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Review Section



Christian Ethics and Contemporary Treatment of Nonhuman Animals

Annika Spalde & Pelle Strindlund

Every Creature a Word of God: Compassion for Animals as Christian Spirituality.
Cleveland, OH: Vegetarian Advocates Press, 2008. 133 pp.

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 Hildegard 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 Rådningstjänsten (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

covenant and promise. According to the Hebrew prophets, we share the same future: the peaceable kingdom on God's holy mountain. (Spalde & Strindlund, 2008, p. 30)

Throughout *Every Creature a Word of God*, Spalde and Strindland reflect on their personal experiences with civil disobedience: planning actions, carrying out rescues, meeting with police and farmers, standing trial, and serving time. In prison, Strindland remembers meeting a young man who was also a vegetarian, who had once been a butcher. When asked why he was a vegetarian, the young man answered, "I have worked as a butcher. In Iraq, also in Sweden. They know. They have feelings. The animals know what will happen when they come for slaughter" (Spalde & Strindland, 2008, p. 100). Readers are most likely to be moved by the personal integrity of Spalde and Strindland as Christian social justice activists: They manifest compassion at all times toward all beings—even animal exploiters.

The ecumenical, international flavor of their lives, their work, and their faith also stands out in *Every Creature a Word of God*: They include a chapter on "The Muslim Jesus" and a chapter on "The Jewish Prophetic Tradition." For example, they include in their personal reflections a memory from Strindland's time in the West Bank, when he shared coffee with a Muslim in Hebron. Afterwards, Strindland noticed two bowls of water standing among the lush leaves of the man's garden. When the author asked about the bowls, the man explained that he had placed the water in the garden for birds, and that his faith taught that treating animals well "will be rewarded by God" (Spalde & Strindland, 2008, p. 88). Such wide-ranging personal experiences lend credence to the inclusive message of Spalde and Strindland, demonstrating that these two Christian social justice activists model the courage and love of Jesus about which they write, and which they find to be central to the Gospels.

The authors also remember and reflect on their direct actions on behalf of enslaved and exploited farmed animals. They remember rescuing hens from battery cages and lifting a puppy from a laboratory cage, relishing the simple gift of watching a liberated hen take her first steps and the simple joy of knowing that one little canine will be spared from vivisection. They do their work openly because they know that what they do is morally right for anyone who is committed to the teachings of the Gospels. In exchange for their Christian dedication and compassion, they are arrested, and when they are pushed before lawyers and judges in a courtroom, they courageously speak up on behalf of exploited and oppressed hens and puppies. Spalde and Strindlund undertake these illegal acts of animal liberation because these acts—undertaken without violence—are consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus:

At the end of the trial the judge asked us if we would go on doing these rescues. Paul sat farthest from the judge and so was the last to answer. 'I am a Jew. I am glad for those who broke the law and helped Jews escape from the Nazis.' The judges who had been looking tired and slumped in their seats, suddenly sat up. 'I am afraid of a society where people would rather obey the law than care for the needs of others. I will continue to fight for the animals as long as I have the strength.' (Spalde & Strindland, 2008, pp. 92-93)

Every Creature a Word of God draws "on Christian experiences from different continents, languages, and times" (Spalde & Strindland, 2008, p. 2) to consider the implications of Christian morality with regard to our treatment of nonhuman animals, yet it is likely the personal Christian witness of the authors—their sincerity, anguish, and ever-present faith—that will be most compelling and memorable for readers. *Every Creature a Word of God* demonstrates that Christian concern for nonhuman animals is not merely a contemporary fringe movement, but has long been important to sincere Christians worldwide who seek a Christian life. *Every Creature a Word of God* effectively calls Christians to rethink personal choices that affect the lives and welfare of God's many sentient creatures. The theological explorations and personal witness of Spalde and Strindlund carry a compelling call to Christian morality centered on compassion and self-giving love and service that seems difficult for any serious Christian to ignore.

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