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## Animals in Religion

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There are several indications that animal deities preceded anthropomorphic ones. The prehistoric paintings of Europe center far more on animals than on human beings. The oldest possible, though disputed, place of worship that has been discovered is a shrine to the cave bear in Switzerland (Eliade, vol. 1, 1978 p. 13-16). According to Max Luthi, animals predominate as characters in the stories of so-called "primitive" (i.e. technologically unsophisticated) people. In the tales of Native Americans, for example, the heroes are generally not people but animals and stars. These are, in addition, the "bearers of culture." Humanity receives water from a snake, fire from a frog and sleep from a lizard (1976, p. 96).

Perhaps early people were overawed by the superior natural abilities of other creatures. The animals featured, whether by frequency or by placement, in prehistoric paintings were usually large mammals of impressive speed and strength – horses, bulls, deer, mammoths, lions, bears, rhinoceroses. But animals may also have been preferred as gods simply because they were so unlike us, and therefore filled with mystery.

Many ethnologists explain the preference for animal deities by what Eliade calls "mystical solidarity" between the hunter and the game, by which both killing and eating acquire sacramental meaning (vol. 1, 1978, p. 5). Man and deer share a single death, mingle their blood and live on as a single creature. While there is much truth in this, religious activity, it seems to me, can never be reduced to one activity, whether attending mass or stalking game.

The emergence of animal deities is the product of cultural experience reaching over hundreds of millennia, in which human beings lived as animals among other creatures of the wild. I imagine Paleolithic people sensed the growing gap between them and their old companions, much as we still do today, and, also like ourselves, were frightened and perplexed. Since these creatures no longer seemed to communicate with them directly, men and women tried to reach the animals through images and signs.

Religious changes accompanied environmental ones. The varieties of animals depicted on the walls of caves, animals like the mammoth, eventually became extinct or rare. The memory of their size, power, habits and appearance surely persisted in oral traditions, after they could no longer be observed. This left the attributes of the great mammals, themselves no longer present, to be claimed by either deities or human beings. Religion, then, developed partly in response to a sense of disorientation due to massive environmental changes, such as the end of the Ice Age. Through divine images human beings were able to bridge the vast gulf between experience and memory.

These animal deities were gradually supplanted by female anthropomorphic deities, by goddesses, who, in turn, were eventually replaced in importance by male ones. These two religious transitions – from animals to women and from women to men – were gradual processes, occurring at different rates in different places and spread out over millennia.

The first transition has been observed in excavations conducted in Catal Huyuk in Anatolia. The earliest shrines are to animals, especially the bull. Around 6,200 BC, the first shrines to a goddess appear, reflecting the increased prestige of women in the transition from a hunting to an agricultural economy (Bastrow, 1988, p. 10). The transition in dominance from goddesses to gods accompanies the increasing urbanization of human societies, since the emergence of the first cities around the middle of the fourth millennium.

The Egyptians did not distinguish as sharply as other people between animals and human beings, and their deities, up through the time of Christ, are often depicted in animal form. Anubis, for example, is represented as a jackal, while Horus is a hawk, Hathor is a cow and Uto is a vulture.

In Mesopotamia and Greece, most deities remain associated with certain animals, which probably represent their original form: Athena with the owl, Zeus with the eagle, Hera with the cow and Aphrodite with the dove. There are many tales of Zeus assuming animal form to have affairs with mortal women. He impregnated Leda, in the form of a swan, and Europa, in the form of a bull. These stories may have served to assimilate local animal cults into the dominant anthropomorphic religion. According to Blumenberg, the old animal cults were still known to Homer, when he composed the *Iliad* in about 800 BC, and he mixed theriomorphic traits with human ones in his descriptions of the deities, calling Athena “owl-eyed” and Hera “cow-eyed” (1985, p. 137). The sacred animals, once rulers of the world, were able to retain a little of their former status by becoming mascots of the anthropo-

morphic gods and goddesses that had replaced them. Yet these mascots occasionally seemed to preserve abilities beyond what even the divinities were aware of. Chinese mythology is especially rich in tales of such animals escaping captivity to terrorize human beings and sometimes even to challenge the deities themselves.

One such story tells of a monster armed with a bronze mallet which demanded from villagers a yearly tribute of virgin boys and girls to devour. When even the monkey-fairy Wu-k'ung, the great vanquisher of demons, fails to subdue this monster, the monkey is forced to seek help from Kuan-yin, the Bodhisattva of mercy. Arriving at her garden, Wu-k'ung finds the Bodhisattva dressed only in a simple robe, holding a knife in her hand and making a bamboo basket. She explains that she knows why the monkey has come, but continues to work until the piece is finished. She then mounts on a cloud with Wu-k'ung, travels to a lake and, reciting a spell, lets down the basket, to draw it up with a goldfish. The monster, it turns out, was this little creature from her pond, which would float to the surface every day to listen to her lectures. The bronze mallet was an unopened lotus bud. Kuan-yin had noticed the goldfish missing in the morning, but, since one day in heaven is a hundred years on earth, the monster had been able to cause trouble for decades (Wu, 1980, vol. 2, pp. 370-402).

### **A Return of the Old Divinities?**

In the second half of the twentieth century, there has been an increasing call for recognition of a feminine element in religion. This has taken many forms, including a new attention to figures such as Mary and Kuan-yin, the feminine concept of "Sophia" or divine wisdom and, most important for us here, the pagan goddesses. In Neo-Pagan communities, it is now common to merge such diverse feminine deities as Mary, Inanna and Brigit together as "the Goddess," while male divinities become "the God" (Christ, 1989, pp. 235-255; Adler, 1986, pp. 177-229). There are a number of problems suggested by this conception. It makes the world into a sort of nuclear family, with the children on earth and the two parents in a transcendent realm. It could encourage the divinities to quarrel like real parents, and the worshippers to maneuver like children. Seeing the religious sphere as a province almost exclusively of anthropomorphic deities, inevitably sets up an opposition, a rivalry, between gods and goddesses, even if this is not intended.

Just as many contemporary religious thinkers have looked into the past to revive, or at least seek inspiration from, the goddesses of antiquity, I believe it will

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be useful to go still further back to theriomorphic deities. As divine aspects of women and men need to be acknowledged, so do those in animals. We need inspiring figures which are not anthropomorphic to remind us that the world was not simply created for human beings, and that other figures are to be respected.

Furthermore, the recognition of divinities that are not anthropomorphic could diffuse and mediate the tension that comes of viewing divinity solely in terms of men and women. If Leroi-Gourham is correct, the animals in the cave paintings of Europe may have already fulfilled a similar function. Clustered together on the cave walls, in very deliberate arrangements, he found groups of abstract male and female symbols, linking and surrounding various creatures. The animals seem to represent a force that could transcend and reconcile even the polarity of female and male (Leroi-Gourham, 1979, pp. 38-44; Campbell, 1988, Vol. 1, pp. 58-67).

Essential to any religious vision is a sense of mystery, but today anthropomorphic figures may be losing the ability to evoke this. As every nuance of human psychology and social interaction is profusely analyzed by hordes of academics, politicians, media consultants, bartenders and others, human beings inevitably begin to seem less wondrous. But animal images, with their blend of strangeness and familiarity, appeal to the imagination as intensely as ever.

It is not healthy for an individual to become overly self-absorbed, and I suggest that this is true of human beings collectively as well. People need some point of orientation outside our species, something which does not look as we do, nor think in the same way. We need religious figures that can hear wavelengths inaccessible to us, as does the bat, or can navigate by means of magnetic fields, as does the whale. These creatures lead us into other realms, parallel worlds, of adventure and romance.

A revival of theriomorphic figures in religion might be effected, like that of feminine ones, by emphasizing those already represented in traditional worship. These, mostly survivals of archaic animal cults, are plentiful in virtually all religions. The Hindus have Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of wisdom, while Buddhists have Wu-k'ung, the monkey-fairy who attained Enlightenment. Christianity represents the Holy Spirit with a dove, and the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition is, in addition, rich in animal symbolism. A revival of theriomorphic figures could also be accomplished by turning to those of the remote past. There is, I believe, no single correct approach and, in any case, we can only choose our divinities to a very limited degree. Most frequently, they choose us, through their power to inspire.

— Historians of religion are virtually unanimous in linking religious practices and beliefs very closely with the predominant economy. Animal gods, as we have seen, were preferred in hunting societies, while female anthropomorphic deities were dominant in agricultural ones. Male anthropomorphic deities ruled in an urban setting. In much the same way, early industrial societies conceived their God as a machine.

These changes raise a number of questions: To what extent can various religious practices be detached from their broader cultural and economic context; and what religious forms will be appropriate to our post-industrial society, where the economic structures are largely unprecedented? Science fiction writers such as Stanislaw Lem have speculated that it might be God the Computer. All that is certain is that religious life will continue to grow and evolve, as it has from time immemorial.

But religion seems to develop in a far less linear way than does technology, since it endeavors to conserve the wisdom of the past. Religion is profoundly concerned with origins, so innovations usually involve revival of old beliefs or customs. And as historians and anthropologists learn more about our ancient heritage, religious thinkers explore the broader implications of these discoveries. Religious artists and writers of the Renaissance enriched their work with a revival of their Greco-Roman heritage. Martin Luther and the early Protestants drew inspiration from the original Christians and, still further back, the ancient Hebrews. More recently, religious thinkers have looked for inspiration in folk practices and pagan religions of the past. Many factors including the rise of evolutionary theory, an increased understanding of our ecological dependence on other creatures, a new appreciation of human limitations and movements for animal rights all point to a revival of theriomorphic figures in religion.

### **Toward a Sacramental Approach in Animal Rights**

Perhaps the most basic lesson of an examination of animals in religion is that our relations with animals are capable of countless variations. Words like “dominance” are at times simply irrelevant. Furthermore, the basic units with which we regard living things, such as the individual and the species, are by no means the only possible concepts with which to think of different creatures.

The notion of human superiority to other creatures impresses me as fairly arbitrary. This is usually rationalized by saying that only human beings are fully “conscious,” yet the whole concept of “consciousness” is based on a metaphysical

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distinction between internal and external reality. A secularized version of "the soul," the concept of "consciousness" was first articulated by John Locke in the seventeenth century, and was initially received with consternation. Probably only the current familiarity of the concept enables people to take it for granted now. On closer examination, the notion of consciousness proves difficult or impossible to articulate precisely (Moussa & Shannon, 1992).

Nevertheless, the idea of human superiority is now so profoundly institutionalized that it is hard to lay this aside even momentarily. The notion is implicit not only in arguments given by critics of animal rights but also in most arguments advanced by animal rights activists. Eating meat may be viewed as a symbolic expression of human superiority (Birke, 1993, pp. 197-199). Yet it seems to me that vegetarianism, since it implicitly rejects a fundamental part of the patterns by which creatures live in the wild, symbolically affirms human superiority to at least a comparable extent.

Historical and anthropological data affirm that a very high regard for animals, and even worship of them, is entirely compatible with eating meat, hunting and some forms of domestication. Such regard, however, is obviously not compatible with a purely exploitative relationship with animals. It would certainly exclude factory farming and some forms of animal experimentation.

Many new developments in such fields as anthropology, biology and even philosophy are leading us to reconsider even the nature of our identity as human beings. This, in turn, leads us to the question of the moral status of animals. These developments raise many implications, both frightening and exciting, and we can now barely begin to sort them out. Without attempting any dogmatic recommendations, I would like to suggest, in rudimentary form, a sacramental approach to animal rights.

Much of the contemporary animal rights movement attempts to discourage the use of animals, whether as food, for clothing, or in experiments. This continues a trend that began with the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not as a result of moral considerations but of technological ones.

A hundred years ago, people made use of a far greater variety of animals, and in far more ways, than they do today. Furthermore, the use of animals was far more visible. Now the rooster that woke people and the dog that guarded the house have given way to mechanical devices. Beasts of burden have long been replaced by motor vehicles. New synthetic materials have reduced our dependence on animals for clothing. We are even replacing cow dung with synthetic fertilizers. Yet the

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result of this has been to drastically reduce our daily contact with animals and, probably, to accord them even lower status than previously.

Daily contact invites use, even when this is not conscious. Attempts to avoid using animals could lead us to move them further and further from the center of our lives. Furthermore, it could lead to increasing resentment of animals, if we are constantly asked to spend money for their care and preservation, while being unable to take anything in return. As we replace leather with plastic, zoos with video tapes, experiments with various alternatives, and meat with genetically engineered soybeans, we could move toward an increasingly artificial society, where animals could be further marginalized, perceived as superfluous and, increasingly, driven to extinction.

But, while I do not object to using animals, I believe they should be able to use us as well. We should not be unwilling to take, but we should give back far more than we are doing in exchange. My model for animal rights is based on that of early hunting and agricultural societies, where meat is received with gratitude, and the creatures that bestow it are given an honored place in tribal life. I support the eating of meat, not to signify that humans are superior to other creatures, but, on the contrary, to signify that we are not.

In many hunting and agricultural societies, the eating of meat, as well as vegetation, is given sacramental meaning, as a means of participation in natural cycles of birth and death. I propose moving toward recapturing this sense through what I shall call the "principle of fair compensation." *Every use of animals, considered as both individuals and species, should be linked as directly as possible with some sort of compensation.*

Institutionalized as a legal principle, this might mean, for example, that a tax on hunting would be used to improve the lives of deer. A tax on pork would be used directly to improve the lives of pigs, while a tax on experiments would be used for the benefit of animals like rabbits. This would discourage careless, unthinking use of animals, on financial as well as moral grounds. The principle, however, need not be incorporated into law in order to be practiced. It may also be observed voluntarily, both by individual institutions and human beings. The local deli near my home has a can for contributions to an animal welfare organization. Whenever I buy meat there, I observe the principle of fair compensation by dropping something in.

The fact that the meat we buy now is packaged and butchered to a point where it looks as if it had never been alive makes it easy to forget what other creatures have

given us. If we are called upon to keep this constantly in mind, perhaps we may gradually reclaim the sense of being joined with them in cycles, where both the individual and the species are transcended.

### Note

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