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**Seeing the Terrain We Walk:
Features of the Contemporary Landscape of "Religion and Animals"**
by Paul Waldau

Though some have suggested that the topic of this volume is a new emphasis in academia, religious traditions, and general public awareness, we do not begin this discussion of religion and animals completely anew. Rather, we rely heavily on much that has already been claimed within and without religion about the nonhuman lives amidst which we live. This volume takes an additional step in a fundamental exploration that has been an ongoing project of sensitive, compassionate humans for millennia. It is the editors' and contributors' hope to engender vigorous, lucid debate, and even to birth a kind of new community, addressing the many issues arising at the intersection of, on the one hand, concerns for and about "religion," and, on the other hand, our inevitable interaction with the nonhuman living beings that we generally refer to as "animals."

As the multiplicity of views stated in this volume testifies, such discussion and community will be dominated by a pronounced *pluralism*. The remarkably diverse perspectives on nonhuman lives found throughout humankind's religious traditions offer, when collected together, an unparalleled opportunity to see certain complex features of the many different topics we might reasonably collect under the heading "religion and animals."

The Center of the Field—Obvious Inquiries

Newly emerged fields in academia do well to answer fundamental questions about the center of the field *and* its parameters. The center of the field, so to speak, includes at least two fundamental inquiries.

(1) The first of these central inquiries is embodied in these questions—*How have religious traditions and their believers engaged other animals? Have they promoted or prevented obvious harms to the nearby biological individuals outside human communities, or have they ignored them altogether?*

Religious traditions have played an integral role in the recurring human tendency to evaluate the world around us. At times, some religions have advanced and maintained hierarchical evaluations, while others have seen and dismantled myriad forms of human subordination of marginalized groups. Various forms of “power-over-others” have been exercised by elite groups of humans for their own benefit, and even a cursory review of history reveals that it is *both* humans and nonhumans who have been marginalized by elitist groups claiming some special status.¹ How have religious traditions handled potential human power over nonhumans? Have all religions utilized the human/nonhuman hierarchy so familiar in industrialized societies today that many unreflectively hold it to be the order of nature? Or is such a hierarchical ordering of earth’s lives more on the order of mere custom and social construction masquerading as natural, even metaphysical, reality?

Religious views, or at the very least opinions dressed up in language derived from religious traditions, have often been understood to be the proximate or ultimate cause of overtly violent acts affecting living beings, human and nonhuman. The political, cultural, and economic aggression known in the Christian world as the “Holy Crusades” were understood quite differently in the Islamic world, where they were seen as a paradigmatic form of human-on-human violence. Even more common than the abundant wars pitting one human group against another have been human efforts to eradicate nonhuman forms

of life. Philo, the first-century Jewish historian, used the image of a *continuous* war with other animals "whose hatred is directed ... towards ... mankind as a whole and endures ... without bound and limit of time."² Since both common sense and the most rigorous of empirical investigation reveal that the vast majority of nonhuman animals do *not* war against humans, Philo's distorting image can be used to point out that one peculiar form of human-on-nonhuman harm, indeed, violence—a form which has, sadly, been institutionalized to an extraordinary degree—occurs when authorities of any kind, religious or not, pass along human caricatures and ignorance of nonhuman animals' actual realities.

At the same time, religious traditions have often been the primary movers of a compassionate engagement with other lives. The possibility of such an engagement has often been thought of as an eminently religious act, though that will sound strange to many modern believers who are heirs to a version of religion that has become virtually autistic about nonhuman realities. Still, religion as a whole has an extraordinarily distinguished record of fostering the ethical abilities that are the means by which humans can and often do care about other animals.

This first of the central inquiries in the religion and animals field is, thus, about matters we generally call "ethical" or "moral."

(2) The second of the central inquiries is embodied in this question—*What role have religious traditions had as mediators of views of nonhuman animals?* Even a cursory review of rituals, dances, myths, folktales, songs, poetry, iconography, and canons reveals that animal images of many kinds have been and remain central features

¹ A well-known example of one culture's struggle with elitism and marginalization of humans is Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

of religious expression. Hence, the study of images of nonhuman animals found so broadly in religious symbolism must be an essential feature of the study of religion and animals.

Engaging this issue of images and religions' mediating role regarding views of nonhumans is no simple matter, however. Religious traditions include an extraordinary variety of stories in which nonhuman animals are mentioned in some way, and these have great differences in tenor and purpose. Some are positive and integrating, while others demean and distort. Some honor the value of nonhuman lives as fully as others justify human use of any nonhuman animal for any purpose.

Of great importance in the field of religion and animals, then, is that nonhuman animals often have been "others" whose presence was important to religious believers. Various nonhuman animals have signified meaning, mediated theologically, or provided an important dimension within rituals. Such constructions may or may not, however, honor those nonhuman animals' *own* lived realities; they may even obscure or intentionally eclipse those realities.

Thus by virtue of an examination of these multiple roles played by images and stories, we can ask, *Have the realities of nonhuman animals, their daily actualities and "historicities," as it were, been seen well?* As noted above, for those who care to see other animals accurately, what amounts to a subtle but powerful form of violence occurs when worldviews or belief systems promote specific forms of misunderstanding and caricature that mislead about the verifiable realities of nonhuman animals. So it is quite natural that practitioners within this field ask again and again if religious traditions have,

² Philo, *De Praemiis et Poenis*, with both Greek and English text, The Loeb Classical Library Series, No. 341, trans. by F. H. Colson (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), Section 85.

in fact, passed along inadequate caricatures of nonhuman others in, say, a canonical scripture, such that a religious believer would be in error when relying literally on this information.³

Relatedly, in sacrificial contexts the use of animals, human and nonhuman alike, has resulted in lives being intentionally extinguished for purposes that are not those of the victims involved. Is the intentional, violent killing of the sacrificial victim always and everywhere a denial of that being's importance? Can such killing in a ritual or symbolic act be an affirmation of some kind? What are the values and assumptions that underlie affirmative answers to these questions about sacrifice? If answers on these challenging questions are different for human sacrificial victims than for nonhuman victims, why is that so?

Careful work on these basic questions about the transmission of images, as well as the inherently ethical questions raised above, leads to the conclusion that religious traditions have, historically, been the *principal vehicle* by which the status of nonhuman animals was evaluated by not only believers, but by entire cultures and their institutions. This evaluative role has been taken over in crucial respects, of course, by scientific traditions, but the importance of religious traditions as continuing mediators of views and values regarding nonhuman animals remains one of the most obvious features of humans' contemporary assessment of their relationship to the rest of life on this earth.

Parameters of the Field—Corollary Questions

Arrayed around these basic inquiries at the heart of the field of religion and animals are critically important issues that draw on the center, but which are, in important

³ Consider this generic problem—a claim appears in a scripture held both revealed and infallible regarding certain features of the life of a particular nonhuman animal, and empirical evidence can be gathered that shows the claim not to be literally true (a minor, though oft-cited, example of an error in fact is the claim in Leviticus 11:6 about hares chewing cuds).

respects, conceptually distinct. Consider how the following inquiries beg questions about the parameters of this dynamic field.

Has there been tension between, on the one hand, religious constructions of animals and, on the other, various admittedly secular views? For example, how do we treat religion-based views that are relatively less compassionate than secular engagements with other animals that are, by consensus, sensitive and compassion-driven?⁴ And what of the difference between traditional religious claims about other animals and claims that rely solely on fact-based perceptions of *their* (that is, nonhuman animals') realities? If a religious view can be convincingly demonstrated to be inaccurate in important respects, how might that view be analyzed in its religious importance or its relevance to our ethical abilities? Given the central role that religious traditions have had, and continue to have, as mediators of ethics, worldviews, and in particular images of nonhuman animals and their place in our moral schemes, these and many other additional questions arise when one undertakes the study of religion and animals.

There are other kinds of problems as well. Can religious traditions, by virtue of their sacred histories, whether oral, written or part of a nonverbal art such as dance or iconography, be said to have "seen" any nonhuman animals well, realistically, *or in ways that empirical investigation cannot*? In general, what is the relationship between sacred history and the complex task of any human trying to grasp another animal's actual realities? Can religions, in fact, play a special role in helping humans engage nonhumans?

Scholars today are beginning to unravel in greater detail what roles, if any, concerns about nonhuman animals, and indeed the nonhumans themselves, have had

⁴ Many of the most prominent animal protection advocates are notably negative about religious beliefs as

within the worldviews and lives of religious communities. Detailed work on such issues produces, as so often is the case, myriad additional questions. Have animals' roles as vehicles for religious significance enhanced or weakened their status as "others" to which religious believers and communities respond? Have those instances where nonhuman animals served elevated roles ever worked to subordinate human interests? Have religious institutions treated nonhuman animals differently than have individual religious believers? In what different ways have other living beings been members of the incredibly diverse communities that religious believers have developed and nurtured? Have religious concerns about nonhumans affected the status of animals generally in *nonreligious contexts*?

While these questions and many others raise the possibility of dramatic differences existing among religious traditions on matters of humans' interaction with the living beings around us, questions often have power well beyond their answers. For example, the very asking of these questions tests both the parameters of the emerging field of religion and animals and whether past modes of inquiry were adequate to the simplest of tasks at the center of this field. Further, can religion and animals inquiries yield helpful observations about the nature of religion? Do such questions go beyond identification of boundaries for the study of religion and animals by revealing that humans' interactions with nonhumans inevitably pervade numerous fields of inquiry and cannot, therefore, be studied in any manner other than through a robustly interdisciplinary approach?

factors in our views of nonhumans—see, for example, the works of Peter Singer and Stephen M. Wise.

Seeing the Pluralism

Even the most cursory investigation across religious traditions reveals an astonishing array of answers to the most basic questions about what the relation of humans to nonhumans has been. Some religious believers have noticed some other animals and taken them seriously even as other believers' absolute dismissal of nonhumans has dominated their local human community.⁵

If those studying "religion and animals" see this diversity, especially as it is manifested variously across different traditions of symbols, practical engagement, and stories⁶ bequeathed to us by our ancestors, the differences noted can inform all of us about the vast range of human possibilities regarding the nonhuman lives around us. In fact, the plurality of views offers important opportunities to probe layers within the views each of us has inherited. In effect, awareness of the plurality of views enables one to carry out an archeological exploration, so to speak, of the scholarly, institutional, cultural or personal claims one has inherited. For example, each inquirer was born into a particular way of talking about and treating the local nonhumans, as well as traditions of generalization about all nonhuman life. Probing that inheritance offers the possibility of seeing its peculiar strengths and limitations. Through such efforts, we can see important features of our own claims, as well as features of other, competing claims regarding humans' place on this earth relative to the place and realities of other living beings. This

⁵ The term "absolute dismissal" is from the opening chapter of Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1984), which is an informed history and philosophical discussion of the mainline western cultural tradition's engagement with nonhuman animals.

⁶ As occasionally happens with the term "myth" when it is used outside religious studies contexts, the word "story" may initially be taken by some as a derogatory term. It is employed in a positive sense here, calling to mind the narratives used in human communities to evoke listeners' awareness, wonder, awe, and even participation in the subject matter of the story. For purposes of this argument, the words "story," "myth," and "narrative" are interchangeable.

same exercise of personal archeology can also help us see our ideas about our place and that of others in complex ecosystems and even the Earth as a whole.

Walking this Terrain

Consider an everyday image—a human traveler trods a path. The path is negotiated within obvious limits—this traveler’s bipedal body, this primate’s vision-dominated sensory abilities, the imagination of those who made *this* path, the traveler’s inherited story of why *this* path matters at all. When approaching our Earth’s other lives, we may take a path composed of an inherited set of symbols, practices, and stories regarding nonhuman lives. If so, we negotiate the terrain before us with important constraints and limitations—we might well have inherited an entirely different set of symbols, practices and stories. Crucially, each person’s particular heritage of ideas—whatever it is—is no less constraining than the obvious limits conferred on each of us by our limited sensory abilities. Just as we can’t hear humpback whales’ ever-changing communications in the sea while on a terrestrial path, our forebears didn’t tell us about those “songs” because our species’ knowledge of “animals” didn’t include knowledge of these complex communications’ existence in any detail until the last half of the twentieth century.⁷

Such limitations, whether of our own personal or cultural inheritance or those imposed by our natural finitudes, underscore how truly embedded any human is in her human abilities and inheritance as she trods whatever paths she chooses to take in life. We are, to use religio-ecological terms one finds in the vibrant discussion of religion and ecology, creatures of vision embedded in the land. Can our vision, physical *and* cultural,

⁷ Consider the basic information gathered in the last quarter of a century about these most complex of nonhuman communications—see, for example, the summary in Roger Payne, *Among Whales* (New York: Scribner, 1995), Chapter 4.

see other creatures fully? Many nonhumans negotiate their own paths with extravagantly different sensibilities, such as the exquisitely sensitive olfactory capacities of elephants and dogs or the echolocation abilities of dolphins. From our paths, it is easily discerned that dolphins live in an entirely foreign, watery world—but what, in fact, do they do with these foreign (to us) abilities and their discernibly large, complex brains? This is not easily known by land dwellers, for our paths go elsewhere.

Indeed, for each embodied creature the challenge is to negotiate one's daily terrain with genetically programmed—and limited—senses. Our eminently human challenge is to use our eyes, our other limited senses, and our all-important ethical abilities and imagination to see the path before us—*where* have we walked, and where *can we walk*, in our relationship to the rest of the animal kingdom?

No matter how one answers this central question,⁸ and no matter whether one's answer weights more heavily humans' obvious special abilities or our equally obvious connections and similarities to other life forms, some simple realities must ground us as we walk any path along which we try to see the field of religion and animals.

The Realities of Other Animals. Most simply, there is a pressing need to allow the realities of "animals" to be a factor in our assessment of religious views of the living beings outside our species. Traditional views may, at times and in important ways, enable us to see dimensions of nonhuman animals. But it is disingenuous to ignore that at least some traditional views have been dominated by caricature and bias, and have thereby created important limitations for believers who might opt for engaging the actual animals as honestly, fully and fairly as possible for the human spirit.

⁸ Consider whether this question is more ethical, more religious, or more scientific. The question has, historically, been asked in each of these ways. Can the question be asked in all three modes at once? And, if so, what might this suggest regarding the relationship of ethical, religious, and scientific enterprises?

If this simplest of needs is to be met, uncritical reliance on inherited views will be an unjustifiable tactic unless we conclude that those inherited views are responsive to the realities of nonhuman animals. And to draw this conclusion, one must in some manner or another engage competing claims about nonhuman animals, whether they be found in other religious traditions or in various traditions of empirical investigation.

The Realities of Interdisciplinary Work. Information and perspectives found in many disciplines, including all sorts of empirical investigation traditions, are of great relevance to our understanding of other animals. The animal piece, in fact, can be found throughout human life, as attested fully by the essays in this volume. But so much of great relevance to the field of religion and animals has been, traditionally, outside the purview and distinctive contributions of religious studies, theology, history of religions, sociology of religion, and anthropology of religion.

Of obvious importance will be the information to be found in many life sciences,⁹ but equally important will be the sensitive and ethically expansive perspectives found in ecological and environmental studies, social and environmental justice critiques, and the many different forms of the animal protection movement.¹⁰

Respecting Multiple Traditions of Empirical Observation. A full engagement with the power and diversity of religious views on nonhuman animals has interesting benefits. It can help one see better the impoverished nature of worldviews that, under the

⁹ The life sciences are really a bewildering forest of individual concerns and approaches that might be found under the general labels "biology" and "botany." The following list only begins to hint at how diverse these have become: agriculture, animal behavior, aquaculture, biochemistry, biotechnology, cognitive sciences, comparative developmental evolutionary psychology, conservation biology, developmental biology, entomology, environmental sciences, ethology, genetics, microbiology, molecular and cell biology, neuroscience, nutrition, paleobiology, parasitology, pharmacology, population biology, systematics, zoopharmacognosy.

¹⁰ Some of these are described in Paul Waldau, "Religion and Which Sciences? Science and Which Community?," *The Journal of Faith and Science*, 4:115-142 (2001).

guise of being purely scientific, are instead *merely* “scientistic.”¹¹ It is well known that the science establishment has had, historically, some serious shortcomings in a number of important respects, some of which have dealt with nonhuman animals. Enlightening appraisals of this important but complex history reveal extended periods of scientific investigation over-determined by agenda-laden paradigms and distorting reductionist ideologies that admit of no other valid means of human knowledge. Analyses of this complex aspect of our scientific traditions and the occasional lack of humility in the scientific establishment come from both within and without the halls of science. Of particular relevance here are many astute observations of informed philosophers of science, theologians, and ethicists.¹²

Empirical assessments of the realities around us, including other animals, are not, of course, the province of science(s) alone. Religious traditions often hold fascinating insights that reflect empirical observations.¹³ The success of both scientific empiricism and other traditions of empirical observation is grounded in the fact that each of us as an embodied individual naturally engages in empirical investigation of our surroundings.

In the midst of our highly individualized, thoroughly grounded lives as one of Earth’s terrestrials, each of us can, as a moral being, consider the impacts of our actions on those “others” nearby, whether they are human or nonhuman. We are all acutely aware

¹¹ The concept is raised in both academic circles (e.g., Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997); and Gregory R. Peterson, “Demarcation and the Scientistic Fallacy,” *Zygon*, 38, no. 4 (December 2003): 751-761) and in widely used educational tools designed to advance critical thinking (e.g., Theodore Schick, Jr., and Lewis Vaughn, *How to Think about Weird Things*, Second Edition (Mountain View, California: Mayfield, 1999)).

¹² See, for example, Bernard E. Rollin, *The Unheeded Cry: Animal Consciousness, Animal Pain and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Barbour 1997; Keith Ward, *Defending the Soul* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1992) (particularly the critique of J. Monod generally and that of Richard Dawkins’ facile dismissal of religion); and Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*, Revised Edition (New York: Routledge, 1995) (re sociobiology).

¹³ It is well known, for example, that various indigenous traditions have had keen awareness of the lives and habits of nonhuman animals. Examples from the Buddhist and Christian traditions can be found in Paul

that we have very special capacities for insights into the value and sufferings of living beings. If we take the time to notice the living beings around us, we see much more than atomized individuals. We see, of course, individuals in *their* context—that is, amidst their families, communities, populations, species, and larger ecological webs.

Modern western ways of talking about humans often place very high value on the importance of individuals (for example, the notion of “rights” held by individuals is often held to be the high water mark of ethical and even legal development).¹⁴ Yet it is uncontroversial these days to assert that other ecological realities are also an essential, even if unseen, part of any individual’s life. That there can be important relationships between and among species is the operative insight in Thomas Berry’s eloquently observation in the Prologue, “we cannot be truly ourselves in any adequate manner without all our companion beings throughout the earth. The larger community constitutes our greater self.” As Darwin showed in such detail, life is indeed a dance of many partners.

Individual mammals, for example, whether members of the human or any other species, are always individuals in *social* circumstances.¹⁵ This all-important mutual integration of lives, often downplayed in atomized conceptualizations of “person” and “ethics,” can be seen in the simplest features and basic circumstances of any individual mammal’s life. Indeed, we *cannot* understand any living being's "individuality" without considering such interrelatedness within a community. Further, since all life grows and

Waldau, *The Specter of Speciesism: Buddhist and Christian Views of Animals*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) in, respectively, Chapters 6 and 8.

¹⁴ A relevant study is Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989). The most deliberate and systematic philosophizing about moral rights for nonhumans remains Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, 2d Edition (London:Routledge, 1988), and the most detailed attempt to state the basis of legal rights for some nonhuman animals is Steven M. Wise, *Rattling the Cage: Toward Legal Rights for Animals* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Merloyd Lawrence/Perseus, 2000).

dies in a larger web, any individual, regardless of his or her species membership, is *fully* seen and understood only within that web. This interconnection is epitomized by Gary Snyder's Buddhist-inspired observation that "there is no death that is not somebody's food, no life that is not somebody's death...."¹⁶

The discrete existence of "individuals," like the existence of different species, is one of the most striking and least disputable of biological data, but a heavy concentration on individuality alone will mislead if is not balanced against the connectedness of family, community, species, similar life forms, and, indeed, all life. And what is true of our ability to engage meaningfully the realities of individuals is also true of our comprehension of "species"—we cannot understand any individual or any species outside its larger ecological context.

These salient realities of interconnectedness in no way require those who study religion and animals to downplay claims that individuality and species are important dimensions of our understanding of biological life. But this profound and defining interconnectedness does suggest that *any* vision or account of life that focuses heavily on just individual-level phenomena or just species-level phenomena will be altogether too one-dimensional to engage the fullest range of humans' remarkable abilities to notice and care about "others."

Embracing the Breadth of Our Ethical Natures. Taking the time to notice and be serious about such realities has, of course, ethical dimensions. How can one know which individuals to consider important if one doesn't know them in context? The questions "Which individuals will be seen?" and "Will they be only humans?" beg further questions about social and ecological realities and connections. Together, these questions

¹⁵ This is, of course, true of some non-mammals as well.

underscore the inherently ethical nature of seeing beyond individuals, beyond any one species, and beyond caricatured images of “animals” advanced by any single tradition of human valuing. A moral agent, to see the world well and take responsibility for her impacts upon “others,” *must* see complementary, larger biological realities that are central parts of any whole life.

Thus, if we are to honor that which each culture, through its religions or other ethically-sensitive views of life, has proudly asserted about humans, namely, that *we are ethical beings*, we come to this simple issue—who are the others about whom or which I *should* care? It is axiomatic that such a purely ethical question is integrally related to the very core of *any* religious sensibility. All versions of religious ethics, in one way or another, postulate that humans, as moral actors, have an obligation to know the consequences of their own actions. And if engaging the other lives on the earth—whether individual animals, populations, integrated parts of a web of life in a specific econiche, or the whole earth—has *ethical* dimensions, then *refusals* to take such realities into account *necessarily* do as well. An implication of the claim that “the larger community constitutes our greater self” is, then, that we, as ethical beings, must try to learn about the “others” in our “larger community/greater self.”

It is not just knowledge of others animals' realities, then, that has potential ethical implications, *but our ignorances as well*.

If so, we find ourselves in a quandary about how to handle traditional claims about nonhuman animals. Given that taking religious claims seriously is a “must” if the adherents are to be engaged, can we take each and every element of specific, dismissive claims about nonhuman animals in the same way as those adherents do? Merely passing

¹⁶ Gary Snyder, “Grace,” *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, 43 (Fall 1984): 1.

along a view because it is traditional is risky business, for our forebears made claims that are, *if used as propositional claims* about the world and animals surrounding us, often demonstrably wrong. It is a commonplace in modern education that an unreflective adherence to traditional claims has often been the excuse for failing to challenge inherited prejudices. Blind allegiance to inherited values—women are inferior to men, blacks were destined by God to be the slaves of whites—was often the soul, so to speak, of the race, ethnic and gender prejudices identified so fully in the twentieth century. These biases were often premised on an obviously fallacious reasoning process—absence of evidence was converted into evidence of absence. In other words, a refusal to admit evidence of the oppressed beings' special natures was converted into evidence that they lacked any important qualities. But it was simply the refusal to look, the failure to take these marginalized beings seriously, that created the alleged “absence of evidence.” The field of religion and animals is confronted with the simple question of whether this same kind of refusal, and in particular its self-inflicted ignorance, has been taking place in some religions and in education because of some humans’ deep biases against members of nonhuman species? Have *we* refused to take *them* seriously or to notice *their* realities, and thus converted a manufactured absence of evidence of their moral importance into evidence of an absence of moral importance?

Seeing the Terrain’s Hills and Valleys: *Goals* in Studying Religion and Animals

To be sure, certain well-known limitations do govern us with regard to our engagement with the lives of other animals. In one sense, humans are typical primates—vision, rather than some other sensory apparatus, dominates our terrestrial existence. But as earth’s precocious animals, it is well within our abilities to go further than mere appearance even when perception of the details of nonhuman lives is notoriously

difficult. Above all, if we are to live up to our important claim that we have considerable moral, religious and philosophical abilities, we must *see* past our own limits and biases. This means we, as embodied, vision-dominated, ambulating animals, must get beyond earth-bound inclinations to focus on our immediate surroundings—our next step, our physical wants, our family, our limited communities of belief, race and species. Visionaries like Thomas Berry help us "see" further, using our imagination to assess where and how our community "walks" among all living beings.

Some religious traditions are well-known for the breadth of their attempt to engage other lives—Jainism and some indigenous traditions are often cited for their regard for nonhuman lives. A few religious traditions, and in some case quasi-religions, have at one time or another advanced only the interests of a single race or a single nation. Other religious traditions have focused primarily, even exclusively, on a commitment to all *and only* humans. Yet, as familiar as it is to contemporary ears, a commitment to our own species only, challenged as "speciesism" in modern times, is not characteristic of all religions nor even all subtraditions of those religions that in their mainline interpretation are dominated by this limitation.¹⁷

In the face of such pluralism, the journey one undertakes when exploring "religion and animals" is obviously multidimensional, all of which suggests a number of diverse goals if one is to travel very far in this exploration. Along the many paths into the emerging field of religion and animals, one encounters extraordinary ways in which any human's understanding of other living beings, whether human or nonhuman, is a product of "social construction"—that is, the images that dominate are as much or more a product of peculiar, culture-bound generalizations and presuppositions as they are an immediate

¹⁷ "Speciesism" is a word coined in 1970, and used widely now by many philosophers. For an analysis, see

and personal response to the observable realities of the animals who are being “described/constructed.” The prevalence of this phenomenon is easier to discern when one looks at a large collection of views, whether from different cultures or multiple eras from a cultural tradition that has grown and evolved over long periods of time. For example, if one looks across the temporal sequence of dominant views of nonhuman animals in the western intellectual tradition, one finds not a single story, but an accumulation of changing paradigms.¹⁸

Similarly, if one looks across a large number of traditions, such as those represented in this volume, one more easily can perceive and appreciate the socially constructed features of *each* view. Social construction is also more readily apparent if one compares a number of views dominated by the all-too-common claim that they are *the only* answer to *all* interesting questions pertaining to religion and animal issues. Such exclusivism happens in different subtraditions. It is found sometimes, for example, in various traditions that make claims about religious writings they deem to be infallible revelation full of propositional content about, among other things, nonhuman animals. *But exclusivism also occurs in certain scientific traditions*, such as behaviorism or other scientific claims, that assert aggressively their own validity in ways that exclude all other human approaches to nonhuman animals’ realities.

Pluralism can be, then, an ally when one is assessing one’s own or others’ understanding of the diverse universe of issues intuitively grouped under the umbrella we are calling “religion and animals.” Acknowledging both pluralism and the diversity of

Waldau 2001.

¹⁸ One well-known four-part sequence is used by the environmental ethicist Hargrove: ancient, medieval (heavily symbolic), modern (representative use of animal images), and post-modern—see, Eugene Hargrove, “The Role of Zoos in the Twenty-First Century”, in B. G. Norton and others, eds., *Ethics on the Ark: Zoos, Animal Welfare and Wildlife Conservation* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 13-19.

issues also helps one see how relevant the religion and animals field is to contemporary debates over ethics or morality. Indeed, if one looks generally at the many parts of any one complex contemporary society (take, for example, any of the early twenty-first century industrialized countries), it will be apparent that there are many different views of nonhuman animals, some of which are in direct competition with others. The pluralism is, in effect, educational, and forces one to consider the origin and finitudes of any one view claiming to be exhaustive or definitive.