

Lisa Kemmerer

Animals and World Religions.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012.

346 pages

\$35.00 (paper ISBN 978-0-19-979068-5)

Christian theologian Andrew Linzey observes in a 1994 publication that “Despite the impressive nature of much recent philosophical discussion of animals, its failure to enter seriously and sympathetically into a specifically theological understanding of animals has meant that the case has *not* been made for the many millions of human beings who continue to adhere, even in a weak form, to Christian doctrine” (*Animal Theology*, 1994 [italics original]). Lisa Kemmerer opens her book *Animals and World Religions* with reference to Richard C. Foltz, who makes a similar argument in his study of animals in the Islamic tradition. The secular philosophies of animal advocates like Tom Regan and Peter Singer do not necessarily carry moral authority for those whose worldview derives largely from a religious frame of reference (3–4). For this reason, Kemmerer explores the major religions of India (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism), China (Daoism, Confucianism), and the Middle East (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), as well as the world’s indigenous traditions, to mine their sacred texts and mythologies for ancient wisdom concerning human responsibilities toward other-than-human creatures or, to use her preferred term, “anymals.”

This neologism – a contraction of “any” and “animal” – appears throughout the book, replacing other available labels like nonhuman animal, other animals, animals other than humans, and the like. Kemmerer finds such labels cumbersome and fraught with a hierarchical dualism that elevates humans over everything else and obscures the fact that humans too are animals, interconnected with other species. As she defines the term, “*Anymal* is ... a shortened version of ‘any animal that does not happen to be the species that I am’” and since the author of the book is a human being, “*anymal* refers to any animal who is not a human being” (17; full introduction to this linguistic choice 14–18).

This survey of religious teaching about anymals unearths a surprising wealth of material pertinent to human moral obligations to their wellbeing. I say surprising because many practitioners are likely unaware that anymals constitute such an integral part of the belief systems they claim as their own. Kemmerer, however, is not naïve in her approach to sacred teachings. She observes that the presence of anymal-friendly themes in the world’s various scriptures does not usually translate into praxis: “*This book is about what religions teach, not about how religious people live.* In truth, there appears to be embarrassingly little correlation between the two” (10, italics original; cf. 8, 21).

At the same time, advocacy is never far from view, from the dedication announcing proceeds from the book go toward anymal advocacy to the somewhat disturbing appendix about modern day factory farming and fishing practices (291–315). Veganism is promoted as an ideal consistent with the religious teachings explored (e.g., 8–9, 10, 286–287). Particularly instructive and motivational are the closing sections of each major unit that include examples of religiously motivated advocacy (7). Here we find exemplars within each religious category considered

(indigenous, Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese, Jewish, Christian, Islamic) whose spirituality leads to advocacy on behalf of anymals. These sections are fascinating and since few readers can boast proficiency in all the traditions represented, there is much to discover. For my part (with a background in the study of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, and a concern for anymal justice), I enjoyed learning something of the teachings of Islamic theologian Al-Hafiz Basheer Ahmad Masri who challenges cruelty “‘justified in the name of human needs and spurious science’” (270, citing Masri’s book *Islamic Concern for Animals*, 1987). The Daoist views of Louis Komjathy on vegetarianism and veganism also registered with me. Komjathy sees “all of life as a ‘ritual process,’ as a form of *communitas* and as an expression of reverence for the sacred” (165, citing Komjathy’s article “Meat Avoidance in Daoism”). Vegetarianism/Veganism, he argues, is way to minimize the suffering and exploitation inherent in meat processing. I find presented in this book a wealth of helpful material from traditions very different from my own. There is also much here – spanning the world religions – which we share in common.

It is a lofty hope (one which I share) that such sacred resources motivate and inspire the faithful toward further consideration of anymal compassion/rights/welfare issues. There are complications, to be sure. Interpretation and the hermeneutical approaches to sacred texts inevitably generate disputes. For instance, what do the freighted terms “dominion” and “subdue” in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 1:26–28) mean, anyway? Do they present a divinely sanctioned license for despotism or a mandate for human stewardship and service to nonhuman creation in all its diversity? (For Kemmerer’s succinct overview see 177–180). Such highly contested passages occur in all the texts discussed in the book and it is here that the nature of such a sweeping overview shows its limitations. Specialists will find the brevity of analysis problematic at times. Still, whatever the book lacks in depth at particular points, it more than makes up for in its generous span of vision.

This multi-religious approach to the urgent matters touching on anymal ethics strikes me as strategically wise because it gathers up the best of the ancient worldviews surveyed and presents them in a way that highlights their *potential* to inspire compassion. (Most people in the world, after all, align themselves, with differing degrees of conviction, to one of these visions of the sacred.) Infused within Kemmerer’s surveys, with their unique focus on anymals, is a startling beauty and call for compassion to extend to all living things. Because most of us focus on just one religious tradition, we seldom find the collective voices of the mystics and prophets of diverse space and time marshaled together in common service of a pressing problem, as we do here. This is a beautifully written and passionate example of philosophical activism that is humble enough to take ancient wisdom seriously in the service of very modern questions.

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