

*Sightings 5/29/08*

Religion and Other Animals

-- Paul Waldau

A March 2008 news item from the BBC, "'Praying' dog at Japanese temple," opened with the lines, "Attendance at a Buddhist temple in Japan has increased since the temple's pet, a two-year-old dog, has joined in the daily prayers. Conan, a Chihuahua, sits on his hind legs, raises his paws and puts them together at the tip of his nose." That the dog's actions might *not* have involved praying of the *human* kind, as it were, is signaled by the quotation marks around "praying," and by quotes from various people that suggest alternative explanations for the dog's behavior. Yet the story closed on a note that underscores humans' continuing deep fascination with the idea of animals as potentially religious: "Jigenin temple now gets 30 percent more visitors than it did before Conan joined in the prayers."

Especially interested in the events at Jigenin are scholars in the developing field of "religion and animals." This field is burgeoning today because it touches on many issues of relevance to our twenty-first-century lives, as religion continues to strongly influence how we regard the inevitable connection between our lives and the lives of those diverse beings we call animals. Values and views about animals that originated in religious traditions, often now enshrined in societies as cultural backdrop, continue to exert great influence on this fundamental intersection in our lives.

There are ancient precedents for the claim that nonhuman animals have a religious sensibility. Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) claimed that elephants, the animal "closest to man," not only recognized the language of their homeland, obeyed orders, and remembered what they learned, but also had been seen "worshipping the sun and stars, and purifying [themselves] at the new moon, bathing in the river, and invoking the heavens."

Today, scholars such as Harvard's Kimberley C. Patton provide theologically informed readings of many traditional claims about the religious awareness of other beings. Patton deals, for example, with "ways in which animals are believed to possess a unique awareness of holiness," noting that "in many religious worlds...mutual intelligibility obtains between God and animals that exists outside of human perceptual ranges." Assertions of a special relationship between animals and God are routinely dismissed in our human-centered world. But the increased attendance at Jigenin temple reflects that we are fascinated by our fellow creatures and the idea of their potential spirituality. In fact, "religion and animals" themes appear in a surprising number of places—one example is Peter Miller's article "Jane Goodall" in the December 1995 *National Geographic*, in which he discusses Goodall's belief that expressions of awe by chimpanzees at a waterfall site "may resemble the emotions that led early humans to religion."

The debate over whether or not our animal neighbors can be "religious" is but one issue in the growing field of religion and animals. In the last decade, the field has also illuminated the significant roles played by religious traditions in our learning about and treatment of other living beings. The contemporary relevance of these topics is reflected in the growth of the field—at the American Academy of Religion, a professional association of teachers and scholars of religion, the formal group known as the "Animals and Religion Consultation" has received growing attention, and publications dealing with religion and animals are increasing exponentially.

This scholarly work emerges into a context where humans' attitudes toward our cousin animals are more multifaceted than ever. At times, some humans seem driven by a refusal to inquire about the nonhuman lives within and near their communities. This refusal is evident in food practices, where many encounter animals most frequently. At the same time, more households in the United States today have companion animals than have children. Polls consistently indicate that an astonishing number of people—in some cases more than ninety-nine percent—hold their dog or cat to be a "family member."

Communities of faith are among the institutions that are most responsive to the complex connections between humans and other animals. One increasingly finds that contemporary religious communities

have reinstated the ancient practice known often as "blessing of the animals." Some communities of faith are quite creative in recognizing the pastoral value of concerns for their members' interactions with nonhumans—some offer worship services in which believers can bring their nonhuman companions, and others provide grief counseling when a nonhuman family member dies.

Theologian Thomas Berry suggests, "We cannot be truly ourselves in any adequate manner without all our companion beings throughout the earth. The larger community constitutes our greater self." Growing awareness of "religion and animals," both scholarly and practical, opens the door to a fundamental question faced by people of divergent faiths—who will humans acknowledge as constitutive of their greater selves?

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*References:*

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