

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of
*The Question of the Animal and
Religion: Theoretical Stakes, Practical
Implications*

Aaron S. Gross
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In *The Question of the Animal and Religion: Theoretical Stakes, Practical Implications*, Aaron S. Gross breaks new ground in contemporary animal studies by tracing the recent history of critical religious approaches to animals before framing several new horizons for further study in an interdisciplinary field ripe for exploration.

The book aims to broadly “expose the absent presence of animals in the history of the study of religion and clear a space for their future” (7), a task Gross sets to by tracing the lineage of Western animal studies through the work of Émile Durkheim, Ernst Cassirer, Mircea Eliade, and Jonathan Z. Smith to reveal Western culture’s tendency to replace animal concerns with human ones, even when animals are the supposed focus of one’s analysis. In each case, Gross points out how the theorists purport to elevate animals as examples in their various frameworks, only to mutate them into totemic representations of ultimately human concern, thereby evacuating the “animality” of animals and replacing it with purely anthropocentric values. As the Durkheimian sacred/profane binary has been maintained in the development of critical studies, animals have been discussed philosophically, but primarily as foils for human religious practices and never on their own terms. Instead of perpetuating this “absent presence,” Gross applies Giorgio Agamben’s warning of the anthropological machine to advocate recognizing that “animals are religious subjects too,” in an attempt to shift the focus of the conversation onto truly animalistic (as opposed to humanistic) concerns (94).

To accomplish this, Gross takes as a case study the incident at the AgriProcessors slaughterhouse in Postville, Iowa in the early 2000s when video footage of animal abuse at this kosher-certified abattoir sparked both secular and religious protests.

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As undercover investigations revealed the extent of the animals' mistreatment, this brought the nature of *kashrut* methods of slaughter into the public conversation, leading to responses ranging from defense to disavowal. Gross details many of the variant Jewish reactions to the event, as well as secular criticisms (from everyone from Temple Grandin to PETA) that attacked both the Postville facility and Jewish practices in general – a complicated story that ends in 2008 with what was, at the time, the largest single-site U.S. immigration raid in history. By contrasting the public reaction to the mistreatment of the workers to that of AgriProcessor's previous scandals, Gross is able to explore both the rhetoric and the underlying logic of popular assumptions connecting ethics with *kosher* dietary practices (44). By analyzing such cultural myths about the Durkheimian animal/human binary (reinvigorated as it was through the work of the other thinkers mentioned above), Gross seeks to “learn to hold this binary in a new way” (94).

In this effort, Gross intentionally projects an ecumenical focus for future researchers that is not limited merely to Western expressions of religion. Although he centers his book heuristically on a particularly Jewish event, Gross points out that the animal/human binary is not the only needless divide to be surmounted by critical animal studies. After defining religion as something that binds communities together and provides a cultural dimension that promotes life-concerned agency (97), Gross brings the work of Tim Ingold to bear on the question and contrasts the anthropocentric absent-presence of animals in Western traditions with the present-absence of animals in North-American hunter-gatherer traditions such as the Greenlandic Inuit or the Waswanipi Cree. By exploring Ingold's notion of the paradox that inherently ties together humanity and animality in conceptual terms, Gross proposes an application

that allows theorists of religion to move beyond a focus on uniquely human subjects to “discover a (religious) subject that is no longer a (human) subject: the subject after the subject” (105).

This sets Gross up to transition specifically onto the question of the animal and religion by considering the work of the thinker whose writings inspired the title of this book: Jacques Derrida. By focusing on Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Gross is able to consider the role of his religious subject (what he later calls the “humane subject”) in relation to both rhetorical and physical violence. By analyzing the difference between referring to “animals” versus “the animal,” Derrida again raises Gross’ problem of the absent-presence of real animals and applies the language of war and genocide to, according to Gross, “incite us to respond” (136). Furthermore, by analyzing Abrahamic notions of sacrifice and their long-term effect on Western culture, Gross adapts Derrida’s explorations of carnophallogocentric society to promote an interpretation of meat-eating as sacrifice that leaves open the possibility of ethical meat consumption.

This allows Gross to conclude his book with an informed and reflective view of the events at AgriProcessors in Postville specifically as religious events insofar as they emanate “from and work through the deeper, recessed folds of living that shape our subjectivity and bind us to community” (146). By confronting Jewish *kosher* regulations and several scriptural (and non-scriptural) Jewish stories with his theorized “humane” subject that is neither simply human or animal, Gross develops and defends a consistently Jewish reverence-for-life ethic that paradoxically allows for carnivorous dietary practices if authentically humane slaughter methods are employed; as Gross

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summarizes, “Eating animals with reverence for their lives is about more than the ethics of eating animals: it is a means of propagating a kind of person, a mensch. Kashrut generally, and kosher practice regarding eating animals in particular is a technology of ethical self-reproduction” (172-3). Consequently, in the attempt to make sense of one’s place within one’s community of both humans and animals, either humane slaughter methods or vegetarianism are the only sensible existential options.

In promoting his reverence-for-life ethic, Gross accuses industrialized kosher slaughterhouses (such as AgriProcessors) of perpetuating Derrida’s theorized war against those different from us – in this case, animals. When slaughterhouses fail to maintain the Jewish tradition of humane slaughter methods that preserve the concern of animals (and not simply the animal) throughout the process of *shechitah*, they fail to accomplish their religious goals. Moreover, by forcibly confining animals into the abusive conditions of these farms, we thereby confine them away from participation in the community – something as morally troubling as it is likewise unsurprising, given the tacit binary assumed between human and nonhuman creatures. As Agamben’s anthropological machine is ever-more revealed and recognized for its error, Gross suggests that the meaning of an animal’s life will only grow – and, through that, human lives “in the depth of the religious dimension of existence” will likewise flourish (189).

Altogether, Gross’ work offers a healthy critique of a long-standing line of thinking in the background of the burgeoning field of animal studies. By tying together threads that will interest researchers of religion, sociology, critical theory, philosophy, and more, Gross has turned out an interdisciplinary work

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that is surprisingly broad-focused in its relatively short page count. Of particular note is the inclusion of a glossary that helpfully explains much of the unique terminology relevant to this new field of specialty, including many of the Jewish elements of his work – a move that, combined with Gross' accessible-yet-insightful writing style only helps to cement this work as an early fixture in the future history of religious animal studies.