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Review of *On God and Dogs: A Christian Theology of Compassion for Animals* by Stephen H. Webb

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On God and Dogs: A Christian Theology of Compassion for Animals.
By Stephen H. Webb. New York and Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 1998. xii + 222 pp. \$29.95 (cloth).

The starting point for this book is the affectionate relationship that can be shared by a person and a dog, which Webb considers for its theological implications relative to how human beings are to treat all animals and live in the

world. The study is significant and original because it considers issues that have often been brushed aside, perhaps because relationships with pets have not been considered "serious" enough for theological reflection. Webb sees the human-dog relationship in terms of the principle of excess, as in a generous excess of grace in which giving surpasses the calculations of utility. The dog in this relationship can give unmeasured and unwavering love to the human, who is called to respond generously with similar gifts of love. Giving can be "a kind of rhetoric, a mode of communication that can be practiced even between those who do not share the same language, or who do not speak at all" (9).

The dog in this relationship is a gift, not just a property to be owned and exploited. And the relationship can draw out both the human and the dog in ways that enrich both lives. It is possible to love and be loved by a being who is different from yourself. This relationship anticipates the harmony of all beings in the end times of God's peaceable kingdom. In this light, petting a dog can be "an eschatological statement about who we want to be" (106). Petting a dog can also acknowledge the impulse that drives us out of ourselves and acknowledge the otherness of one who looks to us with reverence and "a plea for love and understanding" (121). Sharing in the mutual generosity of this relationship can give a perspective of abundance that empowers an "outward emanating care" (101). As we love and are loved excessively by a pet, we may discover ways to live all our lives in an excess of love and grace. Generous love is meant to be shared, and only actualized in the sharing. Indeed, we may even understand God in terms of the companion of a dog who "cares just for the joy of caring" (123).

In many ways, Webb points out important insights for Christian living that are to be gained from the loving relationship of a human and a dog. Since dogs can relate so well with humans, they help us to recall that we stand in relationship with the whole creation. The eschatological future is for all, not just disembodied human souls. God's love is for all, not just humanity. God is the creator and redeemer of all, and we are to share in God's relationship of love and care for all. For many people, the reality of these truths will be most easily touched with a dog. Through evolution or domestication or passage of time or whatever, dogs and humans often live well together. They can enjoy each other, help each other, and protect each other. This sharing points us to how we are to stand in relationship with all animals and all creation, loving animals as gifts instead of killing and exploiting them as commodities. I agree with Webb that there are important lessons to be learned from human relationships with dogs, and that the theological implications of these relationships have been too long ignored because of fear that it would seem silly to take a pet relationship too seriously.

My complaint with Webb is that he moves the focus of his attention from the theological meaning of pet relationships to the issue of Christian

vegetarianism. The development of his thinking process is clear—as we share a loving relationship with a dog, we are moved to extend that love and treat all animals with compassion, which means not seeing animals as things to be exploited, especially not killing them to eat them. We should not view animals just in terms of their utility for us, making their lives an involuntary sacrifice for our appetites.

Some mention of his position on vegetarianism is certainly appropriate in this book, but Webb seems to have made it something of a topic in its own right. His argument for vegetarianism is thoroughly researched, and forcefully presented. I commend it to anyone who wants to consider the ethics of Christian vegetarianism. However, some of his arguments for vegetarianism seem questionable and unconvincing to me. For instance, with respect to the provision of quail to the Hebrews in the wilderness (Numbers 11), Webb concludes, “The moral of this story is that God seems to accommodate reluctantly [to] human meat eating because it is one of the most obstinate and tenacious symptoms of human sin” (137). He considers a plausible interpretation of Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple (Mark 11:15-19) to be that Jesus was acting out of compassion for the animals being traded and sacrificed there (147). Webb considers the possibility that the Eucharist is “both literally and figuratively vegetarian,” an anticipation of God’s total reign in a world of complete harmony (157). He mentions the apocryphal Gospel of the Ebionites, which “provides one of the earliest portraits of a vegetarian Jesus.” The Ebionites apparently believed Jesus came to end all animal sacrifices, “thus making vegetarianism a requirement for all Christians” (159). Webb urges that literal meat eating “is a parody of the vegetarian supper of the eucharist, and giving thanks for servings of dead flesh is an affront to the suffering of God in Jesus Christ” (166).

Whatever the merits of Webb’s arguments for Christian vegetarianism, the more significant concern is that he seems to have departed from the original center of his work. Of course, the topics are related, but Webb has the makings of two books under one cover. My impression is that much more has been written on vegetarianism than the theological implications of dog-human relationships. I wish that Webb had focused more consistently on the original topic, which is rather original, and left his detailed arguments about vegetarianism for another study. Nevertheless, Webb’s book does provide an important starting point for further discussion of the theological meaning of pet relationships, and the implications of those relationships for the way we treat all animals and live in the world.

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