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Holy Dogs and Asses: Animals in the Christian Tradition. By **Laura Hobgood-Oster**. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. xiv + 179 pp. $35.00 cloth.

In recent years, historians, ethicists, and theologians have taken a new look at the role of animals in the Christian tradition. Additionally, agencies like the National Endowment for the Humanities have sponsored summer institutes, and academic societies such as the American Academy of Religion have added consultations probing such matters. So Hobgood-Oster's study, one that she acknowledges is preliminary and thus far from exhaustive, is a welcome overview that represents the cutting edge of this strand of scholarship.

Hobgood-Oster begins with a technical chapter on methodology that would work better as an appended "note on method" since it comes across as an apologetic for considering a topic that she believes some would readily dismiss as trite and unworthy of academic scrutiny. There she tries to demonstrate that using feminist theory, ritual studies approaches, visual and material culture angles, and cultural anthropology—along with textual studies—will shatter the binary distinction that has separated humans from what she calls "other-than-human" animals. Of course, that distinction can never be totally dissolved, though the way it has led to domination and control by humans over other animals may be mitigated. The point is that difference does not mean one form of life is necessarily superior to any other.

The six chapters that comprise the heart of Hobgood-Oster's study are full of insight and tantalizing suggestion. She argues convincingly that in the West, the Enlightenment is a pivotal era in transforming the religious understanding of animals and marginalizing them. She highlights the Cartesian claim that the linguistic ability made the world "humanocentric" (5), relegating animals to a position of subordinate, mechanistic beings. But she then delves more deeply into the western religious traditions, finding rich materials especially in apocryphal texts that reveal animals, for example, as among those who worship, adore, and protect Jesus; indeed, animals are often able to see (with insight) what mortals do not.

Hobgood-Oster also finds in medieval hagiography numerous examples of the later tradition silencing animal voices. Some are models of piety; some are sources of revelation; some even are martyrs. Here she draws as well on inclusion of animals in artistic renderings of the nativity and the Last Supper to show that at least some strands of Christian thought did not regard animals as outside the realm of divine providence. A chapter on dogs is especially provocative, for Hobgood-Oster knows well that much of the Judeo-Christian tradition over the centuries classified dogs not as pets who

were virtually family members, but rather as unclean scavengers. Although some depictions indicate that dogs represent those unworthy of salvation, others—such as a well-known tale of Peter and a preaching dog, or Bassano's "Last Supper," which shows a dog cuddled at Jesus' feet—are more positive.

Yet only in recent years, with a surge of interest in rituals such as annual blessings of the animals, has the western Christian tradition celebrated the presence of non-human species as part of the diversity of creation. Hobgood-Oster clearly demonstrates that such services, even the large-scale one at New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine that welcomes animals into the nave during worship, reveal many of the contradictions that challenge efforts to end the binary distinction between humans and other animals and to demolish the notion that humans should remain superior and dominant. Blessings of the animals tend to focus on pets and domesticated animals; none deals with the abuse and cruelty that often mark facilities that mass-produce animals for consumption or even the puppy mills that may yield the very animals receiving a blessing. Ethical dilemmas and dichotomies remain.

Those dichotomies, Hobgood-Oster argues in her final chapter, come through even in some of the theological endeavors that try to wrestle with them, most prominently perhaps in the case of Christian hunters who theologize about showing mercy to animals slaughtered rather than thinking about animal rights or a symbiotic relationship among all creatures. Others, however, either directly or indirectly push Christian thought in different directions. Hobgood-Oster looks most favorably on the work of Andrew Linzey, Jay McDaniel, and the ecofeminist theologian Sallie McFague. Linzey, although still accepting human dominance over other dimensions of creation, draws on process theology to claim that God joins in the suffering of animals mistreated or abused, while McDaniel offers a biocentric panentheism that seeks to allow for the divine presence in every dimension of creation, including non-human animals. But Hobgood-Oster is especially taken by McFague's arguments regarding the world and all that is in it as representing the very body of God. That, she believes, allows creation to become the home for every living thing, without patriarchal or humanocentric dominance.

Hobgood-Oster has penned a pioneering study and repeatedly offers ideas for further work. Yet this is an important book in its own right, particularly in an age when humanity is slowly coming to terms with a wide range of ecological and environmental issues and recognizing that dominance and exploitation do not result in responsible stewardship. Some might still argue, as did Karl Barth, that because God became incarnate in human form—and not in the form of a dog, for example—human dominion remains central to

all life. Hobgood-Oster provides a compelling alternative perspective, one for which I am certain that the seven dogs who share my home are as grateful as I.

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Christian Inculturation in India. By **Paul M. Collins**. Liturgy, Worship, and Society. Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2007. xvii + 244 pp. $99.95 cloth.

A wedding necklace (*thāli* or *tāli*) instead of a wedding ring; an auspiciously blessed marriage mat (*mukūrttam*); a tonsure or topknot (*kūdūmi*, also known as *sikha*); a forehead mark (*tilak* or *bindi*; or *kūmūm*); use of a palanquin, white horse, and/or parasol (*chatra*) in a ritual procession; clarified butter (*ghee*) and raw sugar (*ghur*), honey, coconut, or some other food for a customary celebration; ingesting a ritually "cooling" or "heating" substance; sitting cross-legged for worship or prayer; maintaining a dual identity, using both a "Christian" and a "Hindu" name; taking communion only with one's right hand; "mother-tongue" worship versus Latin, Syro-Malabari (Syriac) or Sanskriti rites: the list of cultural and social issues, with controversial religious or ritual overtones, among hundreds of Christians communities of India, seems endless.

Christian worship, ever capable of transcending cultural barriers, has never been confined to one culture. It certainly is not bound by patterns imposed from Europe. No one culture or language is, in itself, sacred. All possess a potential of becoming so, to a greater or lesser degree. Christian cultures of India, with their norms or rituals, are not mere instances of "legitimization," or "recognition," by alien Christians from the West. Rather, each reflects an instance of the "indigenous discovery of Christianity" by one among manifold Indian peoples, for themselves. Hence, each attempt to understand Christianity in India requires judicious deference and humility, especially for anyone coming from outside India. It takes a special temerity for such a person to explain "Christian inculturation" in India. Even someone reared within India cannot fully "represent" all that is India, since no one person holds a cultural and linguistic grasp of the subcontinent's peoples as a whole, so as to totally comprehend the cultural ethos and understandings of the thousands of separate communities that make up the pluralism we know as "India." Since Christianity itself has no fixed or universal cultural, linguistic, or geographic center point, its ecumenism is always pluralistic, with only God at its center.