

INTEREST GROUPS

GOD, ANIMALS & HUMANKIND

- Topic: Exploring the Theological Interdependence of Animals and Humankind
Convener: Elizabeth Farians, Xavier University
Moderator: William French, Loyola University
Presenters: Alice Laffey, Holy Cross College
Elizabeth Adams-Eilers, Temple University
Respondent: Elizabeth Farians, Xavier University

For the first time the terrible plight of the animals was the main topic of discussion in a CTSA convention session. This is a welcome breakthrough for animals, for people and even for theology itself. We are giving birth to a new field of Catholic theology which promises to be rich in content and spiritual depth. It will emphasize a God-centered approach to religion rather than a human-centered approach. It will show that animals have intrinsic rights, i.e., rights inherent in them as individual sentient, intelligent beings, given to them by the Creator to be respected. It will reject the notion that animals only have instrumental rights as a species to be used by humans.

Viewing *Meet Your Meat*, a PETA video, opened the session. Two excellent presentations followed. Several theologians expressed interest in the topic. Dr. William French and Dr. Elizabeth Adams-Eilers agreed to help convene our group. "Focus on the Animals" and "God, Animals and Humankind as an Interest Group" by Dr. Elizabeth Farians are available literature. We rented a table to pass out materials. We are grateful to local animal rights groups that helped with staffing. We are hopeful for the same in the future.

The major concern for the group is how to perpetuate itself until the CTSA understands that animal theology is of central concern to theology. Despite the good beginning, the task is not easy. Everyone is asked to study the topic and to seek out interconnections with other groups in the CTSA by preparing papers as well as developing the topic in their own teaching.

Professor Alice Laffey's presentation, in six parts, led to her strong conclusion that theology has very much to do with how we treat other life forms and that now, more than ever we are called to practices that sustain our environment. Dr. Laffey began with a consideration of the First World today, reading from recent *New York Times* articles which captured what she spoke of as our indifference to and "domination" of animals. Then, she briefly summarized the 1993 Pontifical Biblical Society's "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," emphasizing

the document's affirmation of historical criticism and its emphasis on the applicability of the biblical text to the present. Part III reminded the audience that animal sacrifice in the Ancient Near East spoke of the value that humans beings placed on animals. Next, a litany of texts were considered: Genesis 1; Genesis 6-9; Numbers 22-24; 2, Samuel 12; Genesis 3, Jonah, Hosea 2 and some psalms (e.g. Pss 65, 104) which show how animals are favorably treated in the Old Testament. In Hosea 2 the covenant is made by God with Israel, and also with the animals. Very important! Part V continued with some theological implications of the treatment of all of creation: sin as ecological imbalance (the "plagues" in Exodus), redemption as the restoration of right relationships and responsibility toward the animals, and toward all the vulnerable, (especially the world's poor and future generations). The domination of animals is inextricably linked to ecological imbalance and degradation which, in turn, has disastrous consequences that affect the poor and will have unimaginable negative consequences for future generations. The final section concentrated on balance, harmony and sustainability, especially in Romans 8:19-22 and John 1:29. Dr. Laffey concluded that a theological space for animals is desperately needed.

Elizabeth J. Adams-Eilers' paper addresses the urgent need to study the plight of animals theologically. It turns to a theology of the Incarnation to see how Catholic traditions of prayer establish connections among our relationships with ourselves, with other human beings, with other animals, and with God. Finally, after examining Lonergan's important distinctions of the different kinds of conversions, the paper argues for a change of heart as we consider human cruelty and the destruction of animal (and thus our own) habitats. One theology of the Incarnation that considers God's initiative in sending Jesus to take on matter is worded thus: "God became one of us so that we may become like God." Perhaps, the human animal is not the only enfleshed being indicated here? Who is the "us"? Respect, kindnesses, and love for other human beings should extend to other animals which also enjoy "the sweetness of life" as "meat-on-bones" creatures. Liturgical and mystical prayer traditions, including an anaphora attributed to Basil of Caesarea and works concerning the soul's union with God in the writings of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, inspire us to think deeply about generations of human cruelty toward animals and other ways we fail to consider their well being as species and as individuals. Bernard Lonergan's theological method, which describes affective, moral, imaginative, religious, and intellectual conversion, prompts us to re-examine our consciences. As companions and protectors of monarch butterflies and other animals and insects, we could very well find ourselves experiencing yet one more important conversion on our journey to God.

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