

## THE ANIMAL WITHIN CREATION: THOUGHTS FROM CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY\*

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### ABSTRACT

The article's topic is *animal* in Christian religion and concept of creation. It describes how Christian theology has reflected the status and significance of animals in the historical development, which positions it has created or preferred in this matter and how they have changed from biblical times until our post-modern present age. Methodically this cross-section through history means that each period is conveyed in its basic features and presented through selected authors, works or texts of the given time. Along with the historical line, the text also follows the principal question of the nature of the relation between human and animal from a theological viewpoint. The object of reflection is thus also the theoretical basis for a morally justifiable relation of post-modern people to other living creatures. The text mainly deals with the following key aspects: a) anthropocentrism and its difficulties in relation to the position of animals in the western, traditionally Christian culture, b) possible ethical perspectives and consequences of the theological concept of creation for the status of animal today.

### Keywords

Animal; Christianity; Theology of Creation; Historical development; Bible; Integral approach

DOI: 10.14712/23363398.2023.14

**C**hristianity is not a religion in which animals are part of the cult. On the contrary. Among other things, high Christian monotheism is characterised by a strict distinction between the immanent

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\* The article is an extended version of a Czech text 'Bestia. Zvíře v historickém kontextu,' *Archivum trebonense* 15 (2020): 18–29.

and transcendent level. Here, animals are not part of the supernatural world; they are not connected to the heavenly spheres, they cannot be the bearer of magical powers, they are not attributed with otherworldly existence. The animal is neither a brother or a sister in the true sense of the word, yet nor is it a monstrosity that frightens and threatens and should be feared. Animals in the Christian concept are not pets treated with exclusive care, but neither are they ‘material on legs’ that could be used in a cruel way as raw material and then be disposed of. So, what status befits the animal within Christianity? A simple question with no simple answer. Theology itself responds differently and inconsistently for different eras. At the same time, however, there is an indisputable continuity of a certain type of thinking with its characteristic features which can be identified as Christian, regardless of the historical context. And it is precisely this continuity that enables a response that is differentiated and principled at the same time. The key to understanding is ‘creation’ as a theological category.

At first, I introduce the concept of creation against the historical background, which gives a meaningful framework when thinking about the status of animals in the Christian religion. Subsequently, I distinguish the Old Testament and New Testament contexts and their specificity of meaning in the approach to animals. The next procedure is chronological; the article outlines the development of Christian thought and theology regarding the issue of animals from the beginnings of Christianity to the present day. Parallel to the historical line, the text also follows the principled question of the nature of the relationship between human and animal from the theological point of view. In the end, the subject of reflection also includes the theoretical basis of the morally justifiable relationship of postmodern humans to other living creatures. All of this, of course, remains within the chosen selection, without claims to completeness, but with the wish that readers will not only gain an insight into past thinking in the given field but may also be inspired to reflect and act in the present.

## **1. The Animal in the Biblical-Christian Context**

### **1.1 On Theology of Creation**

If talk of animals is to be found at all in Christianity, it is in its concept of creation, which closely follows the Jewish concept. This introduces the world with all its elements – stars, mountains, seas, animals,

humans – as the work of God. Hence God is also called the Creator. The expression ‘creation’ – despite the root of the word and the meaning we associate with it – speaks of no (causal) mechanism that wants to clarify how the world came into being but points to the reason for the existence of everything that is. The reason here is the Creator himself. The concept of creation thus primarily means the relationship between the Creator and the world and not a ‘production process’. The nature of the world turns out to be relational. The revolution of Jewish monotheism and its concept of creation consisted in the rigorous distinction between God, human and nature. The human world has somehow ceased to be mutually permeable to the animal and the supernatural world. The consequences for all three areas are obvious: God, the one true, the absolutely transcendent, becomes an exclusive matter, not part of the world as such; humans are freed to their humanity – neither animal nor extraterrestrial; nature can no longer be the stage of unpredictable numinous forces and becomes ‘ordinary’ nature. Of course, we are talking about a process that took place for at least several centuries and for the Hebrews living in the second and first millennium BC, it only gradually transformed their worldview.<sup>1</sup> However, the effects of this process fundamentally exceeded the cultural framework of the Old Orient and became one of the turning points of the spiritual history of our own civilisation sphere. Christianity, unthinkable without its Jewish roots, draws on this historical progress of Judaism of that time also in its objective attitude towards nature, understood as creation.

The biblical textual corpus itself understandably brings no systematic ‘animal concept’.<sup>2</sup> Books of various genres, by authors known, but rather unknown, from a period spanning almost fifteen hundred years, are aimed at a wide audience. They are always period-specific, always situational, but each time they carry a theological meaning. However heterogeneous this diverse collection may seem, it does have a common characteristic: these are not factual, scientific texts, these are not professional treatises, nor even historiography; what we are dealing with is a collection of confessions. Biblical texts want to witness faith; they are testimonies. Therefore, if the authors mention the animal

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<sup>1</sup> This is evidenced by the Hebrews’ ‘readiness’ over centuries to fall away from the true faith. For the whole problem cf. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: From Abraham to the Present: the 4000-year Quest for God* (London: Mandarin, 1996), 18–36, 51–94.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Simone & Claudia Paganini, *Die Biester der Bibel. Warum es in der Heiligen Schrift keine Katzen, aber eine Killer-Kuh gibt* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2022).

world in some places, it is necessary to read and understand it in the context of what was said and not to lose sight of the main intention of the texts.

## 1.2 Old Testament Context

In the Old Testament, animals are thematised indirectly, through narratives, poetic metaphors, verses or wise sayings, mostly in the context of the relationship between human and animal. Even if the actual encounter between humans and animals remains secondary in the background of the ‘main story’ between human and God, the relevant texts do reflect them as wonderful, mysterious and fascinating.<sup>3</sup> This may be largely a reflection of the fact that the bygone participant of the biblical scene is much closer to the animal kingdom than a member of modern Western societies. After all, even for the inhabitants of ancient cities, it was rather impossible to get through life without being directly confronted with animals. The world of everyday worries was so connected to the world of animals that people could not but reflect on how close the lives of humans and animals were. Although the specific relationship to animals in the Old Testament texts varies from a (more) theological position to a (rather) pragmatic one, in summary, all positions show a basic biblical sensitivity to the created nature of all living things.

Evidence of this variety of attitudes towards animals can be found in a number of texts. There are certainly sufficient passages showing that the ancient Israelites were much aware of the economic benefit to them from the animal world. The texts talk about numerous herds, about the products of animals (milk, wool, skin, to a lesser extent also meat), about cattle as currency for all kinds of trade, or about the respectability of the owner resulting from the size of the herd (e.g., Gen. 12:16; Gen. 26:14; Judg. 6:37). Despite the utility value of animals, however, the biblical mentality does not operate with the idea of the herd as a storehouse of meat, which is an idea of the modern West: ‘*consuming animals taken from the herd or stable for the mere pleasure of eating is rejected as intemperance*’ (Amos 6:4; cf. Zech. 11:4–7).<sup>4</sup> The owner chooses from the herd for his own consumption, usually on special,

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Albert de Pury, *Člověk a zvíře – stvoření Boží* (Praha: Kalich, 1999), 21–23. [*Homme et animal, Dieu les créa*. Genève, 1993.]

<sup>4</sup> Cf. De Pury, *Člověk a zvíře*, 34.

almost sacrificial occasions (cf. Gen. 15:9–10; Gen. 18:7; Judg. 6:19ff.). The Psalms, for example, offer another level of access to the world of animals. In these writings, which are poetic in nature, both the beautiful and the monstrous faces of creation are depicted by using examples from the animal world (Ps. 8:9; 74:13–14; 89:10–11). This reflects a theological point of view, as animals are involved in celebration- and salvation-creating processes (the prayer of lion cubs is their *roaring for prey*, Ps. 104:21),<sup>5</sup> and it is interesting from the perspective of depth psychology as well. It may reflect human's timeless desire to meet the world of animals and to have a deeper communion with them. And it probably shows how humans are fascinated by any encounter with (wild) animals in the most archaic layers of their perception, how we repeatedly experience certain existential anxiety that accompanies this encounter and how it might guide us to the potential communication with what is animal and monstrous within ourselves. It is as if the animal holds up a mirror to us in which we can reveal in ourselves a number of elementary features we would otherwise never have realised.<sup>6</sup>

Specifically, the animal is thematised in the so-called Yahwist account of creation (Gen. 2–3). Among other things, humans are entrusted to rule over other living creatures; here, the Hebrew verb refers to wise and just rule, not arbitrary and predatory treatment. It is not without interest that at the beginning only a vegetarian diet is mentioned for both humans and animals (Gen. 1:29–30), and only after the Flood did the peaceful regime give way to a reality where people and animals eat each other (Gen. 9:2–6).<sup>7</sup> In the aforementioned narrative, Albert de Pury considers three findings to be important: 1) there is no essential ('ontological') difference between humans and animals; 2) animals are created to live in relation to humans; and 3) animals are considered as 'help' for humans. The first characteristic does not aim to devalue humans, for it merely points out that both were created and that God breathed the 'breath of life' into both of them. Therefore, human as well as animal received life as a gift. This gift is not the same as participation in the divine being, nor does it mean the gift of immortality. Both humans and animals are inherently mortal in the perspective of this narrative. If there is a fellowship between them, then its meaning can

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Milan Balabán, *Hebrejské člověkosloví* (Praha: Herrmann & synové, 1996), 135.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. De Pury, *Člověk a zvíře*, 36, 38–39.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant: Bilical Themes of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1992), 99.

be found in their particular earthly lives to which they were called as created beings. The second characteristic relates the creation of animals to a precise intention: from an anthropological point of view, the animal is presented as a kind of remedy for human loneliness. Thus, from the very beginning, the Old Testament reflects the existence of animals with regard to humans, and therefore as a relational matter. Humankind receives the privilege of naming the animals. In doing so, it grants them a personal identity analogous to its own and enters into dialogue with them, so to speak. In comparison, consider that in the Yahwist story this privilege applies to no other created 'things' (such as trees or watercourses). Giving a name necessarily means establishing a relationship and establishing a certain principled equivalence, which, however, does not contradict the establishment of a functional hierarchy. It is humankind who addresses animals, not the other way round, just as – theologically – it is God who primarily addresses humankind, and not the other way round. Therefore, it is not possible to make the animal an object because, in the mutual relationship between human and animal, both parties remain subjects. The third characteristic must also be understood in a similar spirit: it is not a utilitarian relationship, for animals are there to help humans primarily in an existential sense. People need animals, they need each other, and in this sense, together they constitute help for life itself.<sup>8</sup>

Humans are the only creature to whom the symbolic category of the image of God (Gen. 1) belongs, so the distance between humans and all non-human creatures must be maintained under all circumstances; nevertheless, there are 'good relations' between humans and animals in the Old Testament. Their reciprocity even seems to be manifested 'inside out': while the spiritually dead eyes of people are unable to read and understand God's commands, animals are often characterised by surprising empathy, and their eyes seem to have the ability to say a lot. In the Old Testament concept, a considerable closeness, however not intimate, is established between human and animal. The community of animals, which God created for people according to the book of Genesis, is not enough for people, does not fully compare to them, and can therefore neither be seen as a brotherhood nor as a confidential partnership, but even so, we can observe people's loving approach to the animal kingdom, where animals are in a way guides to humans. For

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. De Pury, *Člověk a zvíře*, 73–80.

that matter, orders and mandates given to people always apply proportionately to animals or non-human creation – cattle also have the right to rest on the seventh day (Deut. 5:14), the ‘animal worker’ also has a right to wages (Deut. 25:4), fledglings must not be deprived of their mother (Deut. 22:6), representatives of all animal species must survive the Flood (Gen. 7:3) and so on. God’s mercy should touch everyone, God’s salvation reaches both human and animal.<sup>9</sup>

### 1.5 New Testament Context

The basic Christian text corpus is represented by the New Testament. As for the practical relationship with nature, thanks to the Jewish heritage, Christians could quite naturally follow a practical and sober attitude towards nature and all creatures in it. However, young Christianity – quite understandably – did not solve theoretical questions of this type. The collection of twenty-seven books of different genres is focused on what is at the core of the Christian religion, namely the confession of Jesus as the Christ. Even so, in several places in the New Testament, the concept of creation shows through as the basic framework without which no other theological questions can be contemplated. It must be emphasised that in the liberating Christocentric message, presented as a message of fundamental significance for people, the quality of the rest of creation is in no way lost.

If we start from the historical figure of Jesus – although the preserved tradition is limited and brief – we can note his positive and favourable basic orientation towards the reality of creation. Jesus loves life and its natural pleasures (see the reproach that he is ‘*a glutton and a drunkard*’ in Matt. 11:19). His relationship to God – the primary concern – is articulated through a sapiential view of all created things: in the so-called Sermon on the Mount, there is talk of God’s permanent care for creation (Matt. 6:25–34) and the treatment of nature is a rich part of the allegories and parables told by Jesus. Animals often figure in them, even if not as a separate subject of consideration (a lost sheep is being sought, there is talk of abundant fishing, Jesus compares his existential need with birds and foxes, which have their nests and dens, etc.). Jesus also adopts the biblical metaphor of the shepherd and his animals (Luke 15:3–7). Typically, non-human living creatures are discussed in the context of the good work of creation. In Jesus’s narratives,

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Balabán, *Hebrejské člověkosloví*, 132–136.

animals are reflected relationally – in an atmosphere of omnipresent empathy and benevolence. Jesus’s attitude towards them – to put it aptly – appears to be normal in the best sense of the word. Free from folly, without utilitarianism, neither underestimating nor exaggerating, in a kind of balance of distance and favour. In no way is this an indifferent relationship; on the contrary, it is emotionally tinged. A relationship that can be understood on two levels. On the one hand, Jesus ‘borrows’ animals as actors who embody qualities and values of the human world. It is about the need for care and concern, about vulnerability, consideration, mutual dependence, or even about mutual benefit, which, however, is not usurping or arbitrary. A power-motivated approach to life is out of the question, and all this is transferred in a very simple analogy to all living creatures. Although the position of animals that appear in the message of Jesus – stories that are meant for human ears – might seem to be one of only functional servanthood, this is not the case. The texts also comprise another level. A sufficient number of parables attest to the autonomous status of the animal world, which is obviously respected. The elementary – natural – level of the parables remains authentic. For example, there is no reason to believe that the awareness of compassion for an animal is a feigned affectation but rather captures a real emotion that truly applies – it is indeed assumed that animals can suffer (Matt 10:29f.; 12:11). According to some, there is even an inclusive understanding of God’s generosity in Jesus that stands higher than an anthropocentric perspective would suggest. That is why even seemingly worthless sparrows are not forgotten in God’s eyes, and that is where their true value lies.<sup>10</sup>

Solidarity with a suffering creature is manifested in the letter to the Romans (chapter 8), where Paul of Tarsus speaks of the ‘*groaning of the whole of creation as in the pains of childbirth*’. He recalls an old, most likely Jewish tradition of great anticipation of the day when all will be one with all in all-reconciling harmony. The ‘childbirth sigh’, or the current state of nature and the world, suggests both a critical state and the nearness of (total) liberation. For according to this passage, all non-human creation – theologically as a result of the guilt and pastoral irresponsibility of humankind who ‘deserted’ from God’s original purpose – was given over to futility. It evidently means contentlessness,

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 35.



that is, the loss of God's intended 'content'. Adoration of nature as well as its abuse, exploitation and humiliation to the level of blind elements – they deprive the phenomena 'heaven and earth' of their finality, and thus also of the desired surge to final liberation. In this sense, it is possible to say that human and non-human creation have created and unfortunately always create again a tragic pair, where 'one cannot do without the other', but where at the same time only humans have the keys to liberation.<sup>11</sup>

People and other living creatures turn out to be connected for better or for worse; it is literally a solidarity 'for life and death'. Just as human sin causes the suffering of other creatures, so too can human conversion – in the sense of people's inner attitude changing to an attitude of trust and faith – lead to their liberation.<sup>12</sup>

## **2. Outline of Further Developments in Antiquity and the Middle Ages**

Although it cannot be claimed that the above-mentioned inclusive understanding of moral generosity, which is elementarily indicated in the biblical texts, has been particularly widespread in the Christian tradition, at the same time, awareness of the entire creation's relatedness has never disappeared in the history of Christianity. Early Christian texts primarily testify that along with the spread of the new religion within the cultural space of the Roman Empire, Christians incorporated the ideas of Hellenic culture into their reflections and created a synthesis between this thinking and traditional biblical material. This was certainly also manifested in the field of theology of creation. *The first letter of Clement* (end of the 1st century), appealing for mutual concord, uses the argument of divine order, thanks to which even the smallest creatures live in peaceful harmony. The theme of cosmic harmony occurs in the *Letter to Diognetus* (middle of the 2nd century).<sup>13</sup> The scheme of harmony, and the praise of creation and calls for earthly imitation of cosmic harmony associated with it, can be found in an unchanged form throughout the first few centuries of Christianity – not least due to the strong influence of Stoic philosophy on Christianity. With the collapse

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<sup>11</sup> Balabán, *Hebrejské člověkosloví*, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant*, 129–132.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant*, 132–137.

of the Roman Empire, the theoretical model of cosmic harmony gradually weakens, which naturally means no resignation to the concept of creation as such. It is true that in the course of the entire historical development, influential supporters of the concept of God's moral generosity towards the entire creation are often found in certain currents of the Christian tradition, in which God's mercy towards the world of non-human creatures is repeatedly mentioned or reflected. For example, Basil of Caesarea from the 4th century, long before the well-known Francis of Assisi, speaks of animals as 'our brothers'.<sup>14</sup> From the same period, we can also refer to Gregory of Nyssa or John Chrysostom. The topic of the relationship with animals was understandably close to all hermits, eremites, and cenobites. The peaceful coexistence of wild animals with a human (hermit) is described in the *Life of St Anthony the Anchorite*.<sup>15</sup> R. Murray also quotes excerpts from a work devoted to ascetic life by the 7th-century East Syriac writer Saint Isaac the Syrian:

'The humble man approaches wild animals, and the moment they catch sight of him their ferocity is tamed. They come up and cling to him as their Master, wagging their tails and licking his hands and feet. They scent as coming from him the same fragrance that came from Adam before the transgression, the time when they were gathered before him and he gave them names in Paradise.' When asked what a compassionate heart is, the same author explicitly states: 'It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, [which] shrinks and cannot bear to hear or look on any injury or the slightest suffering of anything in creation. This is why he constantly offers up prayers full of tears, even for the irrational animals and for the enemies of truth, even for those who harm him, so that they may be protected and find mercy.'<sup>16</sup>

It would be fascinating to analyse the theme of animals in the field of art – in imaginative symbolic associations inspired by myths, in visual art, in iconographic monuments. Animals feature in late Roman mosaics and frescoes, and it is often difficult to determine whether these are pagan or Christian examples, even if they are housed in a Christian catacomb or church. Perhaps their mere placement can be understood

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Linzey, *Animal Theology*, 36.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant*, 146.

<sup>16</sup> Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant*, 146–147.

as evidence that a Christian interpretation was intended.<sup>17</sup> In many variations, the frequent theme of Christ as the ‘good shepherd’ was symbolically represented, often through a figure sitting in the middle of his sheep or surrounded by various animals and birds. We should also mention the interesting, unforgettable, influential work *Physiologus*, which was popular for centuries and originated in the folk tradition about animals, itself on the border between the mythical, artistic, and ‘scientific’ realms. The work was written in the early Christian period by an anonymous author, and its numerous expansions, known as bestiaries, contain curious comments on animals and are accompanied by diverse, allegorical reflections. They are meant to serve as a lesson for humans, but the bestiaries also express the feeling that animals also have something to teach us: ‘creatures of all kinds are described with wonder, delight and reverence for the wisdom of the Creator.’<sup>18</sup>

In the history of Christian thought, it would be possible to single out many of the great theologians who dealt with the issue of creation and, in one way or another, thematised the status of animals or the attitude of a believing Christian towards other living creatures. The individual contexts and intentions were very diverse, and the way of thinking about the created world differs because the method of theology itself changed considerably in the course of its development. For example, during the High Middle Ages, this method achieved an admirable formal perfection, which led to an exclusivist conception of theology, but given today’s question of the relationship between human and animal, we would also have to ask whether the overall ‘existential universality’ of the Christian message did not suffer from this kind of theological exclusivity. In general, many historical treatises might be inspiring, while others would provoke or seem aloof. But this article is not an encyclopaedic review. Regarding the intended purpose, it seems important to me to mention two great figures of the medieval period who perhaps represent the best of the Christian reception of nature and our fellow animals: Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) and Francis of Assisi (1181/2–1226).

Hildegard was a well-educated Benedictine nun of her time. Her lifestyle, by definition, involved her constant use of the Bible and regular prayer and singing of psalms and hymns that often featured the theme

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant*, 149–150.

<sup>18</sup> Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant*, 150–151.

of creation, while likewise being in daily contact with nature and specifically animals in the course of her physical work at the monastery. Her understanding of all being is – in accordance with the concept of the time – hierarchical but at the same time extremely dynamic. All nature is organically connected, alive, almost mystical. In her books that deal with, among other things, medicine and natural history, Hildegard not only collects traditional teachings but presents extensive knowledge, learned from her own experience and as observed from the reality around her. She managed to analyse and reflect on nature in its individual phenomena and processes, while at the same time perceiving it as a whole, without losing sight of the interconnectedness of the world's internal structure. Perhaps it can be said that Hildegard's work primarily demonstrates the 'aliveness' of the world. The world as a living organism in which life flows in all creatures at every level.<sup>19</sup>

Francis of Assisi, a well-known saint, often seen as a kind of 'mystic of nature', a dreamer and a fantasiser, actually makes a very substantive contribution to the theology of creation. His attitude, based on Christian spirituality's deep sources, can be understood as an example of a human attitude that responds in a unique way to the shared character of the entire creation.<sup>20</sup> Completely outside the framework of the legendary account of events from Francis's life, there are expert analyses that classify Francis as someone whose approach towards animals went beyond the established custom and qualitatively exceeded the tradition valid at that time. Francis

began a new kind of ministry, demonstrating a dynamically developing and original conception of how humanity should relate to creatures and the physical universe. Apparently it was a sudden and extraordinary inspiration which led him to preach to the birds as his sisters, with great reverence [...]. The effect of this experience was to convince him that his ministry must be to all creation and to humans about all creation, its harmony and the right use of creatures. From now on he let himself be seen preaching to animals and birds, field and forest, even the inanimate elements, call on them as his brothers and sisters to praise God. Francis showed a reverence

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hildegard von Bingen, *Komplete Werkausgabe* (Beuron: Kunstverlag, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Jacques le Goff, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (London: Routledge, 2003).

for all creatures which was like the chivalrous ideal of cortesia, but went even farther, in a humility which was even drawn to self-subjection [...].<sup>21</sup>

In a sense, his receptivity and sensitivity foreshadow a time much later, our own age. Still, the 750 years that remained until humanity's ecological awakening did not generally follow his fascinating and unconventional attitude. Universal respect for living creatures has certainly not become a dominant issue in Western culture.

### 3. The Animal in the 'Era of Humanity'<sup>22</sup>

#### 3.1 The New Self-Confidence of Humans in the Modern Age and Modernity

Self-subjection and humility are no attitudes which can be identified as central to the post-medieval era, which, in taking a brisk turn to humankind and secular things, begins to move away from the vertical perspective. The Modern Age pitches human consciousness against material nature as something that is extended outside humans. This represents a significant shift in perspective. Although the Middle Ages – in line with the 'desacralised' universe – was rather unmoved by nature, what was natural was simply normal and common, yet the concept of creation did contain the imperative of human responsibility for the entrusted world. The loss of the perception of the world and nature as a creation, the work of a good and wise Creator, entailed the loss of this imperative.<sup>25</sup> Theology, with a gradually fragmenting and weakening vision of creation and of salvation of the whole creation, evolved along with history. Other topics seem to be urgent, topics related to orthodoxy, for example, or to the new demands of science. Theology in its main currents exerts no influence on a society that resorts to a more or less predatory approach to the world. There is no offer of an alternative to counter this systematically, not even despite the fact that such potential was present in the concept of creation. In the new era, the relationship with nature and its living creatures is determined more and more by

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<sup>21</sup> Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant*, 155–156.

<sup>22</sup> Term evoking both the era after the 'anthropological turn' (beginning with the European modern age) and the 'anthropocene' – see <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene>.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Jan Sokol, *Malá filosofie člověka a Slovník filosofických pojmů* (Praha: Vyšehrad, 2010), 134–135.

a scientific perspective – modern experiments and rational theories emerge. It applies to the whole of society that between humankind as subject and nature as object we see the birth of the relationship of the worker and the work, the deed and the result.<sup>24</sup>

For the relationship with animals in the ‘era of humanity’ as of the end of the 15th century, it is determinative that humankind gradually becomes the criterion for the view on the world and on nature. No longer God, no longer the salvation and consummation of creation, but humans are ultimately at stake: humans as the starting point and goal, humans who act sovereignly. Awareness of individuality and awareness of personality is created, individuals find themselves interesting. A sense of human exceptionality awakens and becomes the standard for assessing human values, and thus corresponds to the new feeling of the infinity of the world and of history.<sup>25</sup>

During the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment, a modern lifestyle eventually arises from the new ideological assumptions. The development of technology, the increase in capital supporting production and the increasing volume of the labour force bring about the explosive nature of the economy and in its wake an immense development, the increase in general wealth and the building of a cultural world which is understandably an ‘artificial’, non-natural world. At the same time, however, modern development means an ongoing environmental crisis because economic growth always brings along the consumption of the environment, which provides people with a resource material for production, a space for production and a waste dump.<sup>26</sup> It seems logical that also animals as part of the natural environment are instrumentalised together with this environment. Of course, this is the outlook of present-day people who question the obviousness of the viewpoints of that time, while through the self-centred perspective of modern humankind, the environmental crisis as such was not perceived and identified as a crisis at all for a long time.

### 3.2 Typology of the Relationship to Animals

In the modern world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the human-animal relationship seems to be characterised by a high

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Romano Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit. Die Macht* (Ostfildern/Paderborn: Grünewald/Schöningh, 2022), 40f.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, 54–55.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Johan de Tavernier, *De broosheid van het zinvolle* (Leuven: Acco, 2011), 155.

degree of expediency. This attitude persists even in the postmodern era, although simultaneously the end of modernity (the 1960s) sees the emergence of systemic criticism, pointing out the limitations and flatness of the predominantly technical-economic approach to life.<sup>27</sup> The original biblical world of thought, which historically stood at the roots of Western culture and in its further development, significantly determined its character; however, it was familiar with a whole range of attitudes that people of that time ‘managed’ towards animals. In comparison, De Pury, an expert on ancient Near East literature and religion, points out that the relationship of most of our contemporaries to the animal kingdom unfolds mainly – or perhaps only – on three levels: objectification of animals, infantilisation of animals, possibly reduction of animals to something exotic, bizarre, or monstrous.<sup>28</sup>

The above-mentioned instrumentalisation approach corresponds to the first level. Animals are perceived as a good material available to us, not unlike the way plant products and minerals of inanimate nature serve us. When compared to the Christian concept of creation, such expediency appears problematic because it completely neglects the created character of non-human creation. From a theological point of view, not only people but also other living creatures are part of the good creation, ultimately destined to glorify God. Mere utilitarianism seems not only out of place but downright cynical. The second level represents a similarly problematic approach, turned inside out. Animals are perceived as pets, whose reason for existence actually consists in the fact that their owners embrace them, love them, spoil them, take care of them the way they care for small children, baby-talk to them, anthropomorphise them. In addition to the fact that such an approach shows the problematic features of infanthood from a psychological point of view, the core of the problem lies in the fact that here again the animal is instrumentalised, albeit as an object of tender favour, in a seemingly harmless, pleasantly positive way. Seeing this through the concept of creation, not even this appears to be a dignified position for the animal, which is to be neither undervalued nor overvalued in its proper

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<sup>27</sup> Criticism of the ‘civilization order’ goes hand in hand with the beginnings of the environmental movement associated with the publication of certain ‘influential’ books or texts. See Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1962); Lynn White, ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,’ *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1203–1207.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. De Pury, *Člověk a zvíře*, 32–33.

determination. The third level means that the animal is perceived as something exotic in itself, to which people feel both attracted and repulsed at the same time, in a kind of combination of fascination and horror, as if this exoticism is what can still awake people, what can still arouse them, what is still worthy of their attention. Here too, by analogy, we are dealing with the objectification of animals placed in function of humans, albeit a 'harmless' function, perhaps only psychological or aesthetic, but probably always a function with a hedonistic tinge.

The threefold form of our common attitude towards animals characterises the transformation that Western civilisation has undergone in the perception of animals and, along with it, the dangers associated with this qualitative transformation. The concept of creation, which represented the basic framework for understanding the world until well into the modern age, ceased to be generally comprehensible. However, currently, we do not seem to have any other supporting concept in which we could – apart from mere utilitarian argumentation – universally anchor a corresponding relationship to the animal kingdom. The inability of contemporary humans to approach the animal within its own proper context seems to be more than just an oversight or a 'technically solvable error'. The essence of the matter may be deeper.

It is obvious that many of our contemporaries yearn for a species-different encounter with the world of animals and yearn for a deeper communion with them. It manifests itself in very different ways. [...] In this respect, I am surprised by numerous television programmes and documentaries of all kinds (often of a very high quality) that have made it their goal to explore the life of animals in its immense variety. Today, without getting up from our chairs, we can penetrate the remote valleys of Rwanda at any time and follow the fate of mountain gorillas, assist the difficult reacclimatisation of orangutans to life in the wild in Indonesia, watch how a lion's fangs sink into the flank of a frightened zebra on a wide screen in slow motion. All of this is certainly somewhat paradoxical: although no generation in human history has been more distant from the animal world than ours, we have a much more detailed and accurate idea of the fauna of all continents and of all its species than our ancestors did. [...] However, behind the escape to the imaginary Eden and the longing for the lost paradise, there is, at least implicitly, the eternal question that humans carry within themselves, the question about their own essence and their own destiny. From this point of view, the discoveries in animal ethology and their popularisation, the study



of animal behaviour and psychology inspire the greatest amazement. [...] The animal holds a mirror up to people, which enables them to discover a number of elementary features in themselves that they would otherwise never be aware of.<sup>29</sup>

This raises the question whether the existing basic inadequacy in the relationship between human and animal can be compensated legislatively. Laws, too, emerge from a particular breeding ground and draw from certain sources of ideas and values. The legal framework sets the parameters but cannot itself guarantee the correctness and adequacy of either the set parameters or the real approach in practice. This certainly does not mean that we should discard, for example, the concept of animal rights, as they have been increasingly advocated in recent decades.<sup>30</sup> The theological conception, however, considers the problem elsewhere. The attitude of humans towards animals is not a matter of a specific system of obligations that we administer ourselves but a recognition of the right of the Creator (not the right of humans) to have other living creatures treated with respect.<sup>31</sup> So it is not (only) about setting formal rules because they themselves do not change our internal attitudes and thinking, but whether we understand the reasons for those attitudes and whether we can accept them. Creation theology thus leads to the moral generosity discussed above rather than to the mere ‘egalitarianism’ of the law.

### 3.5 The Perspective of an Integral Approach

I believe that the preferred choice is not ‘people or animals’. The exclusive position of people in nature cannot be levelled out – due to their ability to create culture – but this does not mean that people are permitted to behave as if they ruled the world. On the contrary! True exclusivity manifests itself in an awareness of increased responsibility and even – in the spirit of Christianity – by prioritising the good for others. And therefore also for other living creatures. A generous and highly humane approach rejects the idea that we can impose human well-being and happiness at the expense of others. What else are our systems of animal exploitation but the institutionalisation of exactly

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<sup>29</sup> De Pury, *Člověk a zvíře*, 35–39.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. e.g. Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Linzey, *Animal Theology*, 42.

that idea? It is the relative defencelessness of animals towards us ‘that should make us draw back from the immediate exercise of power until we are quite sure that *their* claims have been given greater consideration’.<sup>32</sup> After all, claims, rights, and duties are always communicating vessels: there is an internal connection between nature and human social environment, and our actions have an impact on both without exception.

In a time of epochal changes, our society is looking for a new orientation. The narrowly anthropocentric perspective of the modern epoch has created many things at the expense of others, and in today’s post-modern era, perhaps we experience most of all fear. The inner coherence of the world seems to be threatened, for all without distinction. From a Christian point of view, inspiration for the future can be what Pope Francis calls ‘integral development’ in his encyclical *Laudato si’*. It is not about quantitative growth or about sustainability of growth but about qualitative development. The latter is not easily measured using economic quantities. It is integral because it includes all areas of life, including the animal kingdom, which, for a change, does not figure primarily as a resource (of whatever) for humans, but as a value in itself. Francis clearly thematises that all life is in danger not as a result of our ignorance or technological failure but because of the neglect of the obligation to cultivate and maintain the right relationships: the inner relationship to oneself, to others, to God, and to the Earth.<sup>33</sup> Any kind of tyrannical domination of humans over other creatures is rejected, as we are not their ultimate purpose.<sup>34</sup> Yet, also excessive, uncritical and out-of-context care for animals is also rejected if this care remains at the same time indifferent to the plight of others (for example, the fight against animal trafficking and the concurrent indifference to human trafficking).<sup>35</sup> Integrality means it is not possible to be loving on the one hand and hating on the other. You cannot care here and destroy elsewhere. Our attitude towards animals can be seen as a litmus test that ‘shows colours’, even if it does not suit us:

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<sup>32</sup> Linzey, *Animal Theology*, 58.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si’. On Care for Our Common Home*, 70, available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, 85.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, 91.

It follows that our indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings. We have only one heart, and the same wretchedness which leads us to mistreat an animal will not be long in showing itself in our relationships with other people. Every act of cruelty towards any creature is ‘contrary to human dignity’. We can hardly consider ourselves to be fully loving if we disregard any aspect of reality.<sup>56</sup>

Regarding the above-presented typology of relations towards animals, the accents set by Pope Francis open up an alternative which, instead of objectifying the animal (instrumentalised as a material, as an object of infantile favour or as an exotic phenomenon), offers the possibility of acknowledging an intrinsic value of the animal itself. This value is, in principle, not dependent on humans and – as is evident from the creation theology of both the New and Old Testament – can legitimately be anchored in the basic biblical relationship between the Creator and the creation. Yet, it would seem that only the explicitness of this option can bring about a genuine paradigm shift in the church catechism,<sup>57</sup> which not only declines to instrumentalise animals on the part of human beings but also dismisses the anthropocentric reasons for that refusal. Thus, what is primarily involved is not that the instrumentalisation of animals is unworthy of humans (which is true in any case) but rather that it is unworthy of animals themselves.

Although, in relation to animals, humans fail to abandon the anthropomorphic perspective as the inherent and most adequate way to understand and to model living beings that are structurally close to them,<sup>58</sup> it is necessary to distinguish reasonable anthropomorphism from its more extreme variants. For example, a consistent anthropocentrism can hardly be persuasive in its arguments where the protection of animals for the sake of animals is concerned,<sup>59</sup> just as biocentrism, on the opposite end of the scale, in its radical biologism, even

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<sup>56</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 92.

<sup>57</sup> To this paradigm cf. Martin M. Lintner, ‘Respect for the Proper Value of Each Creature. An Animal-ethical Rethinking of the Encyclical *Laudato si'*,’ *Louvain Studies* 45, no. 1 (2020): 26–48, here 28–29; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2418.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Stanislav Komárek, *Ochlupení bližní. Zvířata v kulturních kontextech* (Praha: Academia, 2011), 263–264.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Michael Rosenberger, *Christian Ethics of Creation. On the Path of Ecological Conversion* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2022), 133–134.

fails to account for the value of an individual phenotype, let alone of any subject whatsoever.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, the ethical dilemma between humans as a norm and nature as a norm, which is constantly present in the long-running debate on animal ethics, need not be a dilemma in the field of creation theology, where norms as such are not concerned, yet where a base of orientation is prepared for them. Even though the encyclical *Laudato si'* develops no theoretical background for such a debate, its contribution reaches in reality far beyond the scope of a specialist or even a moral discourse. To demonstrate and define an integral approach of what is essentially biblical and Christian and at the same time deeply human constitutes a heuristic approach which indicates the direction of the next epistemological and hermeneutical conduct and also practice. And this is by no means negligible. If the encyclical asserts the exclusive position of humankind, then, objectively seen, this concerns none but a relative, because relational, positionality. This exclusivity is certainly not meant in a mode of elitism or isolation but rather of interconnection. According to Francis, humans cannot proclaim to be independent of reality without losing the very foundation of their existence.<sup>41</sup> In the given context, being connected to reality means much the same as acknowledging its complexity. As far as other living creatures are concerned, with which humans share a significant part of their genetic information, fragmented knowledge that excludes a broader reality definitely leads to ignorance.<sup>42</sup> In the encyclical, the Pope insists on the need for synthesis thinking which reflects the environmental problem in its entire context and therefore overcomes the 'false arguments of recent centuries'.<sup>43</sup> In relation to the inviolability of the animal's intrinsic value, the recognition of this value would then be at the same time an appeal to the acknowledgement of its contextuality, its interrelatedness. As regards content, this is – in the best sense of the word – compatible with the here continually considered biblical framework of creation theology.

What seems to me of key importance is the image of God with which the theology of creation works. If recognition of the animal's intrinsic

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Jean-Claude Wolf, *Tierethik. Neue Perspektiven für Menschen und Tiere* (Erlangen: Harald Fischer, 2005), 58.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 117f.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 138.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 121.

value is to be supported theologically, then it is not sufficient only to overturn the accusation that Christianity has provided ideological munition to an exploitative attitude toward animals. It will be necessary to show what kind of God Christians believe in. For, should it be the God of the classical version of theism, which can be found with Aristotle or in later medieval scholastic modifications and which presents God as the motionless mover who experiences nothing nor feels anything, it would then be hard to uphold that God is love. Were the starting point of theology to be metaphysical and to determine the essence of God metaphysically, then a static account of God's features would necessarily fail to include, for instance, mercy, as divine perfection does not allow for inconsistency and therefore endure the notion of God having compassion and suffering at the same time.<sup>44</sup> However, the biblical standpoint is quite different. Although the 'environmental encyclical' *Laudato si'* takes up certain viewpoints of the catechism without critical reflection,<sup>45</sup> it bears witness – on a basic heuristic level, together with other documents by Francis<sup>46</sup> – of a move away from objectivistic metaphysics, from which all magisterial statements were until recently formulated, towards the biblical, evangelical, and distinctly existential standpoint.

For the debate on the position of animals in the Anthropocene, this may prove to be a crucial impulse. It is true that biblical theology offers a variety of prototypical approaches towards animals which are, on the one hand, a product of their age and show, on the other hand, a certain universal feature. Still, in the here and the now, it remains our responsibility. While the exploitation of animals is unsustainable, the use of animals problematic, and stewardship to a certain extent corrupted, compassion seems to be the only attitude that grants the animal an intrinsic, non-instrumentalised value.<sup>47</sup> There is a chance that people will see the Anthropocene as a time of compassion, a time of mercy. This may even prove to lead to a better inclusive understanding of

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Walter Kasper, *Barmherzigkeit. Grundbegriff des Evangeliums – Schlüssel christlichen Lebens* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2012), 19–21.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Lintner, *Respect for the Proper Value of Each Creature*, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Most importantly, *Evangelii gaudium* or *Amoris laetitia*.

<sup>47</sup> Birch and Vischer speak of three basic attitudes that were justified by Judeo-Christian Scriptures: exploitation, stewardship, and compassion. Cf. Charles Birch and Lukas Vischer, *Život se zvířaty. Společenství božích tvorů* (Praha: Kalich, 2007), 75–76. [*Living with the Animals – The Community of God's Creatures*. WCC Publikations, Switzerland, 1997.]

God's generosity, suggested in biblical texts at an elementary level, and to an improvement of the entire stream of awareness and sensitivity, carried with the humility – even to the extent of self-subjection – represented in Christian history by Francis of Assisi: the image of God as the one who shows compassion and suffers.

This line of thinking is fundamentally different from the type of search for objectivity fought for by philosopher and legal positivist Norbert Hoerster, among others, when he produces arguments not only against the animal's intrinsic value but – at a more elementary level – directly against value-bearing concepts like for example *dignity*, which he considers to be an empty phrase.<sup>48</sup> Quite surprisingly, he advocates differentiated intolerance under the shroud of neutral rationality. The integral approach, on the other hand, admits being – in a distinctively different way – biased, as it is always a matter of being on the side of life or of what integrally cultivates life.<sup>49</sup> Intolerance, which excludes, cannot be reconciled with this. *Laudato si'* uses a language in which human dignity, the fight against poverty, the state of nature are connected, in which everything is interconnected, and it is exactly this correlation that becomes the proper integral conception.<sup>50</sup> In the given moment, humankind may very well not yet have a clear idea of what or who animals are. Humankind may very well never have this clear idea or will never even be able to. What is clear, though, is that there are no good solutions that would like to benefit at the expense of others.

## Conclusion

In an attempt to grasp the last reason for the world's existence and meaning, theological thinking understandably has no manual for specific approaches of behaviour in relation to animals. Biblical texts, normative for Christianity, do not serve as an authority to derive precise norms. The very history of the Christian religion, then, appears as a parade of ambivalent attitudes and actions, many of which are exemplary, fascinating, worth following, and others repulsive, shameful, reprehensible. Still, Christianity seems to have a lot to offer with its concept of creation. It turns out that today, unlike in ancient societies,

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Norbert Hoerster, *Haben Tiere eine Würde? Grundfragen der Tierenethik* (München: C. H. Beck, 2004), 31, 33f, 40, 104.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 185.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 139.

there is no lack of expert knowledge, but of a sufficiently universal framework of values in which we could compile our great but fragmented knowledge or include the immense amount of ongoing technological procedures that are both sophisticated and at the same time isolated from the wider context of real lives.

Nonetheless, we cannot go back to the old days. The Old Testament 'earthiness' towards animals, a combination of basic respect, solidarity, and naturalness, arose from a certain concept of creation. We are not and we need not be capable of the same thing. However, Christianity continues to inspire with the ideal of harmony, justice, and peace, and in the face of today's situation, it poses once again, with its appeal to mercy, a challenge to our humanity. How to overcome the extreme dualism in relation to nature and its degradation to a mere object? Where can we draw support so that we do not, in contrast, naively romanticise nature? How can we impede the cynicism which would result from pure evolutionism, which would eventually completely deny our freedom? Ingeborg Gabriel offers an update of the old ideal by restoring three important human qualities: (ecological) responsibility, humility, and gratitude.<sup>51</sup> She sees ecological responsibility as the basis of Christian and immanent humanism, which is in principle open to everyone. She characterises humility as a liberating recognition of reality. Humility does not ignore natural limitations and can endure them. Gratitude is presented as a virtue and the opposite of selfish indulgence. Thus, Gabriel elaborates on the discourse set by Francis in his encyclical *Laudato si'*.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that part of the Christian concept of creation is the process of creation itself. Creation as not yet finished, not yet fulfilled, is moving towards hope. There is nothing surprising about this, considering what has been stated earlier that this concept is no description of a 'production procedure' but a reflection concerning the order of relationship. In this concept, the future is open. Paradoxical as it may sound, perhaps animals, with which we share more than just a common earth and part of our genetic information, could be the ones that enable humans to systematically avoid cruelty and learn delicate sensitivity. Indeed, the above-mentioned integral

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Ingeborg Gabriel, 'Ekologie jako otázka "nového člověka". Antropologické a sociálně-etické úvahy,' *Salve. Revue pro teologii a duchovní život* 27, no. 4 (2017): 65–85, here 74–81. Cf. Gabriel, *Ethik des Politischen. Grundlagen, Prinzipien, Konkretionen* (Würzburg: Echter, 2021), 180, 186–187.

approach can open the road towards establishing a balance between various demands, most of all, however, towards abandoning the mentality of demands in the first place. Theology of creation refers beyond mere expert knowledge or mere morality to the sources which shape the basic human attitude towards their living neighbours and which may even transform it.

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