

## *Kweli ndugu yanga*—the Religious Horizons of “Humans Are Primates”

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### **Abstract**

The opening Swahili phrase, meaning “Truly my kin”, was uttered by Dian Fossey’s guide when both encountered their first free-living gorilla. The theme of kinship, often deemed the ultimate in evolutionary connection and a privileged relationship recognized by *all* ethical systems, can be used to connect our species not only to primates and mammals, but to all life. But examples abound of religious leaders who have resisted this connection, denying that humans really belong in the categories “mammal” or “primate” or, perish the thought, “ape” or “animal”. Less well known is that many religious and cultural traditions have recognized these connections in profound ways, thereby providing a religious horizon for the evolutionary point of view.

### **Keywords**

animals, evolution, religion, apes

### **1. Introduction: *Kweli ndugu yanga***

It is both pleasing to the ear and a matter of conscience to begin with some non-English words. There are few who are unaware of the emergence of the English language as the dominant language around the world.<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>) At [http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Election\\_candidates\\_2006/ArnoLagrange/statement/En](http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Election_candidates_2006/ArnoLagrange/statement/En), the dominance of the English language is graphically revealed in a “chart showing the weight of some languages by speakers (total and native), economy, net surfer, web pages and Wikipedia articles”.

academy and both public and private discussions risk being one-dimensional—or worse, imperialistic—if they are conducted in but one language, one perspective, from one worldview. One risk associated with language one-dimensionality is that cultures and societies dominated by English speakers also become one-dimensional in their religious, economic, cultural, intellectual, political and social thinking—in effect, they take a “less-than-world” view. So we do well regularly to get “off-language”, just as would, say, continent-bound Americans who benefit from getting “off-continent”. I’ll suggest that moving “off” in these ways is especially fruitful as we consider “Evolution, Ecology, and Other Religious Animals”.<sup>2</sup>

*Kweli ndugu yanga* is Swahili, and this African phrase translates, mechanically, into English as “Truly (*kweli*) my (*yanga*) kin (*ndugu*)”. One writer translates the utterance more freely, more theologically, as “Surely, God, these are my kin” (Mowat 1987: 14). This phrase was uttered by Dian Fossey’s guide Manuel when both encountered their first free-living gorilla.

Because Manuel’s utterance captures so much that *we* in the academy and in our society generally have lost of the world about us, I want to contrast Manuel’s simple but altogether connecting and remarkable utterance with another that is closer to what members of the academy say and believe about the world around us. This second story captures—the word is chosen advisedly—a very different, altogether disruptive and dismissive attitude about the living beings around us. It is an attitude that now dominates more than the academy, and prevails in many other circles where English is the primary spoken word.

## 2. Bishop Gore’s Encounter with the Apes

Charles Gore, the English bishop who succeeded Darwin’s famous critic Samuel Wilberforce, went to the London Zoo. After viewing zoo chimpanzees, the bishop commented that the sight of the zoo’s captive chimpanzees made him:

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<sup>2)</sup> This is the title of the panel at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion during which an earlier version of this paper was given.

... return an agnostic. I cannot comprehend how God can fit those curious beasts into his moral order. . . . When I contemplate you, you turn me into a complete atheist, because I cannot possibly believe that there is a Divine Being that could create anything so monstrous. (Sagan and Druyan 1992: 272)

Bishop Gore was, of course, feigning atheism, for he clearly continued to believe in a wise God that, according to his views, did in fact freely choose to create the very chimpanzees displayed for the bishop and others in the London Zoo.

What Gore was not feigning, of course, was his belief that he and all other humans were, are and always will be *qualitatively* different from chimpanzees or any other nonhuman animal. But, it needs to be observed, *quantitatively*, by one respected measure, Gore was *not* all that different from the “so monstrous” chimpanzee that sparked this peculiar passage. Why? Our contemporary science of genetics revealed in the mid-1980s that human and chimpanzees are extraordinarily similar in terms of genetic material (Sibley and Ahlquist 1984). The figures usually given are 98.4% for human/chimpanzee similarity. Subsequent work has suggested that the similarity in the *active* parts of the genetic coding mechanism (as opposed to the inactive, “junk” part of our DNA) is well *over* 99%. In fact, chimpanzees and humans are closer genetically to each other than two hard-to-distinguish bird species such as the red-eyed vireo and the white-eyed vireo, which are 97.1% identical, and closer to each other than are African elephants and Asian elephants (Fouts and Mills 1997: 55, 57).

Given that DNA is so hard to see, we might dwell instead on another feature of Gore’s experience, namely, the quality of the “education” he “received” during his zoo visit, for it is tellingly revealed in his strong negative reaction. The bishop’s perception of the chimpanzees was, no doubt, seriously prejudiced by the captive circumstances themselves, for the individuals he saw had been extracted from a complex social and ecological niche where they belonged. These living beings were, plainly and simply, exhibited out of context for the British public’s benefit, whether that be edification, education, entertainment, or something else entirely. Before moving on from this salient fact, the reader should engage with what this means existentially for all involved: social beings torn out of familial, communal and ecological contexts. This is no simple reality, and it surely is ethically charged. The very act of using written words to convey this prevalent practice (about 3000 chimpanzees are held captive in the United States alone) may suggest a “removed”, almost abstract quality for the

actual realities—it is only with an active imagination and conscience that one can begin to engage the actual facts that are, from the standpoint of the captive animals, brutal and impoverishing.

Gore, perceptive primate that he was, could not have missed the meta-message of the zoo's basic presentation, namely, that *his and other humans' education* was deemed by someone more important than the captive chimpanzees' freedom to pursue their individual and social needs. What is even more important is that even if this moral leader had reacted positively to the captive chimpanzees he saw in the London Zoo, he would not have seen them in *their* home or in terms of *their* larger ecological, social, and cultural contexts—yes, chimpanzees are deemed, even by our measure, to have culture. It is a major contribution of the science of primatology to search out our cousin great apes' actual realities in *their natural contexts*, and then describe these findings as honestly and dispassionately as good science will allow. The 1994 book *Chimpanzee Cultures* edited by Richard Wrangham, the chair of the biological anthropology department at Harvard University, reveals that the prized word “culture” has for more than a decade been widely used of *all* chimpanzee groups (Wrangham et al. 1994). One author in that collection says plainly, “The last two decades have witnessed a paradigmatic change in our thinking about the behavior of animals” (van Hoof 1994: 267). Equally passionate efforts have been directed toward elephants, cetaceans, and many other animals.

The chimpanzees Gore encountered had been dramatically subordinated by the mere fact of being put on display for Londoners. A simple question helps frame what is at issue: what licensed such “power over” these chimpanzees caged for the British public's benefit in the late nineteenth century? At the very least the following two factors played major roles: (1) a human-centered bias, evident in moral values characteristic of the British, European continental, and American cultures of the day, and (2) pertinent to this paper, *an impoverished religious horizon*. What makes Gore's comment relevant to so much of the world today is that British culture—and its values of subordinating and deriding nonhuman animals—has been among the most influential versions of the mainline western, Christian tradition that has, on the whole, consistently belittled nonhuman animals relative to humans.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>) There are, of course, subtraditions within both Christianity and the non-religious parts of the western tradition that have *not* derided all nonhuman animals. See Waldau (2001)

Gore's extraordinary reaction might be explained in other ways, too. For example, it might be explained by Mary Midgley's observation, "We distance ourselves from the beast without for fear of the beast within" (Clark 1977: 120; Midgley 1973). Sheer ignorance and prejudice might also explain his comment; or the collision between, on the one hand, the deep seated conviction in western cultures that humans are set apart from the rest of nature and, on the other hand, the increasing scientific evidence that many of the animals we cage are extraordinary individuals and some are even very much like us in dozens of morally significant ways (Griffin 2001, Bekoff 2002).

Fascinating both from a philosophical point of view and when considering the way in which religions are studied academically is this anomaly: religions have often been a primary locus of affirmations of consciousness in other animals. It is well known, for example, that many ancient peoples felt strongly that some other living beings had a very developed awareness of the world. On the particular issue of consciousness in other animals, consider an observation by one of the foremost thinkers today about consciousness, and place this comment amidst a *secular* debate where many have regularly and vehemently denied consciousness to *any* nonhuman animal:

Again a curious asymmetry can be observed. We do not require absolute, Cartesian certainty that our fellow human beings are conscious—what we require is what is aptly called *moral* certainty. Can we not have the same moral certainty about the experiences of animals? I have not yet seen an argument by a philosopher to the effect that we cannot, with the aid of science, establish facts about animal minds with the same degree of moral certainty that satisfies us in the case of our own species. (Dennett 1995: 693)

Since many religious traditions have diverse resources in their inherited scriptures and in their popular stories that support claims that nonhuman animals have forms of consciousness and intelligence, it is interesting to

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and Waldau and Patton (2006). In the British context, it is worth considering that it was *Christians* by and large (though by no means the majority) who inspired the eighteenth century movement that pioneered compassion and other kinds of concern for nonhumans in England.

consider the denials of biological connection found in various religious circles. Examples are mentioned below.

This is a reason to return to Gore's question about "how God can fit those curious beasts into his moral order". Gore was inclined to see these individual animals as *radically different from humans*, that is, stemming from different roots. So, he ignored not only the obvious similarities—many are clearly there if you look at all carefully—he also ignored the obvious fact that, through the power relationship of captivity, *we* had subordinated *them* and thereby fitted them into *our* moral and religious order. To be provocative and radical (in the sense, again, of going to the *radix* or root) we can ask: what religious or moral horizon tolerates, let alone promotes, treating chimpanzees or any other sentient being in this manner? And what kind of religious or moral horizon would it take to see that refraining from captivity and exhibition of the sort seen by Bishop Gore is win-win for both humans and the animal captives?

Existing moral authorities in our society have not really challenged the questionable claim that zoos are "educational" (Waldau 2001a);<sup>4</sup> indeed, communities of faith are, like so many other contemporary human institutions, places where we rather mindlessly pass along the common claim that "zoos educate". Transmission of questionable information and claims is, of course, something of an honored tradition among both secular and religious humans—we are, after all, traditional animals. In the secular world this transmission of questionable information is sometimes exemplified by the term "factoid", coined in journalistic contexts to describe unproven statements which nonetheless had achieved unquestioning acceptance by frequent repetition. In religious contexts, tradition of course has often trumped investigation, but many have claimed that the essence of the most profound religious insight is precisely the opposite, namely, *acting well*. As Gandhi said, "the act will speak unerringly" (Desai 1968-1972: 111-2). More recently, Karen Armstrong has suggested that the pivotal religious developments in what Jaspers called "the Axial Age" (which took place in the first half of the first millennium BCE) were action-focused and concerned with the local world around us, *including* nonhuman animals.

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<sup>4</sup> A copy of this paper and the rest of the proceedings of the 2001 conference of the same name is available online through Brookfield Zoo's Website—[www.brookfieldzoo.org](http://www.brookfieldzoo.org) > Conservation.

The [Axial Age] sages certainly did not seek to impose their own view of this ultimate reality on other people. Quite the contrary: nobody, they believed, should ever take any religious teaching on faith or at second hand. It was essential to question everything and to test any teaching empirically, against your personal experience. . . .

What mattered most was not what you believed but how you behaved. Religion was about doing things that changed you at a profound level. . . . First you must commit yourself to the ethical life; then disciplined and habitual benevolence, not metaphysical conviction, would give you intimations of the transcendence you sought.

. . . All the sages preached a spirituality of empathy and compassion. . . . Further, nearly all the Axial sages realized that you could not confine your benevolence to your own people: your concern must somehow extend to the entire world. . . . Each tradition developed its own formulation of the Golden Rule: do not do to others what you would not have done to you. As far as the Axial sages were concerned, *respect for the sacred rights of all beings*—not orthodox belief—was religion. (Armstrong 2006: xiii-xiv, emphasis added)

Religion, then, in forms other than those represented by Gore's comments, has had a fascinating capacity to "see" other beings, whether they be human or nonhuman. Thus we can, by challenging Gore's dismissal in a number of ways, expand our own horizons—religious, ethical, communal, personal, academic.

### 3. Recognising Human-Non-Human Connections

It is easy to recognize that humans are mammals. This is controversial only in some circles,<sup>5</sup> and I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that, on matters scientific, such circles are not generally respected in the academy. Going further, in the very act of acknowledging this biological connection, we discern an interesting religious and/or ethical horizon. Our society's acceptance of our mammalian status might be seen to be reflective of the Abrahamic view that humans and nonhumans alike are *creatures* made by

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<sup>5</sup> In 2004, a student in my "Religion and Animals" course at Tufts University related a story about a young Christian girl in Oklahoma who, upon hearing someone discuss humans' relationship to the animal world, denied strenuously that humans are *mammals*. This is an unusual version of the denial of humans' connection to the rest of the Earth's living forms: the most common version is the denial that humans are "descended from

God. A surpassingly beautiful passage along these lines is found in Ecclesiastes 3:19-21 (RSV).

For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth?

Getting outside the largest and most familiar religious traditions and worldviews, we can find hundreds of indigenous cultures that recognized the connections we have to other animals, many with highly developed views of human-animal relationships indeed claims of biological kinship are quite common in origin stories around the world.

Today we can evolve this inquiry by asking about closer biological connections: "If we are mammals, surely we are some specific kind of mammal?" Yes, of course, we are, though obviously *not* certain familiar kinds of animals, such as bears or cats or dogs; we are, in fact, that special kind of mammal science calls "primates". If you try this "get more specific" exercise in many communities of faith—that is, if among certain believing communities you attempt to come closer to some highly specific details of our relatedness to specific creatures (dare I say, our specific animality?)—you will encounter notable resistance. A Harris Poll (#52, July 6, 2005) reported some interesting results on this and related topics believed by the US public: only 22% of adults believe in evolution generally, while 64% believe in creationism (another 10% believe in intelligent design). US citizens' views on this subject are, of course, often closely allied with, even stem from, their religious beliefs, a fact which causes distress to some. *The Economist* (November 8, 2003: 12) reported that Europeans are concerned about the effects of the US preoccupation with certain religious claims, giving as an example this polling result: "three times as many Americans believe in the virgin birth as in evolution".

Indeed, dogged attempts to affirm our close biological connections with, say, our cousin great apes, will lead, in some communities, to not

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apes", which is, of course, a misleading caricature of Darwin's points about *common ancestry*. The denial of descent from apes has, then, as much power as a denial that we are descended from a cousin.



only mere resentment and resistance, but to stiff winds, even hurricanes, of rejection. Such resistance occurs in more than those narrow-minded communities sometimes identified with the term “fundamentalist”. In 1995, Leah Garchik of the *San Francisco Chronicle* (27 November 1995) reported as follows:

In a GQ profile of Pat Buchanan, journalist John Judis asks the presidential candidate his views about teaching creationism in school. ‘Look, my view is, I believe God created heaven and earth,’ said Buchanan. ‘I think this: What ought to be taught as fact is what is known as fact. I do not believe it is demonstrably true that we have descended from apes. I do not believe it. I do not believe all that’.

The 2005 Harris Poll mentioned above found that while 46% agreed that humans and “apes” have a common ancestor,<sup>6</sup> 47% disagreed with that assertion. Such attitudes in the general US public have, almost surely, been influenced in part by the recurring tendency in the Christian and other Abrahamic traditions to separate humans from other animals. *National Geographic* recently ran this set of observations about religion and evolution:

Many fundamentalist Christians and ultra-orthodox Jews take alarm at the thought that human descent from earlier primates contradicts a strict reading of the Book of Genesis. Their discomfort is paralleled by Islamic Creationists such as Harun Yahya, author of a recent volume titled *The Evolution Deceit*, who points to the six-day creation story in the Koran as literal truth and calls the theory of evolution “nothing but a deception imposed on us by the dominators of the world system.” The late Srila Prabhupada, of the Hare Krishna movement, explained that God created “the 8,400,000 species of life from the very beginning” in order to establish multiple tiers of reincarnation for rising

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<sup>6</sup> The question, through separating “humans” and “apes,” is in one very important sense already biased. *Scientifically*, humans *are* “great apes”, the other four species in this “clade” or evolutionary grouping being gorillas, orangutans, bonobos, and chimpanzees. The last two are thought to be our closest evolutionary cousins. The perception that humans are naturally and even metaphysically distinct from other apes is anchored in our ways of speaking and, of course, acting: more appears below on the phrase “humans and animals”. Like fish trying to see the ever-present water in which they swim, we have a hard time imagining the cultural assumptions in which we have been swimming since birth.

souls. Although souls ascend, the species themselves don't change, he insisted, dismissing "Darwin's nonsensical theory." (Quammen 2004: 6)

It is fair to observe, however, that in an analytical sense, asserting connection is clearly not *per se* unreligious. In fact, lots of overtly religious people and plenty of religious traditions remain quite comfortable with claims of both biological connection and even descent (e.g., indigenous stories about an archetypal coupling between a human and some sort of animal ancestor, the offspring of which is the human race).

The influence of absolute denials of biological connection and/or descent goes well beyond specific religious communities, of course. Quammen (2004: 6) adds:

Other people too, not just scriptural literalists, remain unpersuaded about evolution. According to a Gallup poll drawn from more than a thousand telephone interviews conducted in February 2001, no less than 45 percent of responding US adults agreed that 'God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time with the last 10,000 years or so.' Evolution, by their lights, plays no role in shaping us.

Only 37% of the polled Americans were satisfied with allowing room for both God and Darwin—that is, divine initiative to get things started, evolution as the creative means. (This view, according to more than one papal pronouncement, is compatible with Roman Catholic dogma.) Still fewer Americans, only 12%, believed that humans evolved from other life-forms with any involvement of a god.

The most startling thing about these poll numbers is not that such a high proportion of the US public rejects evolution, but that the statistical breakdown has not changed much in two decades. Gallup interviewers posed exactly the same choices in 1982, 1993, 1997, and 1999. The creationist conviction—that God alone, and not evolution, produced humans—has never drawn less than 44%. In other words, nearly half the US populace prefers to believe that Charles Darwin was wrong where it mattered most.

Skepticism among some believers about connection is one thing, even if some decry it as a scientific and educational scandal. Religiously there is something else at issue, something more important than an assertion of mere connection. What is at stake is a fundamental ethical issue—*how we treat other living beings*.

#### 4. Evolutionary and Ethical Connections to Nonhumans

On this subject, human agnosticism about nonhumans' significance relative to *our* elevated status reaches into august circles. The prominent late nineteenth century Jesuit theologian Joseph Rickaby expressed an astonishing dismissal of all nonhumans with this pointed language:

Brutes are as *things* in our regard: so far as they are useful for us, they exist for us, not for themselves; and we do right in using them unsparingly for our need and convenience, though not for our wantonness. (Rickaby 1888: 250; emphasis in original)

He concluded, "We have, then, no duties of charity, nor duties of any kind, to the lower animals, as neither to stocks and stones" (Rickaby 1888: 249).

Rickaby's view, seemingly shrill and out of touch with so much else that is Christian, Abrahamic and religious, was re-confirmed in 1994 as the official Catholic position:

Animals, like plants and inanimate things, are by nature destined for the common good of past, present and future humanity. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994: 516: Paragraph 2415)

This dismissal of nonhuman animals—which really amounts to a failure to notice them and then take them seriously as beings with intrinsic value—is widespread. It appears as part of our cultural fabric even when our extraordinary ethical abilities are mobilized in very constructive ways. An important example underlies the analysis suggested by the theologian James Cone, whose analysis of racism in Christianity has been a landmark in western societies where, tragically, racism has been an integral part of the cultural tradition. Cone opposed racism in Christian churches by referring to any minister who backs racism as: "...inhuman. He is an animal... We need men who refuse to be animals and are resolved to pay the price, so that all men can be something more than animals" (Cone 1969: 80).

Cone's analysis was directed to contexts where racism had long reigned as an extraordinarily vicious problem. But if Cone's specific language here is measured by some non-western standards, such as the ethical assumptions of the Indian subcontinent or those implicit in many indigenous peoples'

cosmologies, Cone's approach of deriding nonhuman animals might seem altogether shrill. This is not because Cone has no point to make, for his overall analysis is a landmark indictment of the Christian establishment's racism. But his powerful point about exclusion of black humans relies on another exclusion, namely, that of nonhuman animals.

There are, throughout *secular* society, far more peculiar denials about our fellow animal beings. A revealing example comes at the end of a passage written by Matthew Scully, a well known American conservative voice and, until Fall 2004, special assistant and deputy director of speech-writing to President George W. Bush. Scully's widely reviewed *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* included the following exchange in a courtroom setting that underscores how decisively our society can, through its laws, deny the simplest of realities that all of us know to be true.

Just how bereft of human feeling that entire industry has become was clear at a municipal court case heard in Warren County, New Jersey, in the fall of 2000. A poultry company, ISE America, was convicted of cruelly discarding live chickens in trash cans. The conviction was appealed and overturned, partly on the grounds that ISE America (short for "International Standard of Excellence") had only six employees overseeing 1.2 million laying hens, and with workers each left to tend two hundred thousand creatures it remained unproven they were aware of those particular birds dying in a trash can. The company's initial defense, offered to Judge Joseph Steinhardt by an attorney named Kevin M. Hahn, asserted outright that this is exactly what the birds were anyway—trash:

Mr. Hahn: We contend, Your Honor, that clearly my client meets the requirements [of the law]. Clearly it's a commercial farm. And clearly the handling of chickens, and how chickens are discarded, falls into agricultural management practices of my client. And we've had—we've litigated this issue before in this county with respect to my client and how it handles its manure...

The Court: *Isn't there a big distinction between manure and live animals?*

Mr. Hahn: No, Your Honor. Because the Right to Farm Act protects us in the operation of our farm and all of the agricultural management practices employed by our firm. (Scully 2002: 285-6; emphasis added)

As both religious and secular examples show, repudiation of our biological connection to our closest evolutionary cousins is more than the result of mere ignorance and fundamentalism. It is also the byproduct of a long-

standing theological distancing of humans and other creatures that goes well back into Christian history. A pivotal figure in this area, as in so many others, was Augustine of Hippo. (See Waldau 2001, Chapter 8, which reviews a number of early Christian theologians on this matter.) The distancing has made us (secular and religious alike) too comfortable with, for example, facile uses of phrases like “humans and animals”. Scientifically, of course, this is a completely fraudulent phrase, but sociologically it is politically correct; indeed, in some ways modern industrialized societies’ strong preference for this dualism, as well as the strong dislike of the more scientific “humans and other animals”, is the ultimate in oppressive political correctness. One who uses the scientific term “nonhuman animal” is portrayed having “an agenda” (which, clearly, they *do*, otherwise why make such an unpopular choice?), while those who use the un-scientific, even anti-scientific phrase “humans and animals” are seen as *without an agenda*. This is problematic, of course, in a society that purports to respect science. Is it not the case, though, that we are, when we use this divisive and scientifically inaccurate language, like fish that cannot see the water in which they swim? True, we differ from our distant fish cousins in one way: our failure to see “our water” is, unlike the failure of fish, due to our actively *refusing* to engage our presuppositions.

What licenses, or at least supports, use of extremely unscientific language and the related, ethically-charged refusals to notice other lives and take them seriously, I suggest, is our society’s refusal to embrace evolutionary thinking generally. And that, in turn, is supported by a radical human-centeredness that is best described as “speciesism”, that is, the belief that it is all and *only* members of the human species who *really* count in the eyes of morally responsible beings (Waldau 2001).

The 2005 Harris Poll hints at why political correctness on this point prevails. Here is “Table 5”, which is labeled “Where Humans Come From”.

“Which of the following do you believe about how human beings came to be?”

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|---|-----|
| Human beings evolved from earlier species.  | 22% |
| Human beings were created directly by God.  | 64% |
| Human beings are so complex that they required a powerful force or intelligent being to help create them. | 10% |
| Not sure/Decline to answer  | 4%  |

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This vote on our *biological* connectedness, as it were, effectively works out to 22% “yes” and 74% “no”. It will be no surprise, then, that in US society at least, there is no wide-ranging, regular acknowledgement of our animalhood, let alone our primatehood or, perish the thought, our great apehood. The prevailing religions in the US do not prompt assertions of this connection, US law does not recognize it in *any* significant way,<sup>7</sup> and the US education system is not willing to take on those who promote this anomaly.

There are ironies in this US denial. In some interesting though indirect ways, scientists around the world have used our obvious connections to chimpanzees and other cousin primates to explore *our* own past—for example, much of the research on chimpanzees and other nonhuman great apes was prompted by a search for clues to *our* origins.

## 5. Religious Horizons and Non-Human Relationships

If someone accepts the *scientific* avowals of our biological connectedness to, say, our cousin great apes (humans are, scientifically speaking, in the great ape clade or common evolutionary grouping), that person will find *some* religious communities and believers who will embrace this claim. In such humans, it can be expressly *religious* horizons that inform, and are informed by, such acknowledgements. Consider two passages from Buddhist texts—the first is from the widely used *Metta Sutta*. “Just as a mother would protect with her life her own son, her only son, so one should cultivate an unbounded mind towards all beings, and loving kindness towards all the world.” The second is from a Korean text entitled *The Bodhisattva Precepts* (Precept No. 20). This reasoning appears in many Buddhist, Hindu and Jain sources as well.

Since all male creatures have at one time been our father, they should be regarded as our father. And since all female creatures have at one time been our mother, they should be regarded as our mother... all living things throughout the six realms can be considered as our father and mother. So to catch and eat any living creatures is surely equivalent to killing our own parents and eating our own body?

<sup>7)</sup> The most provocative book on the status of our inherited legal traditions and nonhuman animals is Wise (2000). But many changes are taking place in legal systems around the world: see, for example, Waldau and Whitman (2002).

Another, more recent insight into our connectedness comes from the remarkable geologist Thomas Berry: “Indeed we cannot be truly ourselves in any adequate manner without all our companion beings throughout the earth. The larger community constitutes our greater self” (Berry 2006: 5). But what is most pertinent to any conversation addressing evolution, ecology, animals and religion is that despite the fact that our connections to other primates are *evolutionarily-certain* (in other words, there is no doubt in evolutionary circles that we belong in the primate group), and despite the fact that every era has had religious believers who readily, naturally, and religiously engage our deep connections to other lives, most religious believers today in some countries are simply *not* interested in this connection.

Interestingly, the connections have not just come to light. We have known of them for millennia. As mentioned earlier, our ancient forebears regularly saw nonhumans as connected to us, and even similar to us, in myriad ways. Even in the most compassion-autistic circles of the western world, the connection has been obvious for quite some time. Linnaeus (1707–1778) was rather explicit about it in 1747 when he wrote in a letter:

I demand of you, and of the whole world, that you show me a generic character . . . by which to distinguish between Man and Ape. I myself most assuredly know of none. I wish somebody would indicate one to me. But, if I had called man an ape, or vice versa, I would have fallen under the ban of all ecclesiastics. It may that as a naturalist I ought to have done so. (Seldes 1985: 247, citing Letter to J. G. Gmelin, February 14, 1747)

Ah, the risk of bans from “all ecclesiastics”. These are less threatening today in Christendom to be sure, although the skeptical might say that this is true *only* because they believe that “[t]he central fact of modern history in the West—by which we mean the long period from the Middle Ages to the present—is unquestionably the decline of religion” (Barrett 1962: 24). But there are still religion-related risks. For example, if today we push as far as we can into the “connection issue” and seek our *closest* evolutionary cousins, we are subject to sanctions more serious than mere political marginalization in some Christian, Jewish, and Islamic circles. Worse treatment, such as a communal inquisition or character assassination, may await us in the most reactionary and denial-oriented religious circles. One well known example was the 1925 trial of biology teacher John Scopes, who was charged in Dayton, Tennessee, with violating the state’s anti-evolution statute.

(The trial, which attracted world-wide attention, is described in detail in Edward J. Larson's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Summer for the Gods*.)

As the controversy over whether we are "descended from apes" suggests, if we try to get extremely precise about our relationship with "the animal world", that is, if we try to explore *beyond* our mere *primate*-hood and find a more specific "-hood", as it were, we risk extraordinary resistance. So if we ask, "What kind of primate are we?" or "Of monkeys and apes, who are our closer cousins?", we might not find our answer invited into the church bulletin or, perish the thought, the pulpit of many communities of faith.

One of the most famous stories hinting at the discomfort with our closeness to *other* primates is the famous account of the 1860 debate over Darwin's ideas between Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and Thomas Henry Huxley. One writer commented about a famous quip by Huxley, "This riposte was sufficient to precipitate an uproarious commotion: undergraduates leaped up and shouted, at least one woman fainted and was carried from the proceedings. . . ." (Korey 1984: 236-7). Korey continues:

Wilberforce . . . in an infelicitous attempt to ridicule his opposition, . . . made so grievous a tactical blunder as to assure instantly his celebration by posterity. Turning to Huxley, he inquired whether it was through his grandfather or grandmother that he claimed descent from a monkey. When the time to speak passed to Huxley, he . . . addressed Wilberforce's slight; posed with the question "would I rather have a miserable ape for a grandfather, or a man highly endowed by nature and possessed of great influence, and yet who employs these faculties and that influence for the mere purpose of introducing ridicule into a grave scientific discussion?"—I unhesitatingly affirm my preference for the ape.

Another story that came out of the wars over Darwin's "dangerous idea" reveals the discomfort with our relationship to our closest cousins. This version of the story is used to open the Introduction written by Stephen Jay Gould for Carl Zimmer's *Evolution: The Triumph of an Idea*.

A famous legend (perhaps even true) from the early days of Darwinism provides a good organizing theme for understanding the centrality and importance of evolution both in science and for human life in general. A prominent English lady, the wife of a lord or a bishop (yes, they may marry in the Church of England), exclaimed to her husband when she grasped the scary novelty of



evolution: "Oh my dear, let us hope that what Mr. Darwin says is not true. But if it is true, let us hope that it will not become generally known!"

Darwin, like Linnaeus, was concerned about condemnation from the religious community. This is a leading reason why Darwin did not explicitly address humans' connection to the rest of the animal kingdom in *The Origin of Species*, though he did later in *Descent of Man* (1871). But this 1871 book was *not* greeted with the furor that arose after the publication of *The Origin of Species*. In 1859, everyone knew that what was at stake was humans' connection to the natural world; indeed, this was the reason the great debate at Oxford in 1860 between Thomas Huxley and Bishop Samuel Wilberforce drew so much attention and emotional energy. By 1871, though, publication of *The Origin of Species* had already prompted books expressly dealing with *humans'* connection to the rest of life, such as Thomas Huxley's *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*, published in 1863.

Although it is often suggested that these biological themes of kinship and common ancestry are the ultimate in evolutionary connection, they are in fact much more than that. In one sense, pointing out our kinship with other, nonhuman forms of life is a ploy, for it is meant to tug on our heartstrings. Why can it do this? Kinship is always and everywhere an extraordinarily privileged relationship—*all* ethico-cultural systems hold that it is ethical and fair to prefer and protect one's family (our most obvious kin) in ways that exclude strangers, and we are allowed to continue to do so even when such preference confers disproportionate advantage. This is what marks kinship off and licenses references to it as "the ultimate in evolutionary connection".

The kinship relationship is important to all of us, of course, because it is freighted with emotional overtones tugging on our heartstrings. Beyond that connection however, are many other connections to other lives, such as the overlap in traits that we so easily recognize in other primates. These connections also offer—if engaged—vast, existentially meaningful ethical implications. It is this important feature that gives them religious horizons of countless kinds and unfathomable depths. The Swahili story of Manuel's instant recognition of gorillas as "truly our kin" despite never having seen them before suggests an openness of mind and heart that is lacking in Gore's reaction, in our religious education generally, and, sadly, many contemporary religious believers' lives.

So it is worth asking, what might recognition of such connections mean for our ethical and religious awareness and abilities? Simply said, affirmation of the ability to notice and take others seriously allows us to encounter our own ethical capacities, and then to play them out in ways of our own choosing.

### **Conclusion: Omatakwiase**

If you visit certain American Indian ceremonies, you will hear chanters use the Dakota word *omatakwiase*. Literally, *omatakwiase* means something like the English phrase “to all my relations”. But, alas, this translation into English, dominant though it may be in the world today, lacks the resonance for us that the musical *omatakwiase* has for native Dakota speakers. Perhaps the closest analogue in contemporary English is religious use of the word “Amen”. Nollman describes how *omatakwiase* functions in context:

Traditionally, chanters offer prayers to the heavenly grandfather. At the end of each invocation, the speaker chants: *Omatakwiase*. . . . The Sioux say that this word is not to be spoken lightly. Intuitively, the sound symbol seems to focus its speaker back into the earth and to all the creatures. . . . (Nollman 1987: 78-9)

Frankly, some modern cultures are not all that validating of those who seek to focus a “speaker back into the earth and to all the creatures”. And even if some religious communities today take seriously the engagement of “religion and ecology”, most people in industrialized societies have to work hard to imagine such a connection to all the creatures in our Earth community, for we have been raised in what amounts to an existential and intellectual ghetto. We simply have not been able to, and thus cannot, see most nonhuman animals well, with one major exception.

This exception is the profoundly important relationship to modern “companion animals” who/which are also referred to as “pets” or, in the spirit of scientific rigor, “nonhuman companion animals”. In some countries, such as the US, more households now have companion animals than have children (Lagoni et al. 1994: 3; McKey and Payne 1992: 22). And many people hold their “pets” to be family members: polling numbers on this range from 70-98% (Wise 1998: 44-45, footnote 57).

But our relationships with these companions, obviously profound in important ways, are not necessarily good indicators of our relationship to nonhuman animals generally. Industrialized societies still kill millions and millions of these animals: in the US, where dogs and cats are increasingly prized, the number killed each day on the average *solely for want of a home* is, according to The Humane Society of the United States, in the range of 10-20,000. This dismissiveness is reflected far more fully in attitudes toward wildlife, research animals, and farmed animals, all of which are far less valued and often not protected at all with meaningful law or, when there are laws “on the books”, with meaningful enforcement.

Scully observes at the very opening of his *Dominion*:

No age has ever been more solicitous to animals, more curious and caring. Yet no age has ever inflicted upon animals such massive punishments with such complete disregard, as witness scenes to be found on any given day at any modern industrial farm. (Scully 2002: x)

This feature of our own cultures and worldviews has resulted, I suggest, in impoverished religious imaginations on the issue of nonhuman animals, *but on much more as well*. Without connection to the other lives on our planet, I submit that virtually every other aspect of humans’ religious lives is thereby impoverished. And with regard to the feature of co-evolution described by Zimmer (2001) with the eloquent expression “life is a dance of partners”, it is clear that religious traditions in denial of such basic connections are not likely to break through to realism about the more-than-human-world. Concern with only humans is, indeed, fairly charged with the description that it is a “less-than-world” view. So, I suggest that my own culture’s views and values, and how we talk (with phrases like “humans and animals”), lead to impoverishment, to ignorance-driven arrogance, and hence to serious foolishness along the lines of “We are not mammals” or, worse, “We are not animals”.

A full acknowledgement of our *primate*-hood, indeed our *ape*-hood, but especially our animal-hood, is, I suggest, important well beyond the scientific facts that connect our species not only to primates and mammals, but to all life. Darwin made an entry in his 1838 notebook that runs something like this: “He who understand[s] baboon would do more toward metaphysics than Locke” (quoted in Barrett 1980: 281). Here are some provocative parallels:

1. She who understands nonhuman animals would do more toward theology than Barth;
2. He who understands nonhuman animals would do more for religion than Augustine.

Finding, affirming, and in daily life honoring connections with nonhuman animals—whether they be the evolutionary connections picked out by the sciences, or the existential and ethical connections seen by religious figures across time and place—is, I suggest, uniquely important for the development of profound religious horizons today. We will not—indeed, *cannot*—be enriched through continued human-centeredness.

It is for these reasons that religious denials of our evolutionary connections are both ethical and ecological denials; and they are profound, tragic, misleading. In the end, for the ethical and religious imagination, for the human spirit, nonhuman animals invite the expression of our most central features—our ethical abilities, our ability to care, our ability to explore the world with compassion and humility, our religious sensibilities. The religious vitality of this connective, evolutionary and ethical point of view is described most cogently by Thomas Berry in the passage quoted already: “Indeed we cannot be truly ourselves in any adequate manner without all our companion beings throughout the earth. The larger community constitutes our greater self”.

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