

Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy

Matthew Scully

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Matthew Scully, a Christian republican who used to be the speech writer for Bush Sr., has taken on a cause almost exclusively linked with liberal democrats, and which attracts only very few brave and informed democrats. What moved this man to write *Dominion*?

Scully toured Smithfield factory farm, attended the 27th annual convention of the Safari Club International (SCI), and witnessed the 52nd annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission. *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* reports what Scully learned through his personal explorations of elephants, whales, and pigs, “not one of them... hidden from the Maker’s sight” (26). *Dominion* reports what is actually happening to animals, and calls Christians back to a common-sense understanding of what it means to be a Christian in a world where all beings were created by a loving and just God.

Dominion first examines Safari Club International, a high-powered extreme minority that he believes will eradicate elephants and rhinos, polar bears and buffalo once and for all. He describes video footage shown at the annual convention depicting men killing large mammals, he explains details of animal biology and behavior, and he quotes liberally from the safari hunters themselves. *Dominion* describes tender attentions adult elephants lavish on their young, and explains why rogue elephants are increasingly a problem for African farmers. We even hear of the importance of faith to safari hunters: “If the Lord is on your side, you’ll win. And hunting and fishing... it’s tough to go wrong... I believe in the Bible and everything in it... Every human being is a miracle. A miracle, the world created for you. You’re it” (71). One can almost feel Scully’s disgust. Readers can also depict the fear of large mammals as Scully describes people with guns lurking around essential water holes. His imagery forces readers to bear witness to these large beasts who tottered and fell to the ground far away, perhaps several years ago. We can envision them trying to rise once more, only to finally fall to the ground permanently.

Scully wryly notes that “[a]ny distinction there might once have been between a domestic animal and a wild creature roaming the remotest corner of the planet has vanished. It’s all livestock, and everything’s for sale” (72). He provides an insider’s ear to the voices of big game hunters as they explain how much they love the animals they kill, how they are helping the Africans, and how important safari hunters are to the preservation of the very animals they hunt. Without hunters, they explain, these animals would not be valued, and would not continue to exist in our world. The high price tags that these hunters are willing to pay *maintains* endangered species, they insist. Economics provide the bottom line, and these animals must be financially viable if they are to be preserved, and hunting preserves them so long as people are willing to pay big money for big game. Scully denounces economics as the bottom line:

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But I don't answer to inevitabilities, and neither do you. I don't answer to the economy. I don't answer to tradition, and I don't answer to Everyone. For me, it comes down to a question of whether I am a man or just a consumer. Whether to reason or just to rationalize. Whether to heed my conscience or my every craving, to assert my free will or just my will. Whether to side with the powerful and comfortable or with the weak, afflicted, and forgotten. Whether, as an economic actor in a free market, I answer to the god of money or the God of mercy. (325)

Scully next turns his gaze on sea life, exploring whale hunting for food and dolphin catching for entertainment. He explains the history of whaling, the cultural of whaling, and he describes the first footage of whale slaughter that reached the Western public in 1976. He relates his time at the whaling convention, offering colorful depictions of the players in this political game, and wry comments on the likely effects of their game-playing on the real-life pawns, the whales. He depicts the governments of anti-whaling nations as spineless and ineffective, even downright disinterested, as they “condemn commercial whaling in general while doing nothing in particular” (183). As with the elephants, he describes the behavior and biology of whales. He explores how whales rear their young, how they feed and what they eat, and he graphically describes footage depicting whales, like elephants, turning on their killers to protect their loved ones, only to die in crimson waters. “As the stricken creature heaves in a bloody convulsion, her companion turns violently... at the last moment sweeping around to charge [the whaling vessel]. He lunges upward, clapping his jaw as if to get at the harpooner, as the gun is aimed down and fired into his face” (154).

Dominion notes that many at the whaling convention turn a wary eye on Westerners who gobble up pigs and chickens yet shake their fingers at those who prefer to eat whales. In response, Scully reluctantly turns his pen to examine the meat industry. He notes the absence of human beings in the “meat production” facilities he visits; cheap meat is dependant on very few employees. A certain number of pigs are expected to die, and are simply removed when they become sickly... or after they perish. *Dominion* provides excellent statistics regarding the pig industry, including such details as dimensions of cages, breeding and birth methods, and age of slaughter. “[Y]our average pig today exists six months upon the earth from suckling to slaughter, and your chickens are hatched, tortured, and ready to serve inside two months” (243). Smithfield, Scully notes, kills a pig roughly every second. The author asks, how can that be done humanely? He describes his visit to Smithfield pig farm in detail. He found a plethora of sores and cancerous abscesses covering the flesh of many tightly confined, frightened—yet curious—pigs. He notes the look in the eyes of these “meat production units,” as they change after years of confinement, from terror to resignation. Scully was clearly saddened by what he witnessed. “It doesn't seem like much to us, the creatures' little lives of grazing and capering and raising their young and fleeing natural predators. Yet it is the life given them, not by breeder but by Creator” (43). Scully is reminded that animals in all their dependence and vulnerability “can teach us a lesson in humility. Take man in all his glory, man in all his brilliance and power and conquests, and what are we to Him but what they are to us?” (35).

Scully was not permitted to visit the slaughterhouse, where Smithfield pigs are shipped for final dispatch. Few who eat meat have ever visited a slaughterhouse, or even a factory farm, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to gain access. Scully notes that:

we think only of ourselves, our need to cut costs, our ambitions for higher profits, our taste for leanness, our desire for consistency. And them? In exchange for their service they get exactly nothing, no days of nurturing, no warm winds, no sights and sounds and smells of life, but only privation and dejection and dread.... We notice these places, many of us, only when the odors reach our homes and new subdivisions, affecting our own quality of life. We create these animals for our profit and pleasure, playing with their genes, violating their dignity as living creatures, forcing them to lie and live in their own urine and excrement, turning pens into penitentiaries and frustrating their every desire except what is needed to keep them breathing and breeding. And then *we* complain about the smell.... [N]o one who has seen how they are treated will ever again dare to use “pig” as a synonym for filth and greed and ugliness. (271, 277)

In one of the most scathing and sarcastic chapters of *Dominion*, Scully turns on scholars who question whether or not other animals can suffer, whether or not other animals can feel. He notes that this is a self-serving point of view in a world where we wish to use animals for experimentation and lunchtime snacks. He even attacks the animal liberation philosopher, Peter Singer, for failing to protect vulnerable human life—for taking his philosophy beyond the point of common sense, and for ignoring critical faith-based dimensions to the moral life. While Scully does not demonstrate a rich understanding of the depth and breadth of Singer’s work, he understands researchers who deny other animals basic commonality with humanity (the ability to suffer and fear) while choosing to experiment on these other beings *because* they are similar to human beings. He notes that the minds and feelings of nonhuman animals are “not entirely unknowable territory. It is just forbidden territory” (217). Theoretical explorations into the realms of possibilities regarding the minds of other animals would be fine, Scully adds, if it were not for their “practical application. They are what gives license to the vicious things that people actually do to animals.... Somewhere in Africa, meanwhile, some unphilosophical lout is tormenting and killing an elephant, that elephant is trumpeting in fear and rage, the calves are crying and scattering, and the law does nothing to stop it because we’re still not *quite* satisfied that the creatures suffer or that their suffering is meaningful or that they think or feel anything at all” (229).

Scully’s attention to the world of hunting, flesh industries, and science is done in the name of Christianity. “Either... suffering has moral value or it does not have moral value. Either there is a God or there isn’t. Either He cares about animals or He doesn’t. Either we have duties of kindness or we do not” (310). Intermittently, Scully turns to the Bible and Christianity, exploring creation in Genesis, parts of Psalms, Proverbs, Exodus, Numbers, Isaiah, Hosea, and also Matthew, Mark, Luke and John from the New Testament. He examines scriptural passages relating to sacrifice and hunting, mercy and the role of nonhuman animals. “The whole logic of Christianity” Scully notes, “is one of condescension, of the higher serving the lower, the strong protecting the weak, the last being first, and all out of boundless love and generosity” (97). How, Scully asks, can it be right by

God for us to treat animals as we do? He is profoundly disappointed that Christians care more for property rights and capitalism than they do about the creatures of the earth, or about the basic tenets of their own faith: justice, mercy, and a God-centered life. Those who exploit animals, Scully insists, demonstrate “a dominion only of power, with them and not God at the center, all grandeur and no grace” (11). “Kindness to animals is a small yet necessary part of a decent and holy life, essential if only as a check against human arrogance and our tendency to worship ourselves, our own works and appetites and desires instead of our Creator and His works” (99).

Dominion is powerful, informative, and disarming. Matthew Scully’s wry humor will make readers smile through anguish. Page by page, *Dominion* exposes Christian ignorance, ignorance that perpetuates the status quo—ignorance of what happens to other animals, and ignorance of what the Bible actually says. Scully has done his homework well, and he is intent on dispelling ignorance. He is not only after the Safari hunter, or the whaler, or the pig farmer—he is after all you: “The only way of winding down the factory farms is by withdrawing our weight, each person, one act of conscience after another, from the momentum of consumer demand” (127). But Scully is targeting Christians, and Christian salvation. “I am betting” he writes, “that in the Book of Life ‘He had mercy on the creatures’ is going to count for more than ‘He ate well’”(45). After reading *Dominion*, those who say grace over chunks of flesh will need to rethink their diet, or dispense with the hypocrisy of grace.