

A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics

reviewed by [Matthew Halteman](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

In Review



A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics

Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton, eds.
Columbia University Press

Imagine a world in which human beings came to view animals as subjects—that is, as inherently valuable individuals endowed with cognitive, emotional and social capacities that constitute living beings meaningful in themselves, independent of their potential value as objects of human use. How would our daily lives be different in such a world? What changes might we enact, for instance, to bring our farming practices, eating habits, medical research methods and economic development strategies into harmony with an outlook that takes seriously the flourishing of animals and the sustainability of the planet on which our collective well-being depends? The guiding question of *A Communion of Subjects* is how renewed engagement with the thought and practice of the world's diverse religious traditions can help us to understand the Earth and its human and nonhuman denizens as “a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects.”

This volume arrives at a moment of rapidly growing consensus that our habit of seeing animals and the Earth merely as resources for human consumption has brought us to the brink of a global environmental crisis. To take just one astonishing example, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations recently reported that modern livestock production is degrading our planet's air, land, soil, water and biodiversity, all the while generating more carbon dioxide emissions than the entire transportation sector. The need is urgent, it would seem, to reenvision our relationships with animals and the Earth and to reevaluate the unsustainable patterns of consumption that currently dominate those relationships.

But how should we approach these formidable ethical and ecological challenges? For many advocates of animals and the environment, the obvious first step is to eschew religion and the hierarchical and human-centered conceptions of the universe that are often believed to come with it. Against the drift of much green thinking, the originality of *A Communion of Subjects* lies in its suggestion that traditional religious reflection and practice can be important catalysts for a gestalt switch on these fronts because they can “awaken an understanding of our profound connection to every life form” and reinvigorate our sense of kinship with and responsibility toward our fellow creatures.

This strategy of positing that religious inquiry on the standing of animals can be a transformative change agent in its own right is the volume's most exciting feature. The essays approach religious questioning as a potential mode of access to important truths about the lives of animals that, once acknowledged, can help us to

reframe the ethical, scientific and legal norms that regulate our relationships to them.

The yield of the editors' efforts here is impressive. Paul Waldau, director of the Center for Animals and Public Policy at Tufts University, and Kimberley Patton, professor of the comparative and historical study of religion at Harvard Divinity School, have collected 50 essays by scholars and scientists across a broad spectrum of fields, including religious studies (Mary Evelyn Tucker), philosophy (Bernard Rollin), history (Thomas Berry), psychology (Kenneth Shapiro), ecofeminism (Carol Adams), cognitive ethology (Marc Bekoff), primatology (Jane Goodall) and law (Steven Wise).

Aware that the juxtaposition of such a wide diversity of perspectives poses the risk of a Babel-like experience for the reader, the editors provide a variety of helpful introductory resources to orient their audience, including a catalog of essay abstracts to enable easy browsing, an engaging overview of the volume's strategy and layout, and original essays by each editor that set the tone for the volume as a whole. The task of this collection, they explain, is not to stake out clear-cut religious answers to controversial questions concerning animal rights, environmentalism and evolution (though such issues certainly arise) but to inquire into the character of the living beings whose interests are affected by these discussions and to discern how religious thought and practice can help us to discover these beings for who they are and to cultivate more holistic relationships with them.

In keeping with this spirit, many of the essays are more information-based than argument-driven, offering evenhanded assessment of the relevant conceptual frameworks, sacred texts and ritual practices of a given religion; highlighting tensions between thought and practice; addressing the diversity of opinion within each tradition; and suggesting ways in which religious resources can promote or problematize our efforts to live in harmony with our fellow creatures.

Virtually every one of the world's major religions has three or more essays devoted to it, and sections on the more specialized topics of animals in myth, ritual and art discuss Aboriginal, African, indigenous American and ancient Roman perspectives as well. The volume concludes with three sections that discuss current scientific, agricultural and social challenges, raising timely questions about industrial livestock production and the use of animals in scientific research and biotechnology, as well as addressing the links between animal exploitation and violence toward human

beings, exploitation of women, marginalization of the global poor and environmental degradation.

The three offerings on Judaism are excellent. Authored respectively by two preeminent voices in the field (Dan Cohn-Sherbok and Roberta Kalechofsky) and one rapidly rising star (Jonathan Klawans), these pieces deliver balanced yet challenging coverage of a variety of ancient and modern Jewish perspectives on relevant biblical and rabbinic texts, animal sacrifice, vegetarianism and the tradition of *tza'ar ba'alei chaim* (cause no sorrow to living creatures).

Regrettably, the section on Christianity is disappointing by comparison, not because the individual essays are uninteresting, but because the section as a whole lacks coherence, is too narrow in scope, and leaves the relevant passages of the New Testament and its complicated relationship to the Hebrew Bible largely untreated (which is unfortunate given the existence of first-rate scholarship on these matters by well-known Christian theologians such as Andrew Linzey and Stephen Webb). The first two essays explore highly specialized and largely unrelated topics—the symbolization of medieval heresy through animal imagery and the Christian influence on Descartes's view of animals—that general audiences may find cumbersome to read about and difficult to relate to their lives. The third essay, "A Christian Approach to Animals," is more accessible, but its generality precludes sustained engagement with the relevant biblical texts.

All in all, *A Communion of Subjects* delivers a wealth of resources for stirring the conscience and stoking the imagination. The offerings on Western religion will remind Christian readers that the ideas of special creation and dominion vis-à-vis the animal kingdom are ultimately grounded in a theocentric world where God's sustaining love of all creation sets the standard for our stewardship. The resources on Eastern religion invite us to consider holistic conceptions of human-animal kinship and intentional commitment to nonviolent living that can inspire new ways of practicing compassion for animals in our own tradition. And the essays on the ethical, scientific and social implications of thinking about animals from a religious perspective challenge us to publicly express our hope in God's promise to renew creation and to take up our calling as agents of that renewal.