

Laura Hobgood-Oster, *Holy Dogs & Asses: Animals in the Christian Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 192 pp., \$35.00, ISBN: 978-0252032134. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v2i4.532.

Laura Hobgood-Oster's *Holy Dogs & Asses: Animals in the Christian Tradition* is intended not as a neutral historic overview of Christian relationship to animals but as an ecofeminist critique of Christianity's teachings on animals. Her study, rather than using a consistent historic or topical approach, is based in a series of essays viewing the issue from different perspectives. Chapter 3 reviews the role of animals in canonical and apocryphal Christian texts, while Chapter 4 investigates the spiritual meaning of animals in late ancient and medieval hagiographies (biographies of saints). Chapter 5 explicates the role of dogs in Christian art, particularly in depictions of the life of Jesus and the last supper. Chapter 6 addresses the increased popularity of the blessing of the animals in a variety of denominations, and Chapter 7 summarizes the positions of influential theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. The book thus presents examples of animals in foundational sacred texts, theological and philosophical treatises, the visual arts, liturgy and ritual, and in Christian practice and leadership. In the process, Hobgood-Oster asks a number of fascinating questions, such as: Are dogs portrayed as valued companions or as less worthy than humans in Christian literature and art? Why has the blessing of animals spread so widely in recent years, and is the blessing really about animals or is it about human needs? Was Protestant acceptance of Enlightenment values a turning point in Christian exclusion of animals from serious theological consideration? Is current Christian ethical theology properly addressing animals?

Hobgood-Oster proves that the tendency of academic theology to ignore animals is not based in historic Christian inattention to the great profusion of life on earth. As she concludes, when one looks through 'the hidden stacks for other histories of Christianity' for animals, just as feminists have done for women, the animals 'appear in droves (or herds, or flocks, or packs)' (p. 145). Her synthesis finds that Christian representation or treatment of animals is often equivocal. Dogs may be martyrs, saints, preachers, true friends, and beloved companions. Dogs may also appear as demons, heretics, and as examples of unworthy forms of life. The greatest demise of animals in Christian tradition, however, is rooted in the infusion of the philosophy of Descartes, and his enlightened contemporaries, into Protestantism. Protestants deleted animals as saints, and thereby as models of virtue, and whitewashed the animal iconography once common in the sanctuary (p. 131). Hobgood-Oster argues this dismissive treatment can be countered by understanding that: 'Animals live at the center of the incarnation of God and indeed, are part of the body of God, as fully as are human beings' (p. 146).

Although Christians interested in animal rights and ethics will find some of the material on hagiographies and recent theological approaches familiar, such as the work of Jay McDaniel and Andrew Lindzey, Hobgood-Oster offers extensive new material on topics such as dogs and art. Her contemplation of the motives for the blessing of the animals presents a thoughtful challenge to current Christian incorporation of animals in ritual, while her discussion of animals in the apocrypha is relevant to the greater Christian discussion about the authority (and adequacy) of sacred texts in guiding the formation of environmental and animal ethics. Scholars of world religions interested in comparative approaches will find the book complements

similar studies of other traditions, such as the role of animals in Islamic and Doaist art.

Since the book assumes the reader has a basic knowledge of European history and Christian theology, it is probably written at too high a level for introductory courses in animal or environmental ethics. However, the range of cultural coverage—from text, to visual arts, to liturgy—recommends *Holy Dogs & Asses* as a potential reading for upper-division seminar courses. In addition, Hobgood-Oster is asking clear and valid questions which can stimulate class discussion and response. The photographs scattered through the volume help the reader to visualize animal participation in Christianity and can become a basis for critical thinking exercises for students. The concise, information-rich writing style and the clear identification of the major theological figures and saints within the text are also student friendly.

Holy Dogs & Asses is evidence that the critique and development of Christian animal theology is entering a new phase, where careful reflection on history and traditions, rather than mere recovery of materials, is becoming more central. Hobgood-Oster achieves her goal of ‘opening our eyes to see [animals] in rituals and theologies, as well as in everyday ethical concerns’ (p. 146) and takes a major step toward filling one of Christianity’s many ethical ‘holes’ in its approach to nature.

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