Disturbing Animals in a Christian Perspective: Re/Considering Sacrifice, Incarnation and Divine Animality

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Abstract: What does Christianity say about other animals? For many people, Jesus-followers and others alike, this is a settled question. The tradition's long and ongoing history of justifying, participating in and even encouraging indiscriminate violence against other animals makes it one of, if not the most, anti-animal religions. But is it the case that Christianity has little to no intrinsic resources to denounce and dismantle systemic and individual cruelty toward other creatures? Is a biblically grounded approach to other animals' self-determination and thriving really a lost cause? This essay argues from an Anabaptist/Mennonite theological orientation influenced by various anti-oppression politics that there are resources within the tradition to disturb prevailing ways of conceiving and relating to other animals. It begins with a brief personal reflection about the author's journey into this perspective and continues with a re/examination of sacrifice, incarnation and the animal nature of God that places other animals at the forefront.

Keywords: Christianity, animals, Bible, biblical studies, theology

> For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth? (*New Revised Standard Version*, Eccles. 3:19–21)

> In a time when other-than-human animals live under threat from so many directions … it is incumbent upon humans to rethink theological positions and religious convictions that put other animals at even more risk. Christianity … has the resources at hand to become a religion that is compassionate to other animals as well. (Hobgood 119)

What does Christianity say about other animals? For many people, Jesus-followers and others alike, this is a settled question. The tradition's long and ongoing history of justifying and enacting indiscriminate violence against other animals makes it one of, if not, the most anti-animal religions. Christianity appears to be so irretrievable on this issue that animal liberation scholars Kim Socha and Rowan Taylor suggest, 'It is far better to bypass the theology altogether' and, instead, emphasize the need to end other animals' suffering based on non-religious compassionate grounds. But is it the case that Christianity has little to no intrinsic resources to confront systemic and individual cruelty toward other creatures? Is a biblically grounded approach to seeking wellbeing and self-determination for other animals really a lost cause?

In addressing these questions, it is first important to remember that Christianity is comprised of an array of doctrines, histories, practices, confessions and institutions that have led to marked differences across denominations, congregations and adherents around the globe. Moreover, while the tradition is best known for anthropocentric narratives that bless the subjugation of other animals, Ken Stone, author of *Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies,* has shown that: 'There is … no single zoological gaze… Diverse texts represent animals from multiple points of view' (121). One way to assess these varied, conflicting perspectives is to examine them in light of the biblical trajectory toward *shalom,* understood most basically as reconciliation, restoration, and right relationships among all members of creation and between

all creation and God. To that end, my interpretive approach overlaps with that of fellow Anabaptist theologian Malinda E. Berry, who builds her 'hermeneutical framework around this basic belief: from the birth of creation to the end of time, God desires that all of creation be at peace and unafraid' (25). Since Christians generally understand *shalom* as being fulfilled in and through Jesus Christ, I also look to the testimony of resurrection as a means of evaluating biblical and theological voices on other animals. In the face of torture and crucifixion, amidst violence and apparent hopelessness, God's final word and work in and through Jesus is life. These guides offer two means of interrogating texts about the place of other animals and our responsibilities to them. Does this biblical position lean into or away from the ultimate end of comprehensive wholeness, peace and justice? Does it affirm God's ultimate, cosmic 'Yes!' to life?

While the ideas presented here have implications for the Christian tradition as a whole, I come to them from an Anabaptist/Mennonite orientation.[1] Among other traits, these theologies center Jesus as the clearest expression of God's desire for the world; affirm that Jesus's teaching and examples are not spiritual metaphors, but instead constitute a way of life that believers can individually and collectively follow by the power of God's Spirit; and trust that God is passionately concerned with the restoration of all things such that the earth is not a disposable stage but is itself a site that God redeems and transforms. The Mennonite stream of Anabaptism also has a long history of pacifism, nonresistance, nonviolence and active peacemaking as a witness to salvation and new life in Christ. Consequently, my goal here is not to rebut prevailing arguments about dominion, the image of God or other well-tread biblical constructs that have been devastating for other animals and for all our ecological and social relationships. This task has already been skillfully handled by scholars like Wilma Bailey[2], Phyllis Tribble[3] and Ellen Davis among others.[4] Instead, my aim is to highlight alternative and lesser known biblical and theological starting points for ethics toward other animals – starting points influenced by anti-oppression politics and commitments – with hopes that fresh conversations might arise.

To that end, I will briefly narrate how my Anabaptist/Mennonite identity helped shape my decision to become vegan and re-examine Scripture in light of animal suffering, and review biblical concepts of sacrifice, incarnation and the nature of God with other animals. I conclude

with initial reflections on why Christians allow for anthropocentrism and violence in relationship to other animals, despite having biblical and theological resources to disturb that approach.

In the beginning

By the time I was a young adult, I had eliminated the carcasses of land animals from my diet for primarily health reasons. I was also calling myself vegetarian, even as I continued eating fishes, hens' eggs and food comprised of cows' milk. I was ignorant about the reality of animal-based food production and, on the rare occasions I thought about the issue at all, I assumed that animals raised for food had idyllic lives. As someone with an aversion to violence, bullying and a love for charismatic creatures since childhood, I would likely have said animal cruelty is wrong. However, I was also unaware of all the ways I was causing suffering through the clothing I wore, the products I used and what/whom I still ate. Although I was Christian from my earliest years and had been part of four denominations, none of my congregations nor my theologies nor my reading of Scripture had challenged me to think deeply about the process of making other animals edible, much less the appropriateness of using other animals for human ends. Becoming Mennonite in my mid-twenties reshaped my ideas on peace, violence and justice at least as it related to the human impact of social ills like war and poverty. Yet, even with increased attention to creation care and environmental sustainability, animals remained on the periphery.

Ironically, I developed an unconventional Christian view of other animals after relocating from New York City to a hub of animal agriculture in the American Midwest. The change came after attending Wake Up Weekend, a formerly annual gathering at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that raised awareness about factory farming and promoted veganism as a compassionate response. At that event I encountered footage of workers throwing newborn male chicks into grinders, garbage bags and dumpsters; farmers dragging weak dairy cows to slaughter with tractors; hens with open sores crammed into tiny cages; and other chilling images. The most pivotal moment for me came during a documentary in which the animal cries sounded like human screaming, causing a visceral, bodily and emotional response. Coming to terms with how 98% of flesh-foods arrived on U.S. tables and increasingly on tables worldwide

compelled me to transition to a plant-based diet in the months following. When I learned how animals were exploited in other industries and how this was integrally related to gender and racial oppression, I embraced veganism fully and steadily developed an animal liberation perspective.

After Wake Up Weekend, I began re/considering other animals in light of my theology and ethics. There I was, an anti-war activist and advocate for nonviolence and social justice as a matter of faith, studying at a Mennonite seminary, yet somehow this horror had completely escaped my notice. How was this possible? How could I as a pacifist and peacemaker be so oblivious to all this violence? The Christian silence on these issues, including within my historic peace tradition, was also perplexing. I had no recollection at that point of anyone preaching against industrial agriculture or naming cruelty to other animals as a pressing concern. Moreover, when I spoke with other Mennonites about being vegan, I was surprised to run into defensiveness, disinterest and status quo justifications for using other animals; sympathetic responses that did not lead to personal changes; and the overall sense that our best response to other animals was better stewardship. These experiences compelled me to see the limits of the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition on this matter. They also prompted me to ask new theological questions, seek out animal-friendly themes in Scripture, learn from Christian and non-Christian animal ethicists, and pursue constructive work on this topic in conversation with others. This reengagement has led to new ways of understanding topics like sacrifice, salvation, incarnation, the nature of God, and the place of other animals within them.

Re/Considering Scripture

When reading the Bible with animal-centered, liberation- and *shalom*-oriented perspectives, one quickly becomes aware of how many nonhuman creatures there are in the text and how often, in exciting and sometimes obvious ways, they upset dominant Christian views about them. The Bible portrays other animals as moral agents (Jon. 3); as role models (Prov. 6:6–11; 30:24–28); as having independent relationships with God (Ps. 104; Job 38-41); as participants in worship (Ps. 148); and as recipients of God's grace, provision and care (Ps. 104, 147; Job 38; Matt.

10:28-31). The concept of dominion, which has plagued Christian relationships to the earth and other earthlings, at the very least, does not include using other animals for food (Gen. 1:28-13) or clothing (Gen. 2:25; 6:6-7). God can and does make covenant with other animals (Hos. 2:18) and they, too, are called to 'be fruitful and multiply' alongside humans (Gen. 1:22, NRSV).

The Hebrew Bible, usually referred to as the Old Testament, also contains laws regulating care for other animals. Stone points to the example of Exodus 23:4-5, which instructs the Israelites to return a stray donkey to its household and to relieve a donkey suffering under a heavy load, even if the creature belongs to an enemy (58). Laws about the observance of Sabbath, the full day of rest from labor on the seventh day of each week and a full year of rest from cultivating the land every seven years, were also meant to benefit all, including the land and other animals. According to Stone, these commands are signs that 'concern for the well-being of others … does not stop at the line between human and animal' (58).

An oft-cited text for animal-friendly Christian scholars, with mentions by David L. Clough (30), Andrew Linzey (85) and Melissa J. Brotton (xix) to name a few, is the unusual story of Balaam's donkey in Numbers 22:21-39. In this narrative, a donkey sees an angel in Balaam's path and avoids contact with the angel in order to spare Balaam's life. The man, who is unable to see the angel, beats the donkey to keep him on the path, and eventually, the donkey confronts Balaam using human speech, saying, 'Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?' (Num. 22:30, *New International Version*). After revealing himself, the angel also chastises Balaam: 'Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it' (Num. 22:32-33, *NIV*). By giving voice to the donkey, the text portrays animal agency and rationality, and suggests that other animals have thoughts about how they are treated. Although the story does not challenge the practice of domesticating or owning other animals, it does support being compassionate and just in cross-creature relationships.

Together, these passages contest Christian worldviews that see other animals as unworthy of moral reflection. Can we say animals are worthless if they are said to worship, repent and sense divine presence? Is it acceptable to destroy their habitats or hunt them into extinction when God intends for them to reproduce and thrive like their human counterparts? How can we insist that other animals' suffering is inconsequential when God institutes laws governing their treatment in the midst of establishing the new Hebrew community? While there is no shortage of scientific and behavioral studies that show other animal species have their own intelligence, languages, cultures, social relationship and complex, appropriate ways of engaging the world, these texts provide distinctly Christian examples that they desire joy, peace and lives free from unnecessary suffering.

The Problem of Sacrifice

Perhaps one of the most prominent human and other animal interactions detailed in Scripture, and especially in the Hebrew Bible, is ritual sacrifice to God. In Genesis 4:5, Abel brings a slaughtered sheep before God and God, without explanation, prefers that offering compared to Cain's 'fruit of the ground' (NRSV). Meanwhile, in 8:20-22, Noah kills and burns the bodies of 'some of all the clean animals and clean birds' on an altar – the same animals he worked hard to save in the ark – and God considers it to be a 'pleasing aroma' (*NIV*). The books of Leviticus and Numbers also have meticulous instructions on what sacrifices are needed for various occasions and, throughout the Hebrew Bible, people make sacrifices to commemorate significant experiences they have with God.

Laura Hobgood notes that, 'After the first Temple was built in Jerusalem, sacrifice of animals became a central aspect of worship and the Temple became the only location where sacrificial rituals could be performed' (112). There were burnt offerings; grain offerings; offerings of well-being; guilt offerings, atonement and multiple sin offerings. There were also regulations about the kinds of animals that could be used with an emphasis on cattle, sheep and goats, as well as allowances for pigeons. Although the law closely governed the mechanics of each ritual, 'only a few texts interpret their meaning with more than a gloss' (Stone 74). Stone

suggests that this oversight was likely due to the widespread and 'familiar' nature of sacrifice, which lessened the need for explanation (74). Hobgood concurs, suggesting that sacrifice was a universal practice that had 'positive connotations associated with offering something pleasing to God' (112). According to Berry, sacrifice likely arose also from an instrumentalist view of other animals (29-30) and may have been God's concession in response to human violence (31-32). The Israelites likely used the practice similarly to other ancient Near East societies, to relate to and establish a boundary with their deity. However, sacrifice in the Bible was also tied to matters of justice such that '"right moral action" must accompany a properly prepared sacrifice; thus God could be sure that the offering was real and sincere' (Berry 34).

Sacrifice in the ancient world was also used to reinforce social identity. Consequently, the practice defined relationships between different members of the Israelites' community, other animals, and all of their relationships to God. Drawing upon Saul M. Olyan's *Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult*, Stone suggests that:

> biblical representation of ritual and cult produce and reproduce a 'hierarchical social order' by making distinctions, often binary in nature (e.g. holy vs. common, clean vs. unclean, Israelite vs. alien, whole vs. blemished, male vs. female, etc.) and then privileging one side of such distinctions over the other. Rather than assuming a single line between all humans and all animals, sacrifice articulates multiple lines of difference on both sides of that traditional divide. (Stone 80)

One result was that, even though men were the ones who served as priests and officiants, men who were disabled, even those in the priestly lineage, could not occupy that position. Similarly, animals who were maimed or blemished could not be used in rituals (Lev. 21:16-23; Deut. 15:21-22).

While animal sacrifice is most associated with the Hebrew Bible, there is also the ultimate sacrifice in the gospels, namely that of Jesus Christ's crucifixion. In the broadest Christian sense, Jesus's death is understood as the result of God sending God's Offspring (Son), who is also God's Self, to rescue humanity from sin and reestablish broken communion with God. However, Hobgood raises intriguing questions about this explanation of God's work in

Jesus, saying: 'what does it mean when a species, homo sapiens, decides that the divine, the one God, determined to offer up itself to itself for our salvation? Might it tell humans that, if even God is willing to sacrifice life for us, should not all beings be on the altar for human salvation?' (113). Although other religions in the ancient Mediterranean worlds practiced ritual slaughter, she wonders if this peculiar belief contributes to an overall Christian tolerance for annihilating other creatures. Yet, an animal-centered view of Jesus's life, death and resurrection can help us understand salvation and sacrifice in more liberating ways.

Revisiting Sacrifice and Salvation

Drawing on the thinking of feminist and womanist Christian theologians, and of biblical scholar Perry Yoder, Berry uses a *shalom* paradigm to put forward a different reading of Jesus's death. In this view, the focus is on resurrection: God's giving of new life and overcoming death in response to the unjust and predatory-like murder of God's Self/God's Offspring on the cross. Jesus interrupts the cycle of bloodshed by forgoing interpersonal, structural and predatory violence when that same violence is exacted against him by empire on behalf of unjust religious authorities. But death and violence do not have the last word because God fully restores him. Although Christians often describe his crucifixion as Jesus 'taking my place' or dying in humanity's stead, Jesus on the cross actually assumed the position of cows, bulls, goats, and other domesticated, sacrificial animals. Berry writes, 'God in human flesh becomes a *nonhuman animal*, metaphorically speaking, so he is a literal human sacrifice and *a figurative nonhuman animal sacrifice*' (36, emphasis added). Jesus on the cross is also simultaneously and entirely 'sacrifice and high priest' (Berry 36), divine and flesh, holy and common, innocent and unclean. The result is that Jesus's sacrifice 'initiates a process of reconciliation between God and the whole of creation' (Berry 36). By inhabiting multiple competing identities, he also upsets the binaries and hierarchies that Stone identifies.

While it might be tempting to see this reading of the crucifixion and resurrection as an innovation, this interpretation is quite biblical. In his brief commentary on seventeen texts related to caring for God's creation, Steve Bouma-Prediger describes the ways Jesus's saving

work involves more than the human community. For example, the vision of 'cosmic reconciliation' (Bouma-Prediger 20) in Colossians 1:15-20 portrays Jesus as: 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation… For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross' (NRSV). Here, 'redemption does not mean the annihilation of creation but its renewal. Salvation is not escape from the earth but its reclamation' (Bouma-Prediger 20). Like Berry, Bouma-Prediger also cites Isaiah 65:17-25, which imagines a future containing a new set of relationships between humans and between animals who are predator and prey. In the prophetic text: 'The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent – its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord' (NRSV). A similar hope is present in Isaiah 11:6-9, which reads:

> The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (NRSV)

Reflecting on Isaiah, Bouma-Pediger concludes: 'We Christians proclaim that in Jesus this good future has broken into the not-so-good present. And we acknowledge that we are called to follow this Jesus – who made this good future real in his life, who brought heaven to earth. This salvation … includes all manner of things earthy and earthly. The redemption of all things broken and bent' (20).

Jesus's ministry before the cross and his resurrection also foreshadow this cosmic, interspecies transformation. Immediately after his baptism in Mark 1:13, Jesus goes to the wilderness and is 'with the wild animals'. Biblical scholar Richard Bauckham carefully studies this short phrase in light of ancient Jewish fears about wild animals and expectations about how the messiah would overcome that threat. The two main possibilities were that the righteous one

would have the same non-predatory relationship with other animals that God originally intended or would bring forth cosmic reconciliation in the vein of Isaiah. However, each of these options involved some form of subjugation. In his translation of Mark 1:13, Bauckham finds something different in Jesus's wilderness encounter. He writes:

> The animals are not said to fear him, submit to him, or serve him. The concept of human dominion over the animals as domination for human benefit is entirely absent. The animals are treated neither as subjects, nor as domestic servants… Jesus does not terrorize or dominate the wild animals, he does not domesticate them, nor does he even make pets of them. He is simply 'with them'. (20)

Even more incredible, Jesus establishes this 'peaceable and friendly companionship' (20) with the wild animals even before he ministers among humans.

The gospel accounts of Jesus cleansing the temple in Jerusalem provides another example of him interacting with other animals, particularly those designated for sacrifice (Matt. 21:12- 17; Mark 11:15- 18; Luke 19:45- 48 and John 2:12- 22). John, who tells the story with the most detail, describes Jesus driving out the sheep and cattle, overturning the tables of the money changers, and telling those selling doves to remove them. In his essay on this act of religious and civil disobedience, Andy Alexis-Baker notes how Christians have anthropocentrically interpreted this culminating moment in Jesus' ministry, in order to claim that Jesus blesses the use of violence and that Jesus was indifferent to other animals. Alexis-Baker challenges that perspective by pointing out that Jesus's anger was directed toward the tables, not people or the animals and that the 'whip' used in the action was like 'a makeshift instrument for moving the animals' made from available materials like reeds and cords, 'more like a broom than a slaughterhouse cattle prod'.

In Alexis-Baker's reading, the temple scene gives an example of Jesus interacting with other animals intentionally and compassionately. He observes that:

> A person who was blind with rage and who did not much care for nonhuman creatures would have knocked the caged birds over like the tables and the money jars… Here

> Jesus takes deliberate care not to overturn the bird cages. He does not put them through further distress but protects them. He pauses in the middle of his nonviolent demonstration to act graciously toward these little creatures.

John Dear also notes that, by sending the land animals out of the temple, Jesus was also 'liberating them from their impending execution' (189) and removing them from a soon-to-be chaotic and frightening scene. If Christians are to apply this action to our current dilemmas, I would offer that the moment is not justification for religious violence, but instead provides a model of nonviolent Christian civil disobedience and targeted destruction of property in service of exploited people, and quite possibly permission for Christian participation in public confrontation that aids other animals.

When examining the temple disturbance, it is also instructive to note that Jesus belonged to a tradition that blessed *and* critiqued sacrifice. Although Christians today often disconnect the relationship between justice and worship, Scripture describes an intimate connection between social ills like economic exploitation, inhospitality, neglect for at-risk communities and idolatry, and the appropriateness of bringing slaughtered animals and plant-based offerings before God. Jesus in the temple disrupts the sacrifices because his 'Father's house' had become a 'marketplace' (John 2:16) and the 'house of prayer' had become a 'den of robbers' (Matt. 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46). In the Hebrew Bible, the prophets also spoke out against sacrifice when there was unjust distribution of power and wealth; mistreatment of widows, orphans and strangers; worship of other gods; rampant violence; and other breaches of God's expectations for religious and social order. In the face of dishonest weights and violence by the wealthy, Micah writes:

> With what shall I come before the Lord
> and bow down before the exalted God?
> Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
> with calves a year old?
>
> Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
> with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?

> Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
> the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
>
> He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
> And what does the Lord require of you?
> To act justly and to love mercy
> and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic. 6:6-8, *NIV*)

In the face of murder and abuses by the priests, Hosea makes a similar declaration, saying: 'For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings' (Hos. 6:6, *NIV*). After his sexual assault of Bathsheba, David admits, 'You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise' (Ps. 51:16-17, *NIV*).[5] These and other passages imply that the purpose of sacrifice was not the bloodshed, and that ritual killing was condemnable when it took place under poor social conditions. At the very least, this insight troubles the argument that animal ethics are a distraction from human problems and prompts us to see animal questions as tied up with our other interests.

Threads of the prophetic critique of sacrifice are also present in the New Testament. In Hebrews 9 and 10, the author questions the efficacy of slaughtering other animals for the remission of sins, especially in the wake of Jesus's once-and-for-all sacrifice. Despite repeating the ritual over time, it was nevertheless 'impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins' (Heb. 10:4, NRSV). The author goes on to say that: 'when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come … he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption' (Heb. 9:12, *NIV*). Quoting Psalm 4, the author writes in the voice of Jesus, saying, 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, "Here I am … I have come to do your will, my God"' (Heb. 10: 5-7). Within the Christian tradition, Anabaptist/Mennonite and otherwise, Jesus is understood to be the end of all sacrifices. This part of the gospel is clearly good news for other animals, too.

Incarnation and the animal nature of God

The incarnation is another important theological concept that relates to sacrifice and salvation, and that can be re-examined in relation to other animals. Currently, most Christians theologies emphasize God's coming among us as a human being. However, some scholars are exploring what it means for Jesus to become flesh more broadly (John 1:14, NRSV). As Joshua Moritz points out the Hebrew Bible describes humans and other animals as 'living souls' or 'living beings' (*nephesh*); as 'flesh' (*basar*; *kol basar*); and as bearing the 'spirit of life' (*ruach hayyim*) (135). These linguistic choices represent 'a profound kinship, making human-animal ontological continuity explicit' (135).

In the same vein, Denis Edwards uses the work of Athanasius, fourth century bishop of Alexandria, to propose an incarnational theology. The focus here is on God assuming the substance of *all* flesh so that 'in the Spirit, the community of fleshly life might be forgiven, healed, freed from violence, reconciled, and find its fulfilment in the life of God' (91). He continues, saying:

> 'All things', including every wallaby, dog and dolphin, are created through the eternal Wisdom of God, and redeemed and reconciled through Wisdom made flesh in Christ… Flesh involves all the interconnected ecological relationships that make up life on our planet. The proposal being made is that the Christ-event is saving not only for human beings, but also in some real way for other creatures, including dogs, horses and eagles. (Edwards 92)

These moves to think broadly about the character of God *in carne* – in flesh – can have the same inclusive effect as deemphasizing Jesus's manhood in exchange for an emphasis on his humanity. Just as concentrating on Jesus's humanness rather than his maleness or his being able-bodied can contest the patriarchy and ableism that undermines the place of women and disabled people in the church, so too does the lens of flesh allow us to recognize other animals as joint beneficiaries of God's work in Christ. If, as David S. Cunningham argues, 'The primary focus of God's relational life … extends to all flesh, all living creatures' (114), then God's restoring mission

does not stop at – or may not even start with – humans. This interpretation has implications for Christian practices toward other animals. As Edwards argues, 'Human beings who would live redemptively are called to participate in the healing of the world, through commitment to the flourishing of animals and to ethical relationships with them' (98).

In addition to re/considering flesh, paying closer attention to what I refer to as the second incarnation also has profound implications for the place of other animals in Christian theology. In all four gospels (Mark 1:9-11; Matt. 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-23 and John 1:29-34), the writers record God's Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, descending on Jesus as a bird. Luke makes the point most emphatically, insisting that 'the Holy Spirit descended on [Jesus] *in bodily form* like a dove' (Luke 3:22, NRSV, emphasis added). In 'The Lord God Bird; Avian Divinity, Neo Animism, and the Renewal of Christianity at the End of the World', Mark I. Wallace examines the Greek phrasing and observes that, '*hos peristeran* [as a dove/pigeon] does not operate here metaphorically or analogically, but appositionally. The expression … is not a simile … but is rather an explanatory phrase that describes the *actual* physical being the Spirit has become' (Wallace 219). During the pivotal moment announcing Jesus as God's Offspring, the Triune God manifests as supernatural, as human being and as nonhuman animal. As Wallace concludes, 'Woven into the core grammar of Christian faith, then, is the belief that the Spirit is the *animal* face of God, even as Jesus is the *human* face of God' (213).

So, what might we glean from God's 'ornithomorphic' embodiment (Wallace 219)? First, I believe God entering into creation history as a bird at this time reinforces the linguistic point that God's intent for the world involves and is for all flesh. Second, I suggest that the image and nature of God includes other animals: that is, that other animals comprise the Divine in some meaningful way. Although the Christian tradition is brimming with hymns, visual art, prayers and other resources identifying the Holy Spirit as a bird, this gospel confession is largely restricted to a metaphor. But perhaps God's work to reconcile all things through Christ is in part the work of God restoring back to Godself the human and nonhuman animal life that is part of God's substance and, thus, part of God's care. What would it look like to embrace nonhuman animals as being in the person of God? What might it do to our anthropocentrism to see their

being as integrated into the divine union? While it is certainly possible to answer these questions in ways that do not revolutionize our relationship to other animals – for example eating other animals from 'humane' farms or killing other animals with our own two hands – taking seriously the 'fleshness' and 'birdness' might allow for more radical interruptions. That God's avian appearance is brief and unrepeated in Jesus's lifetime may account for why Christians have not unpacked its implications for our theology and our ethics. Yet the fact that all the gospels witness to God's appearance as a bird at this crucial moment in Jesus' ministry testifies to its significance.

Challenges and possibilities

With all of these resources for upsetting mainstream Christian attitudes and practices about other animals, one might expect more Jesus-followers to be vegan and the church to be a site of radical animal advocacy. Yet, even some of the scholars cited above are not or stopped being vegan and vegetarian, and several would not claim to be animal liberationists. Why do anthropocentrism and anti-animal practices still carry the day, even among scholars engaged in research that affirms other animals? A simple answer is that the same barriers to revolutionary perspectives on other animals that exist among other religious and non-religious communities also exist among Christians, including Anabaptist/Mennonite ones. Entrenched personal habits and desires; nostalgia about past farming practices; enduring Enlightenment philosophies and pseudo-sciences that denigrate other animals; lack of awareness about the relationship between human and other animal oppression; and both imagined and real obstacles to making new choices are just a few of the factors. Constructs like biblically-based human exceptionalism and dominion undoubtedly compound these rationales, making it difficult to make a transition.

There are also Christians who are conscious of animal ethics while justifying slaughter; ownership; less industrial farming; raising and killing animals for food; and other forms of subjugation. Strangely, these arguments and the conclusions that are drawn are often biblically and theologically incoherent. Space only affords one example, but it is particularly relevant given the topics at hand. In the chapter 'Life Through Death: Sacrificial Eating' in *Food and Faith:*

A Theology of Eating, Norman Wirzba reflects on sacrifice and its impact on how we eat. On one hand, he admits that Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection 'marks the "end" or completion of sacrifice' (124) and that 'Christ's self-offering … sets the pattern for what appropriate self-offering looks like' (Wirzba 128). On the other hand, he avoids sustained reflection on the fact that animals used as food, fur, entertainment and as medical experiments do not give up their lives voluntarily and, as such, are not following in the way of Jesus. Wirzba also argues that 'a refusal to eat meat *may* reflect a refusal to come to terms with the life and death that characterize creation' (133). This contention makes little sense when one considers the beginning note that the resurrection is not a life-death cycle, but instead concludes emphatically with life getting the last word over death. Moreover, if Christ is indeed the end of all sacrifice, why would his followers need to keep shedding blood unnecessarily in order to be 'full members' of creation? This kind of confused and contradictory thinking often passes for a progressive Christian position on other animals, and limits the discussion to increasing respect and being more compassionate without dethroning the human and withdrawing our right to kill.[6]

Despite theologies that do not fundamentally disturb the human-animal binary, Christianity nevertheless has source material within it to rupture our understanding of and relationship to our creature-kin. Re/discovering its deeper, more radical potential will involve continued and extensive biblical and theological exploration. It will also involve examining other artifacts of the faith such as hymns, prayers, and confessions; retelling the stories of Christian forerunners to contemporary vegan, vegetarian and animal liberation movements; and engaging the work of Christians who advance these efforts in this ongoing and emerging field. Jesus-followers need not divorce an ethic of compassion from the beliefs that shape our hopes and convictions. The call to address the plight of other animals can be grounded in our faith.

Notes

[1] For a simple introduction to Mennonites, visit Third Way Media's website, http://thirdway.com/mennonites/who-are-the-mennonites/. For a scholarly resource, which includes a more thorough study of Anabaptist origins and distinctions, see C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction*, Pandora Press, 1995.

[2] Bailey, Wilma, 'Let Them Have Dominion', Rooted and Grounded Conference, 10 October 2015, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN. Keynote address, https://soundcloud.com/followambs/2015-10-01-rooted-and-grounded-wilma-bailey-let-them-have-dominion

[3] Tribble, Phyllis, 'The Dilemma of Dominion', *Faith and Feminism*, edited by Phyllis Tribble and B. Diane Lipsett, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, pp17-39.

[4] Davis, Ellen, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the* Bible, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp.53–59.

[5] Another compelling example from the poetic literature is Psalm 40:6-8: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire – but my ears you have opened – burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said … I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart' (*New International Version*).

[6] Although the goal of this essay is not to debate biblical proof-texts, but rather to constructively identify overlooked Christian Scripture and theology that support liberatory ethics toward other animals, I have nevertheless been encouraged to address the particular claim that Christians are divinely sanctioned/ordered to use other animals as food in relationship to Acts 10. Briefly, the story of God telling Peter to arise, kill and eat a host of 'four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds' (Acts 10:12 NIV) is an extension of Cornelius's visitation story in Acts 10:1-8. The text makes it clear that the issue at hand is about God showing 'no partiality' (Acts 10:34) in

sharing the gospel and the radical inclusion of Gentiles into the Jewish community of Christ. Acts 10:28–29 address this directly when Peter says to Cornelius, 'You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection'. Although the inclusion of Gentiles into the Christ-following body undoubtedly raised questions about appropriate foods during table fellowship, issues that Paul wrestled with in his writings, the fact that Peter wakes up and does not understand the meaning of the dream shows it was not a simple message about eating. Consequently, using Acts 10 as either blanket permission to eat other animals indiscriminately or worse yet as a treatise against veganism and practicing compassion across species is a deeply flawed take on what is happening in that text. For a resource whose focus is on wrestling with other 'but what about this verse' challenges to an animal-friendly Christianity, I recommend York, T. and Alexis-Baker, A., *A Faith Embracing All Creatures: Addressing Commonly Asked Questions about Christian Care for Animals*, Wipf and Stock, 2012.

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