

On Animals: Responses to David Clough's Systematic Theology

with David Fergusson, "God, Christ, and Animals"; Margaret B. Adam, "The Particularity of Animals and of Jesus Christ"; Christopher Carter, "The Imago Dei as the Mind of Jesus Christ"; Stephen H. Webb, "Toward a Weak Anthropocentrism"; and David Clough, "On Thinking Theologically about Animals: A Response."

ON THINKING THEOLOGICALLY ABOUT ANIMALS: A RESPONSE

by David Clough

Abstract. In response to evaluations of *On Animals: Volume 1, Systematic Theology* by Margaret Adams, Christopher Carter, David Fergusson, and Stephen Webb, this article argues that the theological reappraisals of key doctrines argued for in the book are important for an adequate theological discussion of animals. The article addresses critical points raised by these authors in relation to the creation of human beings in the image of God, the doctrine of the incarnation, the theological ordering of creatures, anthropocentrism, and the doctrine of God. It concludes that, given previous neglect, much more discussion by theologians is required in order to think better concerning the place of animals in Christian theology, but acting better toward fellow animal creatures is an important next step toward this goal.

Keywords: animals; anthropocentrism; creation; image of God; incarnation; theology

One way of summarizing the aim of my book is to identify and address a range of theological issues that become apparent when we take animals to be the subject of theological interest, and to demonstrate that many of the ways we have drawn theological boundaries between human and nonhuman animals are in need of rethinking. The critical questions raised by the preceding evaluations of my project can be split into two groups. First, arguments that the issues I raise are not problematic after all, or that the remedies I propose are unattractive. All four authors variously take issue with my discussion regarding doctrines of humanity made in

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God's image, the doctrine of the incarnation, the identification of humans as creatures, the abandonment of a Neoplatonic creaturely hierarchy, and anthropocentrism. The second set of critical questions judge that *more* theological innovation will be necessary in order to meet my goals, most clearly David Fergusson's argument in relation to a personal doctrine of God. I remain persuaded, on the one hand, that the new theological construals for which I argue are necessary for Christian theology to address animals adequately and, on the other hand, that it is not necessary to revise our doctrine of God in order so to do. In this response I will hope to show that this occupation of a middle ground does not leave me sitting uncomfortably on a wobbly fence. I will treat each of the issues raised by the papers, and listed above, in turn.

First, then, it seems that my preoccupation in the book with the doctrine of humans as the image of God needs explication (Clough 2012, 64–67, 100–102). This topic needs consideration when we attend to animals, in my view, primarily because the doctrine seems to be the focal point of most theological claims that humans are uniquely or centrally objects of God's concern in creation and redemption. For as long as we erroneously believe that there is something godly about the human species that lifts us above the rest of the created order—with the possible exception of angelic beings—we will be stuck in bad patterns of theology and worse patterns of ethics in relation to the rest of creation. It is theologically important to recognize that there is nothing in the human make-up that makes us godlike, *contra* the Stoic belief that our unique rationality was a divine attribute uniting us with the heavenly realm. God is God and we are not—not even a little bit. If we image God—and I take this to be an open question—it is, in Christian theological terms, to the extent that we participate in the true image of God, Jesus Christ, and fulfill the vocation God has set before us.

I judge Christopher Carter's proposal to retain the traditional identification of our minds with the image of God (Carter 2014, 756–57) to be particularly problematic, because, as Hans Reinders among many others has argued (Reinders 2008), once we have done this it is hard to resist the implication that those with less cognitive ability image God less well and are consequently less human than others. Margaret Adam argues that we do not need to expand the image of God beyond the human in order to understand our moral responsibility toward other creatures (Adam 2014, 748) but I suggest we do need to do so in order to be faithful to Christian Scripture and tradition. In the Bible, lions, hens, lambs, and doves and other stranger creatures frequently image God (e.g., Isa. 31.4–5; Mt. 23.37; Jn 1.29; Mk 1.10; Rev. 5.6). Among later theological authors, Augustine and Aquinas, to name but two, affirmed that a trace of the Trinity is found in every creature (Aquinas 1963, I, qu. 45, a. 7, citing Augustine's *de Trinitate*). Stephen Webb argues that an account of imaging God as a human vocation is residually anthropocentric (Webb 2014, 763), but I

disagree that this is the case. Every creature plays its own role before God and therefore can be said to have its own vocation: it is called into being by God and is called to take its particular part in the earthly chorus of divine worship, whether supernova or hill or stream or tree or worm or hedgehog or human. I remain convinced, therefore, that theologians need to give much more careful consideration to how to speak well concerning the image of God in a more-than-human context, and that the Christological emphasis for which I argue (Clough 2012, 100–02) will be a crucial element in doing this well.

The second key topic raised by the authors is that of incarnation. In various ways, they each ask what is wrong with an account of the incarnation that says that God became incarnate in the particular human being Jesus Christ and in so doing redeemed all creation. My answer is that there is nothing at all wrong with this theological claim, provided it is construed correctly. I am in full agreement with Adam and Webb in affirming the scandalous particularity of Christian doctrine in this area (Adam 2014, 749; Webb 2014, 763): the redemption of the Universe is effected in the life and death of one single creature. I also agree with Adam that soteriology cannot function with a “like-saves-like” logic (Adam 2014, 749). If we do not take care, however, we are in danger of using Christology to prop up our sense of species self-importance. Let us take a parallel example: according to the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, it is right to believe that the particular creature God became was male, but it is wrong to believe that Christ’s maleness means only males are reconciled to God, or that God’s incarnation as male privileges males over females. In the same way, it is right to believe that the particular creature God became belonged to the human species, but it is wrong to believe that Christ’s membership of this species means only humans are reconciled to God, or that God’s incarnation as a member of this species privileges it over other species. I am inclined to think, therefore, that it is as unwise to try to find reasons that incarnation *had* to be human, as it is to find reasons that the incarnation had to be male. My problem is not with the particularity of the incarnation, therefore, but with theological *generalizing* about it at the arbitrary level of species. Christians have mostly concluded, thank God, that it is a bad idea to generalize about the gender of Christ, but for some reason we continue to think that generalizing about the species of Christ is legitimate. We need either to stick with the particularity of this one creature named Jesus Christ, or if we ever need to generalize, the best generalization is to say simply that God became a creature.

David Fergusson argues that my claim that the species of the creature in which God became incarnate is incidental in the same way as its gender brings us to “a *reductio ad absurdum* of traditional soteriological claims” (Fergusson 2014, 745), where the Word of God might as well have been a crocodile or hippopotamus. I agree that a crocodile Christ is an absurdity

within salvation history as we know it—however many ideas it provokes for theological cartoons—but considering other alternative features of the particularity of the incarnation are equally absurd. If Jesus Christ had lived as a hermit on some isolated island beyond the fringe of the Roman Empire, with few dealings with anyone, it is hard to imagine the incarnation working out in a way that would satisfy Fergusson's core concerns: manipulating geographical particularity therefore leads to a similar *reductio ad absurdum*. If Jesus Christ had lived in the first few centuries following the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, there would have been no language with which his contemporaries could have communicated about or recorded their experience, and the most we could hope for would then be oral and subsequent textual traditions consisting of nothing more than “UG!” Alternatives to the chronological particularity of Jesus Christ, then, also lead to absurdity. In another version of salvation history, God could have become incarnate in a different place or time, but given the salvation history that we inhabit, narrating alternatives are absurd. My argument is not that in our salvation history God might as well have become crocodile: God becoming human in Jesus Christ must be understood theologically as the pivotal point of the whole of salvation history, to which everything leads and from which everything follows. My argument is that we cannot pick a particular aspect of the particularity of the incarnation such as place, time, race, gender, or species, and make a special claim for its theological significance. The theological content of the affirmation that God became human in Jesus Christ is that this is the way God acted to reconcile and redeem creation. It would be truly absurd to indulge our species self-preoccupation to such an extent that we conclude in preference that the incarnation means God's final confirmation of human importance among the other creatures.

The identification of humans as creatures is a third point of concern, identified by Carter (Carter 2014, 758). Carter argues that the recognition of humans as animal creatures can have only a problematic reception among African Americans who have been denigrated as nonhuman animals by white Christians over centuries. For those who have only recently, if at all, been recognized as being fully human, Carter observes, the language of creatureliness risks dehumanizing human beings (Carter 2014, 759). I am of course deeply sympathetic to the after-effects of white racist attitudes that considered animality to be a term of abuse and, as a white heir to this oppression, I must clearly offer reflection on appropriate theological strategies for dealing with this legacy in ongoing dialogue with black fellow Christians. We must recognize parallels here in the identifications of women, or Jews, or persons with disabilities, with animals supposed to be irrational. I wonder whether the excesses of theological anthropocentrism arise in the context of a similar crisis of identity to the one that Carter describes. Perhaps, as Walter Brueggemann argues, Genesis 1 is good news to an oppressed people in exile that, despite all

appearances, have an important place in God's good purposes for the world (1982, 24–25); perhaps African American Christians need time fully to receive a similar message before it makes any sense to propose to them the humility of the reciprocal recognition of being one kind of animal creature among many.

In the context of Carter's point about the status of race, I do not believe there is anything in my account that would undermine the legitimate recognition of racial identity. In proposing that it is theologically appropriate for humans to identify themselves as animal creatures, I am not suggesting there is no value in recognizing additional particularities in definitions of human identity. Neither am I suggesting that it is insignificant to identify as members of the human species. To name human beings theologically as human animal creatures is to situate human identity clearly within expanding concentric circles. I argue in the book that it is significant to pause at and reflect on creatures that fall within the boundary of the human—ground that has been well covered in the theological tradition to date, though clearly not in a way that has been adequately attentive to racial identity. My argument is that there is also value in considering the creatures that fall within a wider circle: that of the animal (Clough 2012, xx–xxiii). There is nothing in this scheme that suggests it would be inappropriate to consider relevant boundaries within that of the human animal creature, such as race. In sum, while recognizing the very acute sensitivities that arise from the great injustice done in identifying African Americans with nonhuman animals, I do not see the situation of any humans being advanced through the denial that, beyond our common humanity, all humans also share characteristics with other animal and nonanimal creatures.

Stephen Webb concludes that I remain a weak anthropocentrist despite my confused protestations, and that my rejection of the elaborate Neoplatonic chain of being in favor of a flattened bipolarity between God and creatures unhelpfully elevates the body/soul divide. Regarding the latter point, I think our dualities are missing each other. The bipolarity I am defending is creator/creature, not material/spiritual. All the angels and archangels, together with anything that is spiritual in earthly creatures, belongs on our creaturely side of this divide, as does the entirety of the new creation to which Christians look forward. In Christ alone that duality is overcome. I do not think we can live with a great chain of being of creatures any more than we can live with the orders within humanity it specified. I do not think we have any proper grounds to believe we participate more fully in the divine than the lilies or the birds of the air, the busy ant, or the rejoicing hills (Mt 6.26–8; Prov. 6.6–8; Ps 98.8). As far as we know, we think and talk more about our participation, and we certainly do it in a way that is particular to us, but humans are very apt to measure participation in the divine on the basis of attributes we are already convinced are

human strengths. We need, therefore, a very different theological account of creaturely difference, which I explore in *On Animals* 1, Chapter 3.

As regards Webb's charge that I am confusedly and weakly anthropocentric (Webb 2014, 761–62), my hope that my account is attentive to complexity rather than merely confused. The kind of perspectival anthropocentrism I consider inevitable is, it seems to me, not properly termed anthropocentrism at all. I do recognize that we view the world as humans and that our moral task begins in this context (Clough 2012, xxii–xxiii); I do not believe that the centrality we inevitably have in our own worlds corresponds to human centrality from a divine point of view. In fact, it seems to me that confusing our point of view with God's is the root of many of our problems in this area. I do not think this position qualifies as even weak anthropocentrism: wholly altruistic persons still look at the world with themselves at the center, but should not for that reason be accused of even weak egoism.

Fergusson suggests my book is misleadingly described as systematic theology (Fergusson 2014, 742). Clearly, the book does not present a comprehensive account of all topics in systematic theology, but if this were a requirement whenever we used the term, it could only be applied to works on the scale of Thomas's *Summa theologiae* or Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and even then we might find aspects wanting. My project aims to be systematic in method, rather than extent. I gratefully leave to others the task of setting out and defending the presuppositions and structure of an aspirationally comprehensive theological system; my work instead seeks to draw attention to significant problems in the coherence of traditionally conceived theological systems that become apparent when one thinks about animals, and to propose remedial action. Even if we are not initially motivated by concern for other animals, I am arguing that this issue needs urgent and sustained theological attention, just to keep the systematic theology show on the road. It is not always appreciated that Descartes was motivated to propose the ludicrous theory that nonhuman animals were automata by a concern about the plausibility of Christian doctrine of the afterlife (Descartes 1968, 76). In the 400 years since, his theory has been roundly rejected, but, mystifyingly, theologians have, almost exclusively, been asleep at the wheel in trying to provide a better account of the place of other animals, despite the apologetic need to respond to the challenge of evolutionary theory that has arisen in the meantime. An additional particular problem I am seeking to address is that many Christians, committed as I am to this traditional framework, seem to believe that it instrumentalizes the entire nonhuman creation to human ends, on divine authority. I consider this to be a profound theological mistake, if not a blasphemy, with the dire and ungodly ethical consequence of, once again, falsely claiming God's blessing for our cruel exploitation of weaker fellow creatures. My book primarily succeeds or fails, then, on

whether it convinces Christian theologians who take broadly traditional views of Christian Scripture and tradition, that there are problems with the coherence of our theology here, and that these sources should not be read as establishing humans as God's sole or focal end in creation, reconciliation, and redemption. This is the modest doctrinal ground that needs to be gained, in my view, in order to argue for the radical changes in the practice of Christians toward other animals that will be the focus of volume II.

Fergusson also makes the much more challenging point that my implicit personal doctrine of God may be at odds with my espoused rejection of most forms of anthropocentrism. I take seriously his citing of Hume's point that if we were intelligent spiders we would be likely to use spiderly metaphors to talk about God. Our personal language about God is similarly metaphorical: we should have confidence that used rightly and by God's grace our language names something true about God, but we should remain acutely alert to divine/human differences. Human agency, for example, may well be more like the agency of a tree than it is like God's agency. Our theology and worship are a human-specific mode of response to God rather than the unique earthly use of the songs of the angels. A personal doctrine of God is therefore only problematic if we place human and divine personhood on some continuum, or if we exaggerate the value of personhood, or both. I do want to show that even personal concepts such as sin are porous in relation other animals, but it works the other way around, too: "Go to the ant, you sluggard" says Proverbs (6.6); consider the birds of the air and the lilies, says Jesus (Mt 6.26–9): there are ways that humans need to strive to imitate the virtues of nonpersonal creatures. I suggest, therefore, that it is not our doctrine of God that needs to change, but our renewed appreciation of the difference between doctrine of God and theological anthropology.

Fergusson also challenges me to specify where I sit on a spectrum that has strong anthropocentrism at one end and indeterminate variety with no especial human significance on the other. I think we can start on this task by stating clearly the hypothetical judgment that God could have created a universe that glorified Godself and allowed the participation of creatures in the triune life without human beings. As another boundary marker, in the context of climate change it is less hypothetical to state that there could be a future for life in God's Universe after the extinction of human life. Beyond these broad benchmarks, I submit that it is not spiritually healthy to try to rate our relative importance to God in comparison to other creatures, any more than it would be healthy for you or I to try to rate our personal importance to God among fellow human beings. By God's grace we each find ourselves here, in a particular creaturely context, with a particular creaturely task before us. I propose we spend more time trying to do that well, and less time preoccupied with creaturely league table rankings.

In conclusion, once we have noticed the significance of other animal creatures for the theological project, we cannot avoid the hard task of revisiting what we thought we knew of Christian doctrine to ask if it still makes sense with this larger referent in view. My hope was that this book would provoke such reflection and conversation among Christian theologians, and I am therefore most grateful to my interlocutors for this debate and interchange. Much more such exploration is necessary, well beyond the topics the book treats, though we must not use this quest to *think better* in relation to other animals to defer or delay the still more urgent demand to *act better*, which is the topic of *On Animals: Volume 2, Theological Ethics*, which should appear in 2015. Adam reminds us that the relationship between right belief and right practice is much more complex than seeing them respectively as cause and effect (Adam 2014, 748). Perhaps finding ways to recognize in practice the belief that other animals are our fellows, like us created, reconciled, and redeemed by God, is the most important next step in good theological thinking concerning them.

NOTE

This article is based on the author's response to a panel presentation sponsored by the Christian Systematic Theology Section and the Animals and Religion Group at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Baltimore, MD, November 24, 2013. The panel discussion focused on the author's book *On Animals: Volume 1, Systematic Theology*.

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