



THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

Book Review: A Faith Embracing All Creatures

By Byron Borger for The Humane Society of the United States

A Faith Embracing All Creatures edited by Tripp York and Andy Alexis-Baker (Cascade Books, 2012)

In our 30 years of book-selling at our small town bookstore, we have noticed trends, trends silly and significant. Significantly, in the general culture there has been a notable interest in recent years in books about animals – sweet tales, inspirational stories, and serious stuff, including an interest in animal welfare. In the religious publishing world (I am most familiar with Christian publishers) there is trending interest in faith-based creation-care, with wonderful authors writing about sustainable living, exploring the delights and ethics of food, and, more specifically, books about animals. While there is considerable disagreement about how best to integrate one’s religious convictions with ones practices of daily discipleship, there is a fresh conversation about the implications of God’s call for humans who bear God’s image to steward well and relate properly to their fellow creatures.

In the last decades there have been academic (and often arcane) theological writings about animal welfare, but few widely-available, easily accessible books for traditional religious readers. Gladly, there have been many voices deconstructing the rather traditional but quite wrong-headed assumptions and attitudes revealing human hubris in “taking dominion” over the creation. Nearly every major Christian publishing house, especially evangelical ones, have done fabulous books about creation care, Christian environmentalism, and Bible-based ruminations on the beauty and duty of caring well for God’s good world. Few of them, however, until recently, have mentioned much about animals, let alone animal welfare.

This is changing, and it is wonderful to see lovely titles like *All God’s Creatures: The Blessing of Animal Companions* by Debra Farrington (Paraclete Press), *Will I See My Dog in Heaven?* by Jack Wintz (Paraclete) and *The Friends We Keep: Unleashing Christianity’s Compassion for Animals* by Laura Hobgood-Oster (Baylor University Press). More generally, there are books coming out about faith perspectives on eating sustainably. *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* by Norman Wirzba (Cambridge University Press) is serious but wonderful; *The Spirit of Food: 34 Writers on Feasting and Fasting Toward God* is a truly beautifully-written anthology, and the fabulous, new *Eat with Joy: Redeeming God’s Gift of Food* by Rachel Marie Stone (IVP) is the essential “go-to” entry level, must-read book on the subject. Each offers faith-shaped insight about land,

creation-care, animals, and the ethical dimensions of our embodied human tasks such as farming, shopping, and eating.

York & Alexis-Baker's ***A Faith Embracing All Creatures***, however, takes this developing conversation to a new, profound level. The sub-title notes that these essays are “Addressing Commonly Asked Questions About Christian Care for Animals.” It is the second in a series of books that explores the ways we too often assume that violence is necessary in our daily lifestyle practices. It is unashamedly inviting us to a nonviolent worldview of lifestyle, a morally-serious way of relating to all other creatures; this, of course, suggests a robust vegetarianism. It includes 14 strong chapters by authors from across the theological spectrum -- from progressive and traditional Catholics to a professor from Calvin College in Grand Rapids; from a Scandinavian Ghandian to several Mennonites, Brethren, and Baptists.

While some may prefer a wider pro/con format about Christianity and vegetarianism (that book has yet to be written) this does cover the proverbial waterfront of Biblical and theological concerns. Readers who care about a Biblical perspective will find new insights, tough questions explored, and exciting new angles of vision, both on the texts of Scripture and on the implications for our relationships to animals. Many of these essays are creative and fresh. Some are quite passionate – insisting that it is immoral to cooperate with industrial farming practices that produce “cruelty meat.” They may not be presenting the final word, but, it is the best book of its kind.

Faith Embracing... includes substantive and provocative pieces and they differ in tone and perspective, making this a valuable book for personal study as well as for small fellowship groups, Sunday school classes, or reading clubs. They comprise a powerful (and, perhaps for some readers, persuasive) Biblical case for vegetarianism. At least, it will invite omnivores to a more conscientious approach to God-honoring shopping and eating choices – avoiding factory farms, learning about which agricultural practices cause animal suffering, and how we can be more mindful of the creatures around us. As Brian McLaren writes in a truly lovely afterword, the heart of the nonviolence to which the editors invite us is Christ-like kindness -- love for all things which our loving God created, which extends to the non-human creatures walking before the face of the Creator. Those who care about caring for animals will find this a challenging, important and useful resource. May it lead us to substantive conversations, deeper dialogue, and renewed awareness of the role of non-human creatures in our lives.

Byron Borger is the owner of Hearts & Minds, an independent bookstore in Dallastown, PA, and regularly blogs about books. www.heartsandmindsbooks.com

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