

INTEREST GROUPS

GOD, ANIMALS & HUMANKIND

- Topic: School of Compassion: A Roman Catholic Theology of Animals
Convener: Elizabeth Farians, Xavier University, Cincinnati
Moderator: Jane Smiley, Regis College, University of Toronto
Presenter: Deborah Jones, Editor, *The Arc*, Journal of Catholic Concern for Animals
Respondent: Elizabeth Groppe, Xavier University, Cincinnati

The session had two main parts: first, a review of Dr. Jones new book: *The School of Compassion: A Roman Catholic Theology of Animals* and secondly, a discussion of the future of the group, now in its third year. The members of the group are convinced that animal theology should have permanent status because it is not peripheral but is fundamental to theology and even to our relationship to God. Suggestions were to try to get permanent status, to apply again for the next year as an interest group, to present papers to other groups and to arrange an informal meeting next year.

Dr. Deborah Jones' paper, "How Could the Catholic Catechism Reflect Theology's Prophetic Commitment to the Animals," analyzed the Catholic Catechism. Her book is a first on Catholic thought on animals and it serves as an encyclopedic reference. According to her, the Catechism gives a mixed message about animals from total anthropocentric instrumentalism to religious concern and the humane attitude of the saints. What is needed is a more developed theocentric perspective, in which commitment to all of God's creation is a human obligation. Deborah M. Jones argues in her book *The School of Compassion: a Roman Catholic Theology of Animals* (Gracewing, 2009) for a reappraisal of those elements in theology which have hitherto justified the exploitative treatment of animals, and a reaffirmation of the more animal-sensitive elements in the tradition. She offered a brief critique of a few sentences in the Catechism, suggested an alternative reading which is consistent with Catholic teaching, and outlined an approach which honors the Christian's priestly and prophetic role towards animals.

Dr. Elizabeth Groppe expressed appreciation for Dr. Jones' articulation of a theology that broadens the Catholic vision of a culture of life to include all sentient beings, while making careful ethical distinctions between humans and animals that can help guide our lives in this postlapsarian world. She noted that the ethical principle that we should kill animals for food only when absolutely

necessary for human survival would not only relieve the tremendous suffering of animals in industrialized “factory farms” but would also relieve human suffering. A U.N. report released June 2, 2010 stated that as global population surges toward the 9 billion projected by 2050, a global shift to a vegan diet will be necessary to limit human hunger and the impacts of climate change. At the same time, Elizabeth Gropp noted the challenge to Deborah Jones’ ethic posed by authors Michael Pollan and Lierre Keith who argue that a sustainable, post-fossil fuel agriculture system must include animals. Finally, she noted that Jones’ theology of compassion for animals could be strengthened by Oliver Davies metaphysics of compassion. She concluded with St. Isaac the Syrian’s response to the question “What is a compassionate heart?”:

It is a heart burning with love for the whole creation, for humans, for the birds, for the beasts . . . for all creatures. He who has such a heart cannot see or call to mind a creature without his eyes being filled with tears by reason of the immense compassion which seizes his heart; a heart which is softened and can no longer bear to see or learn from others of any suffering, even the smallest pain being inflicted upon a creature. That is why such a person never ceases to pray also for the animals, for the enemies of truth and for those who do him evil, that they may be preserved and purified. He will pray even for the reptiles, moved by the infinite pity which reigns in the hearts of those who are becoming united with God.

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