

Animal Theology

An Interview with Paolo De Benedetti

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GN-AM: In recent decades Italy has joined the rich discussion about the relationship between humans and animals from a biblical perspective. What are the key points to start this reflection in a productive way?

PDB: The Bible offers a number of suggestions on how to build our relationship with animals, from the creation account. In this account, after the story of creation, which says “every living creature that moves [...] according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind”, it is stated that “God saw that it was good. And God blessed them”. This same statement of Genesis 1 is repeated for reptiles and wild beasts. However, our biblical faith goes further: we remember the scriptural affirmations of the “good Shepherd” and of “the Lamb of God”. In the Christian tradition there are plenty of stories that let us be “closer” to the animals: I am referring to the Desert Fathers, Saint Francis and the Franciscan tradition, but also, more recently, to a secular sensitivity, especially Anglo-Saxon.

GN-AM: In contemporary Western society we are now witnessing a moral “schizophrenia”. On the one hand human beings’ value is progressively raised above the whole of creation and, sometimes, even above the Creator, to the point that the human being becomes a demi-god. On the other hand we are witnessing a gradual devaluation of the value of human life. Where does this ambiguity come from and what can be done to curb this phenomenon?

PDB: I think it does not derive only from an ideology, so-called, “materialism”, but rather from an inability to perceive and accept the dignity of life, i.e. the ethical and psychological equality that is possible (although not always, because of men’s fallenness) in the human-animal relationship.

Indeed a vast amount of religious and non-religious literature reveals what might be called a “dialogue” between men and animals, and even plants. And even with God: theology of life reveals us that trees invoke God for rain.

GN-AM: On several occasions in the Bible we are given evidence of the direct relationship existing between God and animals. Is it possible to encounter the reality of these teachings in our daily life?

PDB: Very often yes, but not always. Especially when animals are used as “tool”. In fact we must not forget that the human-animal relationship is twofold: on one hand there are the animals of affection, companion animals, and poetry animals; on the other hand there are animals of use, to put it plainly, exploited animals. We mentioned the theological “weight” of some animals: the lamb, the sheep, the dove, the donkey, the whale, etc. We should also quote the theological poverty related to this topic: I always remember that a Cardinal answered one of my protests against the killing of lambs for Easter by stating the danger that we may become animals too in so doing. But we really are animals, as it is expressed by the etymology of this very word.

GN-AM: Does a common thread exist which unites Christian animal theology to other religious beliefs?

PDB: Judaism and Christianity from millennia eliminated animal sacrifice – conceived as a tribute to God and as God’s nourishment – and in this they share the position with other ancient and Eastern religions.

GN-AM: In your books you offer several images in order to show God’s love for His creation, is there a particular one you want to share with us?

PDB: At the end of the biblical account of creation, “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1,31). God’s love for creation is not only self-gratification but – if I may say so – is also the recognition of the creation itself as His neighbour. And this is what we too must recognize. However the teachers have, as always, added an “other interpretation” of “very good”: with a play on the Hebrew words not possible to reproduce in English, one can read “very good” as “good is the death” – a statement required to justify precisely the introduction of death in the creation.

GN-AM: Today great emphasis is given to the issue of ritual slaughter. The debate is twofold: on the one hand there are Jews and Muslims and on the other Christians and non-believers. Not to rehearse the arguments of

each side how can Christians today show a more compassionate example towards animals to those believers who share faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Can the Holy Scriptures show us a common path to follow together?

PDB: According to Genesis 9,3-4, God allows the eating of meat after the flood, because of a certain divine pessimism towards men. But with a fundamental reservation: “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood”. The blood was understood as the seat of life, I would say of the soul. This is why, although God allows meat-eating, He requires the total bleeding of the animals. And the blood taken from the living being must be covered with the sand or ground, that means it must be buried and in some sense offered to God, representing His little but crucial victory over death. It is a law still valid, even if the blood-life identity is understood in symbolic sense today. But as the Bible teaches us, we should recognize the “theological” value of this symbol. As we should recognize the theological symbol of another alimentary law: if the animal suffers while taking away its blood, it is forbidden to eat its meat. Hence it is clear that in the dietary laws is implied a fundamental idea: compassion.

GN-AM: What are the biggest cultural barriers that need to be removed in order to spread a biblical culture about animal ethics issues?

PDB: One of the biggest barriers is the current way to produce food: no one today takes away a “life” from a living being to eat meat but rather goes to shops (butchers) where life, in the biblical sense, has already been removed. I believe that “awareness” of food is the hardest thing, I would say almost unthinkable, in today’s world. It remains a “possibility” of compassion in the way of killing – which happened a long time ago in domestic places – of chickens, rabbits, and birds. I remember that my grandmother, when we were kids, did absolutely not allow us to watch her while she was killing a chicken. And it is still in my mind the image of the scissor penetrating the throat of the poor animal.

GN-AM: Pope Francis in the first few months of his ministry often speaks about creation and the protection of creation. What is the difference between the theology of creation and animal theology?

PDB: The theology of creation is based on the understanding of creation (the whole creation) as my neighbour. And not only my neighbour, but also God’s neighbour. There is a little play of words in Jewish mysticism in which God, before creating anything, is defined *ajn* = nothing, in the sense

that there are no words to describe or define Him. But one fine day (allow me this popular formula) God, who knows to be *ajn*, makes an anagram, and defines Himself *anj* = I. Describing himself as “I”, in the very instant he creates “you”, that is the creation, God’s “you”. In other words, God’s self-definition gives birth to His neighbour, which is the whole creation. This is why our existence, the existence of the stars and the existence of my cat are all based on God’s “you”.

GN-AM: The original sin is linked to the eating of the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. A suggestive interpretation sees the killing of animals for nutrimental purpose as real sin, which leads to the expulsion from the Garden, with the consequent knowledge of suffering and death. What do you think about it?

PDB: Men must not pretend to have the knowledge of good and evil. And why should they not expect it? Because, as it appears from the whole Bible, the knowledge of good and evil is – if I may say so – a divine revelation entrusted to the Law, the Torah. A revelation that God has linked to sin and death. For this reason He did not intend to show it to Adam and Eve in order to save them from sin and death. But curiosity, the knowledge of the whole “all” (that is, of life and death), has prevailed in Adam and Eve over the obedience to God.