Review Section

Christian Ethics and Contemporary Treatment of Nonhuman Animals

Anniaka Spalde & Pelle Strindlund

*Every Creature a Word of God: Compassion for Animals as Christian Spirituality.*


*Every Creature a Word of God: Compassion for Animals as Christian Spirituality* combines the authors’ personal reflection with words and thoughts from a plethora of philosophers, accomplished writers, Biblical scholars, religious adepts, and theologians in order to ponder Christian ethics concerning our contemporary treatment of nonhuman animals. Interweaving the work and words of powerful thinkers and writers across time and place, Spalde and Strindlund offer concise, pithy chapters that explore key topics, including those that are seldom included in books on Christian animal ethics. They examine the meaning of “neighbor,” God within creation, service and power, saints and saintliness, diet, slavery, caretaking, animals as spiritual guides, death and the resurrection, and the Eucharist. Critical to each of these subjects, the authors also explore biblical translation, selection, and interpretation.

On each subject, the authors offer personal points of view alongside insights and quotes from such diverse figures as American Quaker John Woolman, American Tibetan Buddhist Norm Phelps, Trappist monk Thomas Merton, Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky, Catholic saint Hildegaard of Bingen, philosopher Peter Singer, poet William Blake, Catholic theologian and saint Augustine of Hippo, and of course the Gospels and the writings of Paul. For example, on the subject of the sacrament, “a specific religious rite that expresses our relationship with God,” Spalde and Strindlund (2008) encourage
Christians to be filled not only with care and compassion, but also with “awe and devotion” toward nonhuman animals because we ought to be open to finding “God's presence in all of creation” (p. 23). They close their work on the sacrament with a quote from a French Catholic and poet from the turn of the 19th century, Francis Jammes, who felt that he could “see a halo around the heads” of the animals he came upon in the city, “a real halo, as large as the universe, placed there by God Himself” (Spalde & Strindlund, p. 24).

Both authors are Swedish, faith-based social justice activists, and their Christian dedication to social justice lends credence to their writing. Spalde, an ordained deacon in the Church of Sweden (Lutheran), participated in the Trident Ploughshares campaign to abolish the British nuclear arsenal. She has organized protests against the Swedish arms industry, served as an Ecumenical Accompanier in Israel/Palestine, worked as an assistant nurse in Paraguay, and lived with the homeless at a Catholic Worker house in Duluth, Minnesota. She is also a founding member of the Swedish Christian Vegetarian Movement.

Strindlund, who holds an MA in Religious Studies, has also traveled to various continents on behalf of social justice—on behalf of his faith. He volunteered as a social worker in Tyler, Texas, lived with threatened indigenous villagers in Guatemala, and accompanied harassed children to and from school in Palestine. He is also a founding member of Räddningstjänsten (The Rescue Service), a Swedish organization using “non-violent civil disobedience for the liberation of all animals” (http://www.raddningstjansten.org/english/).

Strindlund and Spalde continue to work for world peace as nonviolent Christian activists. They have recently been campaigning to end Swedish weapons exports to the U.S. military in Iraq, and have published a Swedish book on Christian nonviolence—both theory and practice. And they continue to engage in direct action on behalf of nonhuman animals. With their actions and their voices, they encourage human beings to “reflect God’s nature in our dealings with others, particularly when we are in a position of power” (Spalde & Strindlund, 2008, p. 5). To support this moral outlook, they recall the Biblical account of creation, where “God asks human beings to relate to animals in the same way that God relates to us: with nurturing and protective care” (Spalde & Strindlund, 2008, p. 5). They also point to common origins:

We have a common origin and share a common home. We have the same creator, we were created on the same day from the same material (“the dust of the ground”), we received the same blessing and we rested on the same Sabbath. We were given the same plants to eat. Our destinies are intertwined; we were saved in the same ark and participate in the same