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# SPECIAL SERVANTS OR SPECIOUS STEWARDS? HUMAN UNIQUENESS AND THE CHARGE OF SPECIESISM IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Sharon E. Austin

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At the heart of a charge of speciesism is a desire to expose an automatic, unexamined assumption that human beings matter more than any other species, simply because they are human beings. It challenges the notion that the interests of *homo sapiens* (no matter how minor) must always come first when they conflict with the interests of other species. At the root of such assumptions are deeply held convictions about the ultimate uniqueness and superiority of human beings, over and above all other creatures. This thinking has often been traced to the Judeo-Christian tradition, which appears to promote human authority and prerogative at the expense of nonhuman animals.

Christian theology, for its part, has been relatively quiet on the matter of animals, despite the growth in recent years of ecotheology and faith-based eco-justice movements. If animals are considered at all, they are often subsumed into the category of the “environment”, or referred to simply as part of the earth’s natural resources, which human beings have been divinely commissioned to dispose over.<sup>1</sup> It is

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<sup>1</sup>Clare Palmer, “Animals in Christian Ethics: Developing a Relational Approach” *Ecotheology* 7.2 (2003): 163.

only relatively recently that theology has begun to reflect on the human-animal<sup>2</sup> relationship and make steps towards doing theology as if animals mattered. The purpose of this paper will be to introduce and analyze the notion of speciesism and some of its attendant issues, and to consider how it might impact or challenge a theological understanding of human uniqueness. I will briefly explore aspects of moral agency and the philosophical framework, and examine notions of human power and privilege stemming from scripture. I will then consider and reflect on some of the theological responses to the speciesist charge that is often directed at the Judeo-Christian tradition.

## Speciesism & Moral Prejudice

Though the term itself is awkward and may sound a little like something cooked up by PETA’s<sup>3</sup> marketing department, “speciesism” was actually coined some thirty-odd

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<sup>2</sup>The limitations and inherent bias of the common terminology is immediately apparent. While fully recognizing that humans are also animals (and that indeed, the thrust of the paper is to explore dualistic thinking that would draw such a sharp line between the human and the animal) I have chosen to use this terminology for simplicity and brevity.

<sup>3</sup>People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

years ago by British psychologist, Richard D. Ryder, while he was reflecting on moral prejudice in the bathtub.<sup>4</sup> The term was subsequently picked up and circulated by various philosophers, most notably Peter Singer, who introduced the moniker and the idea behind it to the world at large when he published his seminal and controversial *Animal Liberation* in 1975. At the time he described speciesism as “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species”<sup>5</sup> and the term is now employed with some frequency, particularly within the animal protection movement and occasionally by environmentalists (though the latter seem to prefer the related-in-principle term, “anthropocentric”).

While the speciesist label is usually used and understood pejoratively, there is no shortage of self-avowed speciesists who don’t deny a bias towards humans and a lack of moral concern for nonhumans, but rather embrace it and defend it in logical argument or by pointed appeals to scripture. Philosopher Carl Cohen, for example, emphasizes moral agency as a uniquely human trait and finds in the amorality of nonhuman animals sufficient grounds for excluding them from his sphere of moral concern.<sup>6</sup>

The issue of moral agency is central to any discussion of ethics or morality in general,

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<sup>4</sup>Richard Ryder, *Animal Revolution: Changing Attitudes Towards Speciesism* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2000), 223.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 6.

<sup>6</sup>Tom Regan, *Animal Rights, Human Wrongs: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 108-109.

and thus relevant to the present examination of speciesism. For without the understanding that human beings *are* moral agents, who can and do reflect on their choices, there can be no critiquing of human actions. It is precisely because we are not simply slaves to instinct, tradition or our own desires that we even engage in ethical reflection and debate in the first place. The perennial question at the heart of ethics – “how ought I to live?” – comes out of an awareness that we do not live and operate in isolation, that our actions can and do impact the world around us, and it is this consideration of the “other” that necessitates moral reflection on our own choices and actions. But who is the “other” that we should be mindful of? Those who we would acknowledge as worthy of moral consideration are understood to be within our sphere of moral concern, while the rest remain outside of it; and the criteria by which we admit some (but not others) into that sphere, is subject to debate, analysis and change.

Because speciesism would exclude individuals on the basis of species type or membership, it is generally understood as a form of discrimination, and is meant to resonate with other types of moral discrimination such as racism or sexism,<sup>7</sup> which would similarly exclude individuals from the sphere of moral concern based on a particular characteristic such as ethnicity or gender. Such discrimination generally emphasizes differences, while recognizing commonality or continuity only amongst those who are already encompassed by the circle of moral privilege.

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<sup>7</sup>Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 6.

## Monkeys, Men and Morality

Prior to the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859, the prevailing explanation for the great diversity of life observed in nature was the Theory of Special Creation, which maintained that species were created, by God, independently and relatively recently, and that they did not change over time.<sup>8</sup> Darwin sought to demonstrate that transmutation (the altering of one species into another) had in fact occurred, and postulated the theory of natural selection as the driving force behind this. Evolutionary biology has since finessed and expanded the notion of continuity and shared origins between *homo sapiens* and other species, and we have come to recognize human beings as a type of mid-sized, vertebrate mammal classified amongst the great apes. And yet, a continued sense of the innate uniqueness of humankind seems to have remained firmly in place; indeed, the radical implications of evolutionary theory appear to have had little impact on the moral realm.

Many in the animal rights movement, including Singer, have attributed this persistence of stubborn moral attitudes towards animals, to illogical appeals to revelation and to deeply embedded theological notions of human uniqueness in the Christian tradition. Unlike many Eastern religions, which articulate and concretize principles of non-violence and compassion towards all beings, the Judeo-Christian emphasis on humanity's pride of place (even at the expense of nonhumans) has often been singled out as a root cause of spe-

cialist attitudes in Western thought and praxis. It is enough to prompt Richard Dawkins, in *The Blind Watchmaker*, to remark: "Such is the breathtaking speciesism of our Christian-inspired attitudes, the abortion of a single zygote... can arouse more moral solicitude and righteous indignation than the vivisection of any number of intelligent adult chimpanzees!"<sup>9</sup>

## Christianity and Speciesism

At first glance, Christian thought and practice regarding the treatment and moral status of nonhuman animals seems to have been relatively consistent from the twelfth century onwards, whence we can discern a hardening of the scholastic tradition towards animals.<sup>10</sup> In many ways, Thomistic thought still underscores much of the contemporary Christian thinking about animals, but alternate views and attitudes punctuate the Church's history, both before and after Aquinas. Many of the early saints, for example, were known for their kindness, care and regard for animals (most famously St. Francis, though Singer critiques the friar's inconsistencies: preaching to the birds in the afternoon, and eating their close cousins for dinner).<sup>11</sup> While a full history of the development of Christian thought regarding nonhuman animals will not be attempted here, it is nevertheless important to identify

<sup>9</sup>Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*. As quoted in Richard Ryder, *Animal Revolution: Changing Attitudes Towards Speciesism* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2000), 245.

<sup>10</sup>Andrew Linzey, "Is Christianity Irredeemably Speciesist?" In *Animals on the Agenda*, edited by Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto (London, UK: SCM Press Ltd., 1998), xii.

<sup>11</sup>Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 198.

<sup>8</sup>Scott Freeman and Jon C. Herron. *Evolutionary Analysis*. 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2004), 35.

the key concepts that have led to the popular understanding of human uniqueness that is traceable to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and which are drawn out and challenged by the charge of speciesism.

### In the Beginning: Imago Dei and Dominion

One need not look much further than the opening chapter of Genesis, to locate the likely scriptural roots of Christianity's alleged speciesist attitudes:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."<sup>12</sup>

If the entire framework for the popular Christian understanding of the human-animal relationship can be distilled to a single scriptural verse, this is it. The Priestly account of creation in the first book of the Hebrew Bible has served as the one definitive starting point for all subsequent reflection on human beings in comparison with, and in relation to animals, and it contains the two key concepts central to that understanding: *imago Dei* and Dominion.

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* holds that human beings are unique and favored by God because they were expressly made in God's own image. Just what exactly this might imply, or how it should be understood, is less clear. Like many other traditions, the doctrine of the *imago Dei* has a rich history with a variety of interpretations, from substantive to functional, to relational and even to escha-

thological, with many theories put forth as to how human beings might effectively image God.<sup>13</sup> While the notion of *imago Dei* originates in the Hebrew Bible, it is also important to note how the concept shifts in the New Testament, where it is instead embodied very specifically in the person of Jesus, who – as both perfected humanity and the image of the invisible God – could be thought of as effectively trumping the *imago Dei* card that human beings had been clutching so proudly since that opening chapter of Genesis.<sup>14</sup> It is precisely this Christ-centered paradigm for imaging God that some theologians take as the starting point for understanding human power and dominion, as will be examined shortly.

The notion of human hegemony that stems from this particular creation account is one that many return to again and again, to justify and support the use of nonhumans for human purposes. The Hebrew word *kabash*, which is used in this passage, is usually translated into English as "subdue" and it is only recently that alternate exegeses of the term have even been proposed.<sup>15</sup> Here again, as with *imago Dei*, the question arises as to how the notion of dominion should be understood and effectuated. Is it simply an unchecked, scripturally sanctioned domination of the earth and the

<sup>12</sup>Genesis 1:26, New Revised Standard Edition.

<sup>13</sup>J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 133-145.

<sup>14</sup>Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World?*, 124.

<sup>15</sup>David K. Goodin conducts a contextual and structural analysis of *kabash* in "Understanding Humankind's Role in Creation: Alternate Exegeses on the Hebrew Word 'Kabash,' and the Command to Subdue the Earth," *Studies in Science and Theology* 10 (2005). He argues that this Hebrew word can be understood as a divine directive to human beings, not to conquer the earth, but rather to enter into a spiritual relationship with it.

nonhuman? Or can it be understood as an absolute authority directly related to human fitness for the role, but which nevertheless “carries no insult to our fellow creatures,”<sup>16</sup> as author Matthew Scully points out? Should human dominion be exercised with a mindset of care and mercy, or one of utility and profitable exploitation?

It is important to stress again, however, that the interpretation of both these concepts varies widely. As such, I think it is the interpretations that should more appropriately absorb the charges of speciesism than the concepts or notions themselves. The challenge for systematic theology, if it would respond to speciesism at all, lies in creatively revising these key concepts without losing their core substance or forsaking them completely.

### Theological Responses to Speciesism

The development and articulation of moral theories has largely been the purview of philosophy, and in fact one finds that theological reflection on the moral worth of nonhuman animals is often framed largely as a response to a particular philosophical strategy for thinking about the matter. Some philosophers, like Peter Singer, approach the issue from a Preference Utilitarian perspective, while others (such as Tom Regan) stake their arguments in rights theory, which relies on the recognition of moral rights of individuals, and encompasses the notion of equality, justice and en-

titlement.<sup>17</sup> Despite the different approaches, both philosophers maintain that speciesism is a moral prejudice that is not rationally defensible. Keeping this general philosophical groundwork in mind, I would like to turn now and consider some of the voices and responses from contemporary theology with regards to speciesism and a specifically theological understanding of human uniqueness.

### Humans as “Stewards of Creation” and “Caretakers of Diversity”

Charles Pinches, whom I will introduce here as representative of this particular model of understanding, feels that many theologians have been too quick to adopt negative views of speciesism, and he proposes instead a more positive interpretation that preserves the notions of uniqueness and difference encompassed by species designations. He acknowledges that nonhuman animals deserve better treatment than has hitherto been afforded them, but takes issue with rights language and concepts of justice and value. He prefers a more specifically theological language, which speaks of the “integrity of creation” and “goodness” rather than “value.”<sup>18</sup> He cites the Genesis 1:20-24 passage, in which God creates the great variety of living beings, each according

<sup>17</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that Regan’s rights-based approach, while only one of several, seems to be the one that has garnered the most attention. While many animal protection advocates do not actually anchor their activism in rights-based moral theory, they are nevertheless usually portrayed as “animal rights activists” in the media and popular press, and little attempt is made to distinguish between the different philosophical (or even theological) frameworks that underpin the activism.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Pinches, “Each According to Its Kind: A Defense of Theological Speciesism.” In *Good News for Animals? Christian Approaches to Animal Well-Being*, edited by Charles Pinches and Jay B. McDaniel (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 192.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2002), 12.

to its kind, as evidence that God delights in such uniqueness and variety amongst his creatures. This is key, for Pinches, who sees the integrity of creation lying in that diversity, and he thus posits a form of theological speciesism that recognizes, along with God, the inherent goodness of each part of creation. He criticizes the animal rights approach, which he feels is blind to species distinctions, grouping all animals under one banner and “mixing the woes of all of them together.”<sup>19</sup>

For Pinches, human uniqueness and the exercise of dominion can be understood in our uniquely human role as “caretakers of diversity”; as such, our sin regarding nonhuman animals is in having destroyed, not sentient life, but biodiversity. He cites Adam’s naming of the animals in Genesis 2:19 as an example of this uniquely human capacity to recognize and identify the great variety of kinds that God has made, and as one of the ways we effectively image God.<sup>20</sup> This important naming function is corrupted, Pinches believes, once we start misnaming the animals in terms of our own needs and desires, and failing to see them as they actually are.<sup>21</sup>

Pinches warns against evolutionary biology’s tendency to diminish interests to a single interest of species preservation, which I think is a valid point, and one of my own critiques

of the modern conservation movement. It is the kind of thinking that often lies behind the “stewards of creation” model, which runs the risk of reducing human responsibility towards nonhuman animals to one of species conservation above all else. It is something of a “store manager” syndrome, wherein we feel that the extent of our duties lies in our keeping the shelves sufficiently and continuously stocked, as it were, and that we are only delinquent in our role as such if we drive a species to extinction and reduce the full product lineup. Talk then easily turns to “responsible management” and issues of “sustainability”, without actually questioning the necessity or ethics of a practice in the first place, regardless of how sustainably we can manage to maintain it going forward. It is very much a mind-set that would congratulate itself for conserving a species while cashing out its members; an approach which tends to eclipse individual experience and suffering by subsuming them under the general (and abstract) interest of the species.

Ultimately, this notion of human beings as stewards of creation and caretakers of diversity only seems to meet the charge of speciesism half way, or ambiguously; it includes animals in its sphere of moral concern insofar as their larger categories are concerned, backed by a divine edict to maintain their great diversity, but excluding their individual experiences of pain or suffering at human hands, when there is a profit, pleasure or advantage to be gained from their use or abuse. How else, then, might Christian theology maintain an understanding of human uniqueness and dominion over nonhuman animals, while more fully admitting them to the sphere of moral concern? The work of Andrew Linzey, arguably the most prolific and outspoken advocate of doing the-

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>21</sup> Perhaps one contemporary example of such misnaming might be the United States Department of Agriculture’s classification of rabbits raised for meat consumption as “poultry”, which then allows for their exclusion from the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (HMSA), which has never included chickens, turkeys or other birds. <http://www.hfa.org/about/rabbits.pdf>

ology as if animals mattered, will here serve to illustrate a different model of understanding a humanity made in God's image.

### Humans as the "Servant Species"

Linzey's central argument is that human dominion over nonhuman animals must be modeled on the Christ-given paradigm of lordship manifest in service, essentially an *imitatio Dei*. He presents his argument by first defining what he calls the "Generosity Paradigm", set over and against Peter Singer's utilitarian approach. Whereas Singer speaks of an equal consideration of interests of all individuals involved in a situation of conflict, Linzey argues instead for a moral priority of the weak and defenseless (such as children and animals), so that they are given not equal, but greater consideration. For Linzey, these are special relationships that have special obligations. He argues that the sheer vulnerability and helplessness of animals, in the face of our absolute power over them, should compel a response of moral generosity that goes beyond a simple equal weighing of interests, which could potentially see the interests of the weak being traded against those of the strong.<sup>22</sup>

Linzey is also wary of the 'uniqueness spotting' tendency in the social sciences (which he feels may lead to a kind of idolatrous self-aggrandizement) and seeks instead a theological understanding of human uniqueness that avoids this potential trap. He finds this ultimately in the notion of humans as the "servant species", where human uniqueness lies in the capacity for service and self-sacrifice for the

other.<sup>23</sup> As such, humans are seen as uniquely commissioned and positioned, as the species that is capable of co-operating with God in the redemption of a suffering world. This self-sacrifice and self-costly love takes as its model a supreme God who humbles himself to identify with, and suffer for, the weak and lowly creature that is man. And just as Christ's love and generous service cost him dearly, so, too, does Linzey freely admit the radical and costly implications of abandoning an exclusive preoccupation with our own species.

This controversial notion of service to non-human animals and the natural world (rather than just stewardship of them) is echoed by Huw Spanner, who proposes a similar servant-kingship for humanity, based on biblical models of kingship in the Hebrew Bible. Spanner notes that great kings such as David were often chosen from among the common people (and were thus like and in solidarity with them) and were in theory meant to be as servants to their subjects. He also describes the paradigmatic model of a shepherd's ungrudging and ready care for his sheep as an example of what God expects from those who have dominion.<sup>24</sup>

Linzey is aware of some of the objections that may be raised to his arguments, including the use of a language of generosity (rather than of equality, justice or rights), which may be construed as paternalistic or recall earlier notions of "noblesse oblige". I, too, wonder if phrasing human responsibility towards nonhumans as a form of generosity might not frame it as

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 28-61.

<sup>23</sup> Linzey, *Animal Theology*, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Huw Spanner, "Tyrants, Stewards – or Just Kings?" In *Animals on the Agenda*, edited by Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto (London, UK: SCM Press Ltd., 1998), 223.

optional, only to be employed when convenient, and with little or no real accountability. Nevertheless, I think that Linzey's model of service rather than mastery holds greater potential for both theoretical and practical fruitfulness than the "stewards of creation" model, and can help theology guard against hubristic thinking. But the question does arise as to what human service to nonhumans might look like, in practical terms; what kinds of sacrifices might be entailed? What current practices might we expect to have to relinquish in the process? Would such service entail waiting hand and foot on our companion animals, always putting animal needs before human ones? Or might it mean, in many cases, simply the extension of mercy where we might otherwise withhold it, for our own gain?

### **Power and Mercy**

Philosopher Clare Palmer is particularly troubled by Linzey's description of human-animal power relationships, which she feels are too "top-down", depicted as if animals were passive victims of human domination, unable to act themselves. She sees this model of power as offering only two options: the use of power as a weapon of oppression, or the complete denial of it. Palmer prefers to consider other models of power that are more nuanced and contextual, which recognize and are sensitive to the different natures of different animals. She offers up her own sketch of a "Christian relational ethic of care for animals", largely influenced by feminist writers, which identifies moral emotions, is attentive to the context of a particular relationship, emphasizes a concern for the well-being of the other, and does not require any self-emptying

or servitude.<sup>25</sup> But while this contextual, relational approach appears to hold great potential for recognizing connectedness and the many different ways that humans and animal lives actually intersect on a daily basis, Palmer considers only direct-contact relationships (such as the human-pet interaction) and sidesteps the more troublesome area of "indirect" relationships that humans have with animals (e.g. with those we eat or whose skins we wear). This is problematic, because it is those very same indirect, largely invisible relationships that cause the greatest suffering to the animals involved, and therefore the ones most in need of a practical ethic of care.

Palmer's uneasiness with the power dynamic may exemplify a common concern with Linzey's suffering servant model of dominion, in that removed from its theological framework, it might appear unconvincing and downright unappealing, especially to those who have already experienced forced or expected subservience to others. But taken in its context, Linzey's model of human service seems not so much an absence or negation of power, but rather one which is immensely powerful in its self-giving, in its outpouring of care and compassion that positively participates in the creative and redemptive process. Palmer's main oversight is the failure to recognize that the kinds of situations that the majority of nonhuman animals are subject to are precisely top-down power relationships in which they are defenseless against a much stronger human power. Struggle as they might in their cages, leg traps or lab restraints, there is clearly no contest or much chance of resis-

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<sup>25</sup> Palmer, "Animals in Christian Ethics," 169-178.

tance. And it is really only in this type of power dynamic that mercy truly has a chance to surface. For in the moment of a raised club or poised knife blade (especially in the absence of onlookers), nothing – not laws, nor the threat of species extinction, nor any notion of animal rights – is likely to stay the hand, other than sheer mercy on the part of the would-be oppressor. As with Pinches, Palmer's focus on species or relational specificity still falls short of addressing the more exploitive human-animal relationships, and overlooks potential human-animal solidarity in more common traits such as the capacity for physical pain and suffering.

## Conclusion

For the most part, our attitudes towards animals are inherited. They are shaped in particular cultural contexts and influenced by subjective experiences, and they often go unchallenged for much of our lives. So, too, do we absorb notions of human uniqueness and entitlement without necessarily examining or questioning their origin or validity. The charge of speciesism attempts to draw these assumptions out into the open and call attention to the moral neglect of nonhuman animals in human industry and action.

The radical shift in thinking that would be required to move away from prevailing attitudes towards animals is not to be underestimated. We have a remarkable capacity for rationalizing actions and behaviour, and we tend to find pretexts for all our preferences. In addition, there is no question that we do benefit – not least economically – from current practices of widespread animal use. The question remains, however, as to whether or not they

are ill-gotten gains. Indeed, the affliction of cruelty on nonhuman animals for human benefit, especially where alternatives exist, must be challenged, even – and perhaps especially – by Christian theology. And I would suggest that such a massive reorientation of perspective of the human-animal relationship calls for nothing less than what Bernard Lonergan would identify as moral conversion: a shift in horizon in which the main criteria by which we judge our possible courses of action, goes from one of self-satisfaction to one of value and the good of the other;<sup>26</sup> and where a member of a species other than our own is actually recognized as a significant “other”.

While there are certainly grounds for a pessimistic outlook, encouragement can be found in the moral progress that we have already witnessed in the last few centuries, that have seen the boundaries of the sphere of moral concern expand to encompass more and more of the formerly excluded. And I believe that Christian theology, which is well acquainted with notions of mercy, sacrifice and reconciliation of relationship, stands to contribute positively to a revisioning of human uniqueness that includes, rather than avoids, a moral consideration of other species.

*Sharon Austin* is an M.A. candidate in the Department of Theological Studies at Concordia University. She holds a B.Sc. in Biology from McGill University, and prefers to strike at the root (while occasionally hacking at the branches).

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<sup>26</sup>Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 235-240.

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*The Lamb*

*Anonymous*