
Laura Hobgood-Oster’s recent book *Holy Dogs and Asses: Animals in the Christian Tradition* is a fruit of the new interest in the theme of animals and religion. Several books on such topics have been published during the last few years, ranging from theology to history of religions; some of them have an explicit animalistic and/or theological agenda, while others are more neutral; some present broad outlines, others go into detail on a limited range of sources and topics. *Holy Dogs and Asses* focuses on the broad lines and reflects a theological interest in animal rights and welfare.

Dr. Hobgood-Oster is the Elizabeth Root Paden Professor of Religion at Southwestern University. With Paul Waldau she shared the Consultation on Animals and Religion in the American Academy of Religion, 2003-2008, which was important for the new interest in animals and religion. The purpose of *Holy Dogs & Asses* is to “examine a variety of representations of animals in the stories of Christianity” (p. 8). The book includes a preface, an acknowledgement, seven chapters and an epilogue plus notes, bibliography and an index.

In the first chapter, “Weaving and Roaring: Animals and a Religious Studies–Centered Methodological Bricolage,” the author presents her methodology which consists of an assemblage of approaches and strategies. These are mainly taken from the study of popular religion/folk culture, examination of textual traditions, investigations into rituals and performance and feminist analysis. The feminist approach, and especially ecofeminism, is the most prominent utensil in her methodological toolbox. According to Hobgood-Oster, ecofeminism “claims that all dualisms and binary oppositional forms must be dismantled in order for oppressive systems in their entirety to end; otherwise, oppressive systems continue to dominate” (p. 10). The questioning of human superiority and dominance over animals runs like a thread in the volume. Central to the thesis of the book is the need to recognize the reality of animals, not only to read them as—and thus reduce them to—symbols and metaphors.

The second chapter concerns the shifting historical settings for the discourse on animals in Christianity. The chapter reaches back to the ancient worlds of Egypt and Mesopotamia and forward to the twenty-first century and the cultures of Europe and the USA.

The theme of the third chapter is animals in the Christian canon, early Christian theology, apocryphal traditions and “Gnosticism.” Hobgood-Oster investigates the canonical scriptures and muses over the fact that “one is left uncertain about the status of animals.” When she confronts the canonical stories with non-canonical ones, she finds that the non-canonical stories sometimes include more positive
histories of animals. In the conclusion to the chapter she raises the question whether animals were deliberately omitted from canonical texts (pp. 61–62).

The fourth chapter is about animals in medieval hagiography. It includes a typology of animals in relation to saints. The author sees animals as examples of piety, sources of revelation, martyrs and servants and as “primary others” in relationships. Finally she presents the use of animals in bestiaries.

The theme of the fifth chapter is dogs in Christian story and art. Similar to the procedure of the first chapter, Hobgood-Oster reaches back to the pre-Christian Mediterranean world and to Mesopotamia before turning to medieval saints and Christian imagery. She discusses the themes of dogs in relation to saints and in relation to demons and heretics, and makes the comment that “when dogs are included in the human story, they might provide the ultimate example of the excluded other who is and always has been present” (p. 84).

In her penultimate chapter, Hobgood-Oster discusses blessings of animals in contemporary American culture based on her own surveys, while in the seventh and last chapter she takes up a theme associated with the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and discusses “how animals are good to think with” among contemporary animal theorists.

Laura Hobgood-Oster covers much ground in this book. She shows the reader that the religious construction of animals is well worth studying and that texts, images, and rituals where animals appear exist in abundance. The methodological pluralism and the feminist perspective sometimes work well, though I would have wished for a more explicit theory of symbols and metaphors. The relationship between metaphors and reality is important for Hobgood-Oster, but is generally difficult to grasp, and not least in the case of animals. There are also technological and economical dimensions to the use of animals that very much contribute to contextualizing them in different cultures and periods. These dimensions could have received more attention, especially since one aim of the book is to complement metaphorical animals with real ones.

The author frequently uses a bird’s-eye view, surveying at least three thousand years as well as several cultures and regions. In chapter two where pre-Christian Mediterranean cultures are treated, complex cultural and historical processes are summarized in a too superficial way to be really convincing and connections are made too hastily and without sufficient empirical grounding. Similarly in chapter five the survey of dogs in pre-Christian religions is very sketchy. Examples of superficial comparisons and rather unconvincing attempts at making connections include references to the Egyptian influence on Christianity, putative connections between sacred bulls that challenged Israelite monotheism and the Egyptian Apis bull, “lion cults” and Aslan in C.S. Lewis’s The Chronicles of Narnia.

When Hobgood-Oster compares canonical and non-canonical texts and the roles animals play in them her observations and questionings are interesting, but