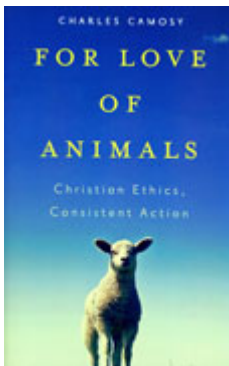


Ethicist makes case for animals

Julie Hanlon Rubio | Apr. 2, 2014



FOR LOVE OF ANIMALS: CHRISTIAN ETHICS, CONSISTENT ACTION

By Charles Camosy

Published by Franciscan Media, \$15.99

In this short, engaging book, Fordham University theologian Charles Camosy calls Christians to think harder about their relationship with animals. If we claim to be supporters of justice, nonviolence and environmentalism, can we still engage in common practices such as eating meat, owning pets and hunting?

Camosy roots his argument not in sentimental pleas to save cute animals, but in clear-headed claims about justice. He defines justice as a duty of "consistently and actively working to see that individuals and groups -- especially vulnerable populations on the margin -- are given what they are owed." He suggests that when we condemn NFL quarterback Michael Vick for his support of dogfighting, but continue to buy bacon made from pigs who are "at least as social and smart as dogs," we act inconsistently and unjustly. Though Christians did not invent the idea that human beings have the right to use animals as they choose, they have used the idea of "dominion" to justify mistreatment of animals. Camosy provides an alternate reading of the Genesis creation narrative, showing that "the world is not created for human beings. Indeed all creatures have goodness independent of human beings."

Christians committed to nonviolence seek a world in which "swords are beaten in plowshares" (Isaiah 2:4) and "The wolf shall lie down 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" (Isaiah 11:6). Camosy asks us to evaluate the consistency of our ethical decision-making, not just for humans but for nonhumans. Even if the Bible recounts that God permits animal sacrifice and eating after the flood, Camosy, relying on Genesis and Isaiah, argues, "God's will for nonhuman animals is clear: They are to be our companions, not our food." He highlights the stories of saints and other great Christian figures (including J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis) who wrestled with the implications of the Christian vision for human and nonhuman animals.

Contemporary Catholic thinkers ask Christians to view environmentalism as part of their commitment to be good stewards of the Earth. In this context, we are called to live counterculturally, limiting travel, living with less stuff, using less electricity and natural gas, just to name a few examples. Camosy draws on publications of the animal agriculture industry to argue that the factory farms -- where most of the meat we eat is raised -- are

not only engaged in animal cruelty, but are also major contributors to environmental destruction. One of the most significant actions Christians can take to lessen their eco-footprint is to limit their intake of meat, especially meat from factory farms. Care for the Earth, nonviolence and justice all seem to point in the same direction.

Camosy's argument will be controversial, even though he tries to head off major objections. (For example: Didn't Jesus eat animals? Don't humans need to eat meat?) The most serious questions are both theoretical and practical. At the theoretical level, we might ask if humans have a special place in creation that justifies some use of animals, even if we ought to treat them more justly. At the practical level, the question of balancing competing goods is key. For most households, eating humanely-raised meat will cost a lot more, even if they eat less. The duty to treat animals well can conflict with duties to give money to charity, buy fair trade and prepare meals that all family members can enjoy. Balancing these competing goods is not easy. Practicing justice, nonviolence and care for the environment might look different in each family.

That said, recent work on animals makes it more difficult to justify ignoring the ethics of animal treatment. Detailed descriptions of how turkeys are raised, killed and sent to markets, for instance, are widely available. Because I've been mulling over Camosy's argument, I am finding them harder to dismiss. Buying humanely-raised turkey means paying twice or even four times as much. Yet, Camosy asks, if "Christians have a moral duty to be protectors -- not only for fellow human beings, but for all creation," how can we buy animals that have been robbed of the kind of life God intended for them? I'm not sure I can answer that question anymore. This book is a must-read for Christians who want to wrestle with tough questions and strive for ethical consistency in their relations with all animals, human and nonhuman.

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