
Book Review

Trevor Bechtel, Matthew Eaton, and Timothy Harvie (eds.), *Encountering Earth: Thinking Theologically with a More-Than-Human World* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), xxii + 254 pp., \$33 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-49829784-4.

In and between the lines, this is a strong edited collection in multiple ways. The impressive, diverse contributors provide extraordinary range and depth, from the inviting connections made by Chris Carter's preface that moves deftly between the personal and the conceptual, to Heather Eaton's closing 'The Human Quest to Live in a Cosmos' that illuminates how ecological and global issues play out in our personal lives and local places. One essay after another in this moving collection reveals how the title's reference to 'theological' is not in any way narrow or constrictive, but instead altogether enabling as the volume beckons forms of theological discourse and reflection that openly embrace the best of our human abilities to care about a wide range of 'others'. The authors provide inviting, and at times encompassing, overtones that open doors to a broad understanding of religion and both theistic and nontheistic forms of awareness and connection that others have for millennia been naming spiritual, mystical, meditative, contemplative, and, in the last centuries, ecological, environmental, and moral.

The diversity of subject matter also fosters humility in a key sense, for it brings across the salient fact that other-than-human lives in the Earth community are so varied that no collection, even if it extends to the length of several multi-volume encyclopedias, can hope to exhaust our own species' long and rich history of interactions and, sadly, deep harms to the more-than-human world. This volume addresses that challenge in two ways. First, it offers diverse voices who speak to humans' connections to many different kinds of animals. Second, it is divided into four sections that together reveal the breadth of the topic called out by the encompassing 'encountering earth' theme.

'Family and Home' features five pieces, four of which begin with an affirmation of the author's personal connection to a particular nonhuman who had become an integral member of the author's family. The other essay in this collection explores general dimensions well described by its title 'Animals as Eschatology: Struggle, Communion, and the Relational Task of Theology'. 'Farm and Lab' includes three helpful, introductory perspectives on the long-standing human traditions of (i) working closely with horses, (ii) using tens of millions of nonhumans annually as experimental subjects that are intentionally harmed in order to develop benefits for humans, and tens of billions of nonhumans raised in unnaturally confined circumstances for our use as food or material gain, and (iii) farming ways of life as imagined by two of the twentieth century's most impressive theologians, Thomas Berry and Edward Schillebeeckx.

'Wilderness and Wild' opens doors for the reader through four imaginative essays, the first of which touches upon the ancient but presently marginalized topic of snakes. The second essay offers the gift insight that 'the water supporting life is *itself alive*' (p. 151). The third essay raises the complex issue of hunting and how to notice and take seriously the many dimensions evident in this ancient and still contemporary tradition. Fittingly, the fourth essay in this group offers the healing theme 'Ecological Transformation through Attentiveness and Intimacy'. 'Cosmos and Earth' ends the volume fittingly with three essays by which each author returns the reader to themes that integrate concern for and awareness of the more-than-human world back into inclusive theological framings that touch upon the values-intensive orientation so characteristic of human animals.

Because a wide range of nonhuman individuals and communities are mentioned in these essays, the collection as a whole is wonderfully invitational, returning again and again to the foundational issue of how each of us acts in our daily life, for as Gandhi observed, 'the act speaks unerringly'. At the same time, this collection makes it clear how rich our species has become by virtue of such open-minded and open-hearted thinking done in truly diverse theoretical and theological discourse. It does this because these essays draw upon a corpus of, literally, scores and scores of book-length projects that have returned both the scholarly world and other-than-scholarly worlds to an awareness of how diversely humans on-the-ground, as it were, have long been noticing and taking seriously the other-than-human animals with whom we share so much biologically, ecologically, and, often, cognitively.

The result is a collection that continues to open up the study of theology, animals and religion, animal studies, and comparative religion, for these essays will undoubtedly foster yet more contributions about this rich panoply of topics. As a group, then, these essays reveal how fully alive the macro topic 'animals and religion' has become and will remain. They move the field into the forefront of scholarly discussion about how and why humans can *and need* to relate to the more-than-human neighbors in each person's local world. The journey to such awareness is often, of course, personal and local, but these essays reveal rich insights about the importance of personal journeys to these foundational realities. The book as a whole, then, underscores the importance of theological discourse remaining close to and entwined with non-theological discourse, theory, ethics, comparative and interdisciplinary thinking, as well as plain human decency, as we return to the obvious fact that each one of us lives inevitably in a world that is *far more than human*. Thereby the editors and contributors give one hope that our species has rich prospects of 'encountering Earth' in ways that help us develop more adequate forms of education about the larger Earth community and, more locally, humans in relation to the other-than-human lives of their local place and beyond.

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