Fox Burials and Elephant Bones**:**

The Possibility of Religion in a More than Human World, and Why it Matters to the Academic Study of Religion

By

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studies that have historically precluded a thorough investigation of animal religion, as well as locate alternative perspectives.

Such critiques are implicit in materialist theories of religion such as those of Manuel Vasquez, who has attempted to map how religion works outside of language. Other materialist leaning scholars like Donavon Schaefer have attempted to use poststructuralist philosophies to argue that religion is a complex extension of multidimensional, affectively determined bodies. The materialist theories of Vasquez and Schaefer identify religion as something which emerges organically in evolutionary time, out of certain evolved, bodily capacities not unique to humans. This point is crucial, for whilst other scholars like Robert Bellah have already focused attention on the emergence of religion in evolution, scholars like Bellah still maintain a narrow focus on the human. The theoretical approach provided by Vasquez and others offers the best available way to engage the topic of animal religion within religious studies. What is more, cognitive ethology demonstrates that animals share complex forms of cognition with human beings. In so doing, cognitive ethology complements these materialist approaches. These discussions raise a number of possibilities for the discipline of religious studies. Whereas classical ontologies have

theoretical approaches taken by Schaefer and others underscore that religion emerges as part of a multiform arrangement of bodily technologies, linking organs, cells, circuits, and tissues. Rather than establish an arbitrary dichotomy between beliefs on the one hand and emotion on the other, theories like radical embodiment demonstrate the collaborative and interconnected way in which religion emerges as a complex bodily process. Beliefs and emotions feature as constituents of this complexity. Once religion can be understood in this way then cognitive ethology can provide additional data from which to develop possibilities for understanding religion as a shared evolutionary inheritance, rather than purely an ensemble of rational (human) mental activities.

By understanding religion as a complex of bodily processes, and as something thereby shared with other animals, it radically calls into question how religious studies can be understood in a human exclusivist paradigm.

Chapter One

the human/nature split, but the divide between the humanities and the natural sciences and

[32] However to simply say that animals can be understood with reference to their

[33] Indeed just as there is no answer to the question, what is religion, there are only classifications, similarly there are only classifications of behaviour. Thus it is the way in which behaviours are classified that is crucial to questions concerning *both*

general have tradi

[36] In these scenarios an organism can acquire new

define human society and labour in terms of conscious and intentional thought. In contrast, according to Marx and Durkheim, animals are determined by realities that are instinctive and

operating within that artificial realm of the human as radically distinct from the animal. These critiques have typically taken place within the framework of the Enlightenment mentality and have not sought to undermine the underlying assumption that humans are radically distinct from

mentality that we assume that the reasonableness of its general ideological thrust is self-

[53] This helps to explain why the existing landscape in religious studies is historically unfavourable to the question of animal religion. It is because the Enlightenment mentality from Descartes to Durkheim assumes a radical distinction between humans and animals, particularly at the level of subjective, conscious thought and behaviour. However this ideological distinction is increasingly hard to justify. Indeed -cognisance, art,

[54]

Recent scientific explorations into animal behaviour arising from the Darwinian perspectives that dif

dichotomy or non- [55] All such dichotomies are the product of systems of classification. For instance primatologists have identified wide cultural variation in chimpanzees, relating to tool use, grooming habits and courtship.[56] If these

humans are essentially, absolutely and radically distinct from animals. Evolutionary science calls these distinctions into question and this will certainly have an effect on how religion is to be

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[53] *Worldviews and Ecology*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 21.

[54] *Human Ecology Review*, Vol 13. No. 1, 2006, 45. It should be noted however that not all animals possess these qualities, and not all animals possess them equally. Consequently it is necessary to avoid potentially re-inscribing anthropocentrism through extolling qualities limited only to certain species, particularly mammalian ones. The simple point being made here is to undermine the most basic idea that there are particular qualities unique to humans, not to suggest that *all* animals possess them.

[55] Ibid, 45.

[56] See Franz de Waal, *Our Inner Ape* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005).

seemed more or less adequate to the first fifteen thousand or so years of human history have been [62] Animals are intrinsic to these discussions,

relevant to both religion and society at large in the context of ecological crisis. What is at stake is ous commitments and religion-

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Yet it is important not to generalize. For example, assessing the extent to which various

teachings of the tradition as they relate to subjects like animals. Also, some religious traditions

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themselves. Even in the case of Christianity where one could argue as Lynn White Jr. did, that

[67] there are important

[68] The point is that religious attitudes towards animals are highly nuanced and overgeneralizations are to be avoided.

The need for greater attention to detail becomes more apparent at the physical level of

understanding the physical universe. Recovering a sense of place in the universe, a sense of identity as animals ourselves, and a sense of belonging to the long history of evolution, does not only have spiritual and religious implications for religious practitioners, it has implications for the religion scholar also. These implications are revealed in what an evolutionary consciousness tells us about ourselves as humans in relation to animals.

our primate-hood,

indeed our ape-hood, but especially our animal-

[72] In other words,

understanding humans as animals has deep implications for the humanities, including religious

[73] The

historical constructions of religion have obviously developed recurring patterns which render religion explicable in the human world, but have yet to explain its emergence in comparison to even our closest co- ins of religion, however constructed, remain arguably inexplicable in an evolutionary context without further exploratory comparison with other species. In this sense animal religion is also poised to assist in better understanding the origins of religion that is profoundly relevant for the humanities. As

[74] Our

identity as humans is shaped by our diverse ecological vicinities, replete with other creatures

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[72] *Worldviews* 11 (2007): 103-123.

[73] *When Worlds Converge ±What Science and Religion Tell Us about the Story of the Universe and Our Place in It*, eds. Clifford N. Matthews, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and Philip Hefner (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2002), 96.

[74] *Communion of Subjects*, eds. Kimberly Patton and Paul Waldau (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), xvii.

the term 'religion first punctuates the butterfly of religion as such and sticks it [81]

Non-reductive materialism is decidedly agnostic about any essential/fundamental characteristics to religion, and likewise relativistic about the number of possible approaches there are to study it. Although Vasquez himself still refers primarily to the human context, in principle these aspects of a non-reductive approach avoid fighting an uphill contest for animal religion. This is because a non-reductive approach allows for the kind of cross-fertilization of ideas and approaches to religion that would combine to produce theories of animal religion.

2.2.2 Emotion, Religion, and the Cross-Species Bridge

In the opening chapter of *Religion and Emotion: Approaches and Interpretations*, John Corrigan describes how scholars of religion have historically been reluctant to address issues of emotion

theologians to artists, scriptural exegetes to literary and social structuralists and

[82] Notably because of the entanglement of emotion and theological discourse in particular, some religion scholars have found it too problematic a topic for discussion. However additional reasons for this reluctance can be located in the point that emotions themselves have also been historically caught up in Enlightenment dualisms. For instance the most basic feminist observations regarding the operation of hierarchical dualisms would likely

something more

prevalent in females.[83]

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[84] This is not to deny the necessary distinctions between cognition and emotion, but rather to understand how they are

[85] In other words emotions can be seen as self-organizing systems of interactions that inform certain types of intentional behaviour.[86] [87] The

stitute our

[88]

If one is able to regard emotions as the organizing principles around which both mind and body collaboratively constitute our subjective, personal and social selves; then one is better able to see why other scholars have commented on the importance of emotions to religion. William

[89] Som

emotion is critical to religion (and this can be evidenced using a variety of approaches that take account of complex embodied life ways), and emotion is a shared evolutionary phenomenon (that humans share in common with other species), it becomes reasonable to query in what ways ani

in the human context.

Some scholars have already taken up this line of thinking in a number of interesting ways.

o Animals Have Religion? Interdisciplinary

Ultimately materialist theories help to limit the totalizing attempts of social

product of iterative discursive practices but rather of the interaction between these practices and matter, including biology and ecology, which is dynamic, agentic, and polymorphously [100]

Emotion is a site where these limits are being worked out in a way that makes cross-species comparison possible, given the emotional complexity which other-than-human animals exhibit. Once again, given how emotion can be demonstrated to serve as integral to the social functioning of what is often termed religion, then perhaps animals organize their own systems of meaning in like ways. The

[100]Vasquez, *More*, 169.

Chapter 3

Cognitive Ethology and the Case for Animal Emotions

3.1 The Roots and Current Trajectory of Cognitive Ethology

[101]

Cognitive ethology has its beginnings in areas such as comparative psychology, classical ethology, laboratory experimental psychology, and philosophy of science.[102] Donald Griffin launched the field in 1976 with his book *The Question of Animal Awareness: Evolutionary Continuity of Mental Experience*. Griffin and his contemporaries struggled to establish what

[103] Bekoff usually cites the example of pets, particularly dogs, to illustrate the point that many people instinctively know that animals live rich emotional lives. Providing an empirical basis both to substantiate and explain this intuition represents the core impetus for cognitive ethology. This stands in contrast to the behaviourist-centric research of classical ethology and other animal studies, namely the research into the strictly bio-

Cognitive ethology takes its lead from anecdotal cognitivism, which was first championed by Charles Darwin. In describing the anecdotal cognitivist approach Bekoff and Allen state:

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[101] *Comparative Approaches to Cognitive Science*, eds.

evolution of human response to fire. Chimpanzees are close to human lineage and this makes

[107] Additionally the similar

of hominid evolution, makes these apes ecologically important as a *living* [108] The

[114] As Bekoff points out, there is absolutely no way to substantiate such a claim.

limited perspective represent a cultural legacy also common to religious studies; in so far as some of the same characteristics of human exceptionalism are present, and preclude a more thorough investigation of other-than-human animal experience.

3.2 The Contributions of Marc Bekoff

champions and the dialogues he engages. For instance Bekoff is not concerned with questions of whether animals have emotions, for him this is self-evident. Bekoff wants to understand *why* animals have emotions. Consequently Bekoff situates his research within a comparative and evolutionary framework. Bekoff believes, like Darwin, that the gap between humans and animals is widely exaggerated and that humans are still living with a Neolithic brain that was at one time capable of enjoying more mutually enhancing relationships with animals. There is a sense for Bekoff that humans have lost some of their evolutionary way, or at least forgotten about it. This is why Bekoff believes strongly that we have more to learn about ourselves through learning about animals, allowing us to ask and answer questions of why similarities and differences between us have evolved the way they have.

In terms of his research Bekoff is unapologetic for his use of anecdotal evidence. He concedes that the anecdote (singular) does not equate to evidence, but that anecdotes (plural) do. However Bekoff also points out that the kind of anecdotal evidence cognitive ethology puts forward, whilst taking inspiration from anecdotal cognitivism, moves beyond its limitations

s are now

able to exploit techniques like experimental playbacks of vocalizations to conduct controlled studies under field conditions; the range of experiments made possible by such techniques means that there can be no easy dismissal of modern cognitive ethology on the grounds that it is

sensibilities.[119] Bekoff holds the view that much of what constitutes our popular understanding of religious virtues, for instance love, altruism and compassion, spirituality, a sense of the sacred, are well documented in animal behaviour. It is appropriate to highlight this, as this paper is extending the limits of these notions a little further into the discipline of religious studies.

3.3 The Beginnings of Data

Turning to case studies in cognitive ethology underscores the kind of available data for animal religion. Yet it is important to recall the lenses through which to explore these case studies, and there are two significant points to note. The first is to recall the discussion of theories of embodiment, which understand religion as something emergent from physical-material processes. Given this, the second point is to see these case studies from an evolutionary perspective. It is from this vantage point that pre-linguistic, other-than-human capacities for religion are better

are by degree rather than

kind; the closer this conversation of religion is to both embodiment and evolutionary origins, the closer it is to effective cross-comparison with non-human animal species.

Firstly it is important to understand that other-than-human animals possess emotions, but

[120] Just as behaviours are

different so are feelings. This too is important to notice because a similar temptation is to overgeneralize at the species level, f

opt to show compassion and save the life of an orphaned member of another species, another of the same species could opt to abandon it. Just as some humans can show love and compassion, others can show hatred and contempt. What follows are three cursory glimpses of preliminary evidence that could prove fertile for further investigation into animal religion.

Much cognitive ethological research has been conducted on primates, but this first study

[125] Indeed many animals have the ability to conceptualize. Chickens for example can conceptualize different communication signals related to food and danger, and this in itself is ground-breaking. Yet for dolphins to exhibit the kind of communicative complexity described above, leaves open the possibility for the *production* of such complex communication as it relates to various forms of social meaning making, one particular aspect of religion that is tied to emotions.

[126] Indeed play has become an interesting location for theorists in the study of religion, and its emergence. One of the most useful applications of theories of play to various religious rituals is notably in the context of what Gregory Bateson cal -

What is striking is that some animals also possess this ability at a fairly sophisticated level; and how meta-communication manifests in play is a key focal point in cognitive

[128]

a number of avian species, and thus it affords the opportunity for a comparative investigation of cognitive abilities extending beyond the narrow focus on primates that often dominates discussions of non- [129] Once again moving away slightly from primate-centric study, Bekoff contends that we have much to learn about the evolution of *human* morality from

[130] Indeed Bekoff goes on to say that

[131] Bekoff argues that animals are moral, but not necessarily

[132] There are many complexities to what Bekoff is proposing, which include a discussion of terms, notably the distinction he makes between morality and ethics. Nevertheless, the basic point is that animals possess the ability to organize their social behaviour around conceptual frameworks of right, wrong, fairness, and justice, according to their own species differentiation, and that these are often learned and expressed through play and regulated by emotions. Once again there would appear to be some basic ingredients for the scholar of religion to take a closer look at.

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[128]Marc Bekoff, Colin Allen, *Species of Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 88.
[129]Bekoff, Allen, *Species*m[(129)] TJf.86wrod throug00550pre

The last case study is that of African elephant behaviour, as observed by Cynthia Moss and described

Chapter 4

Final Conclusions

4.1 The Consequences for the Study of Religion

Religious studies like other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, is facing significant challenges in the current university environment, including how to envision religious studies as a discipline, understanding its place in the academy, and defining the object of its study. A discussion of animal religion helps to highlight the fault-lines for what is at stake for the discipline in these terms, at this moment in time. Indeed the viability of animal religion is dependent on some of the same constraints as the discipline of religious studies itself. Animal religion is poised to help draw out some of the toxic residue of the Enlightenment which hampers both animal religion and religious studies from moving forward.

4.1.1 Human Exclusivism

The first residue is human exclusivism which until now has been discussed only in terms of how it precludes the possibility of animal religion. Yet human exclusivism also imposes harmful limitations on the discipline of religious studies itself.

Rodney Stark points out that typically social scientists are trained to prefer one particular

[138] However Stark states that this is also the cause of so much pointless research. The appropriate order of things is for the research question

how to find it depends on *what* you want to

[139]

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[138]

methodology,[140]

critical because it is analogous to the way human exclusivism in religious studies almost functions as a meta-method to which so many are unquestionably loyal.

Not only does human exclusivism limit the ability to pursue important questions, it also affects the discipline in an even more foundational way: it is a false starting point, a bad foundation that could undermine the integrity of the discipline.

For instance other disciplines which religious studies uses for its own (given that the discipline has no tools of its own) construct their work on foundations that assume relevance for cross species and evolutionary comparison. This should likewise inform the work of religious

-than-human animals possess

culture and psychology, and therefore evolutionary comparisons are not just required in the domains of cultural studies and psychology, but also religious studies as well. Ultimately I take

> When there is no deep commitment to comparative work regarding
> er-than-human animals, both
> formal and informal education are at a great risk. Among the most
> debilitating of the risks is the possibility that education about the non-
> human inhabitants of our shared world will remain human-centered in
> ways that continue to produce harms to other living beings and
> dysfunctions for humans in our local and global communities.[141]

So what animal religion reveals for the discipline in terms of human exclusivism, are faulty start lines and limited possibilities, combined with the prospect of social irrelevance and ethical indifference. This leads into the next issue of social engagement.

4.1.2 Social Engagement

[140]Stark,
[141]Paul Waldau, *Animal Studies*, 162.

Animal religion requires a deeper social engagement on the part of scholars. This is quite simply because animal religion would represent a general shift of focus toward the non-human in wider society. Greater attention to animals is an inevitable consequence of greater understanding of ecology and evolution. The place of the human in the universe is being questioned almost everywhere, and some would suggest this represents a vast shift in consciousness. Yet some scholars are still wedded to the traditional ideals of the cloistered academy; where the scholar is free to be disinterested and question what they like in the pursuit of knowledge, without interference or the contamination of other outside pressures. Questions like animal religion, and

the *ancien regime* this can make some scho

[142] However religious studies is not alone in this, and to see the

more to do with whether or not the entire system of higher education needs to be radically rethought, and whether we can play a role in making a case for the importance and effectiveness

[143] e only

[144]

Still, religious studies needs to accept the coming discomfort with intrepid optimism, or

e Robert Bellah have seen

importance in primitive shamanism than in all the cut and dried rationality that college professors

human in wider

[145] This statement points to a disconnect between the Enlightenment humanism

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