical narratives such as that of Jesus as a little boy shaping and then giving life to sparrows. She looks at traditions of animals as saints and martyrs, such as the lion who lived with St. Jerome, and at paintings such as Lorenzetti's *Last Supper*, where a cat and a dog are shown alongside the disciples at that pivotal meal.

Second, *Holy Dogs and Asses* offers insight into the present status of animals in Christianity. Hobgood-Oster presents vivid descriptions of contemporary blessings-of-animals rituals in small churches and imposing cathedrals. She also evaluates current theologians—Stephen Webb, Matthew Scully, Andrew Linzey, Jay McDaniel, and Sallie McFague—who have broadened Christian ethics to not only apply to the treatment of nonhuman animals but also expanded the Christian notion of salvation to include them.

Third, Hobgood-Oster displays a sophisticated feminist methodology. She argues that just as the Christian faith throughout its history has suffered from male-centered texts, theologies, and practices, it has also been overwhelmingly anthropocentric. In the same way that feminist scholars have uncovered numerous accounts of women central to the Christian story, Hobgood-Oster succeeds in finding the unexpected: evidence of humans valuing animals in Christian history. She demonstrates that male-centered Christian theologians have used not only women as symbols and objects of projection, but animals also. But she manages to go behind the symbolism to ask questions about the real lived experience of the animals.

Another related reason to celebrate Hobgood-Oster's book is the insights about *humans* she has uncovered through studying Christian treatments of nonhuman animals. As intimate connections with animals—reflected in the art and legends of early and medieval Christian history—gave way to more distant and dominating relationships after the Enlightenment, Christians also found themselves increasingly alienated from their own bodies and men became more dominant over women. The Enlightenment's glorification of rationality/spirit and devaluation of emotions/bodies led to dualisms that simultaneously subjugated women and degraded animals and nature.

One criticism is that Hobgood-Oster's project is too ambitious for one book. The newness of this field of scholarship compels her to include as much material as possible in order to fill the many gaps in both popular and scholarly understanding of Christian history. Yet each facet of the subject deserves the depth of attention devoted to dogs in the chapter focused on that species. I hope Hobgood-Oster will continue to contribute to the religion-and-animals literature with many more volumes of this quality.

I would also encourage Hobgood-Oster to raise a stronger critique of the annual blessing of the animals at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. She vividly describes the scene: Human choirs are accompanied by recordings of humpback whales and timber wolves. Elephants and other residents of the Bronx Zoo, along with thousands of dogs and other companion animals, walk down the sanctuary's central aisle after entering through the great bronze doors of the church—doors which are only opened on the "High Holy Days" of Christmas, Easter, and this blessing of the animals ceremony. Then she perceptively notes that the important symbolism of "bringing animals into the sanctuary" serves to subvert and overthrow the overwhelming dominance of humans in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christian religious practice. She also recognizes that this symbolic blessing of animals leaves un-addressed the brutal realities of factory farming. But she only wonders briefly what the experience is like for the animals themselves, and brushes even that question aside by remarking, "How would a human being ever really make that determination?" Surely an empathetic attempt to enter into the experience of, say, an elephant—forced to travel by truck to a huge cathedral, being unloaded and then goaded down the aisle—would reveal the stresses and distresses that must be present for the elephant. Further, the use of zoo animals in such blessings serves to condone the morally dubious practice of incarcerating animals for the sake of human education. It would have strengthened her book if Hobgood-Oster had questioned the ethics both of the blessing ceremony and of zoos more strongly.

But these criticisms are few when compared to the impressive contribution *Holy Dogs and Asses* makes to scholarship in the humanities. Hobgood-Oster's sensitivity and breadth of knowledge make this book a must-read for anyone interested in animals, religious studies, feminism, or environmental responsibility.