

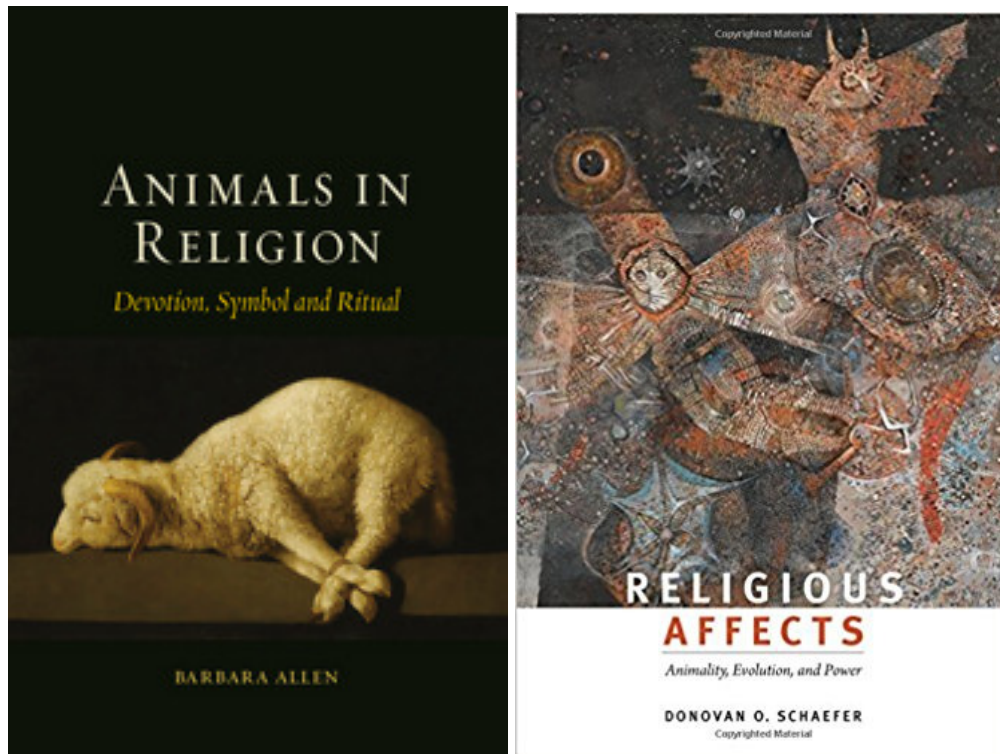
Review Article

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Religious **A**nimals and Animal Gods

Barbara Allen. *Animals in Religion: Devotion, Symbol, and Ritual*. Reaktion Books, 2016. 560 pp. £40.00 (hb).

Donovan O. Schaefer. *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power*. Duke University Press, 2015. 304 pp. \$94.95 (hb), \$24.95 (pb).



The fraught conflict between religion and science is the stuff of grand cultural narrative. And while it may be true that particular theologies play into this opposition, there are also discourses in religious studies and theology that seem to exist precisely *because* of the fact that religion and science (despite all narratives to the contrary) inevitably collude and collide. Such is arguably the case with the subfield of religion and animal studies. Recognizing kinship bonds between humans and other animals may act as a

kind of antiseptic, to clean out any anti-evolutionary theology that might ignite anguish over our common ancestry.

An earlier generation of scholarship at the intersection of religious and animal studies (what gets billed, in the field, as the study of religion and animals) was more oriented around what Dave Aftandilian has called the “tradition-based approach.” This research sought to uncover the role that animals played, historically, within religious traditions and to understand the meaning of phenomena such as animal sacrifice or ritual slaughter. There was often a clearly ethical dimension to this approach as well, encouraging people of faith to affirm resources for animal activism or vegetarianism within their own traditions. But recent scholarship on religion and animals has begun to ask a different set of questions. In conversation with work in cognitive ethology, illuminating the intellectual and emotional lives of other creatures, many new projects on religion and animals explore the religious and spiritual powers in, and around, animal life.* This sort of inquiry raises questions about the nature of religion itself: is it something with roots in our animality? Does religion or spirituality point to a set of phenomena that we also witness in the lives of other animals?

Two recent books exhibit, in very different ways, this approach to the study of religion and animals. Rather than simply examine a given religious perspective on animal life, these books keep an evolutionary framework at the forefront, using it to pose questions about how nonhuman animals might give us insight into the nature, function, evolution, or origins of this phenomenon that we label “religion.”

Donovan Schaefer’s *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* might more obviously exemplify this paradigm, given that the book focuses explicitly on evolutionary theory. Schaefer argues, in the book, that the study of religion has tended to side with the angels, over the apes. This opposition — of angel to ape — is a reference to an 1864 speech from British parliamentarian Benjamin Disraeli. Speaking on the position of the church in its conflict with modern science (more particularly, evolutionary theory), Disraeli suggests that this battle poses the question “is man an ape or an angel?” In response, Disraeli resolutely affirms that he himself is “on the side of the angels” (1). Implicit in such a statement are theological descriptions of angelic life from medieval thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas, who called angels “spiritual creatures” and characterized them as essentially non-physical entities who exist as pure intellection. Against such a proposition, Schaefer makes it clear that he is on the side of the apes. This is not, however, an affirmation of the power of science over that of religion. Rather, Schaefer is arguing for a theory of religion that refuses to fixate on the

angels and their disembodied intellection and orients itself instead around the life of animal bodies.

While religious studies has often presented itself as the scientific study of religious history, life, and culture, Schaefer argues that an almost exclusive theoretical focus on cognitive phenomena such as the nature of *belief* or a fixation on the use of religious scriptures and language has kept the study of religion pinned to the world of the angels and has alienated it from the world of animal bodies. This critique of the belief-oriented focus in religious studies is not new and can be seen in the work of scholars such as Talal Asad, who have found it a remnant of Protestant Christian belief-oriented theologies. This, for scholars like Asad, has rendered the discipline of religious studies almost incapable of theorizing traditions that do not fall into the structures of Protestant life and thought (such as Islam). Schaefer is not unconcerned with such matters. But he is more concerned with the possibility that a fixation on belief and language has made the study of religion so anthropocentric that it is incapable of theorizing the possibility that Jane Goodall once raised as she observed a chimpanzee dance almost purposelessly in front of a waterfall: could this chimp be having a kind of religious experience, rapt by something like wonder or awe?

Schaefer is invested in a theory of religion that can explore or even explain the chimp's waterfall dance. This means approaching religion as a phenomenon that is not only not limited to human life or culture, but is experienced and accessed by humans on the level of their animal bodies. This means, perhaps inevitably, theorizing religion itself as an evolutionary phenomenon. There are, of course, a great number of theorists both within and outside of religious studies who have already theorized the evolution of religion itself. But Schaefer wants to prevent the reiteration of that great divide — between human and animal — that often appears even in evolutionary theories of religion, to suggest that humans are that animal with a *logos* that becomes manifest precisely through social structures such as religion, in order to separate them from the rest of the animal lives. Instead, Schaefer suggests, those things we label as “religious” in our own human lives have not only evolved from, but continue to evolve *alongside, with, and as* animal life. This requires, however, a clarification on how it is that Schaefer is theorizing evolution, in the first place.

Schaefer emphasizes that the evolution of religion is not a logically ordered, straightforward phenomenon that thinkers such as Daniel Dennett or Richard Dawkins suggest that it is. Religion is not a phenomenon that evolved to meet a particular demand or function in human life, later becoming essentially useless or redundant. Or religion is not the logical, pragmatic, “development of cost-effective solutions” to life's

suffering and problems (158). Rather, Schaefer is interested in the work of theorists who critique the adaptationist perspective in evolutionary biology such as Stephen J. Gould, Elizabeth Vrba, and Richard Lewontin. This “pluralist” perspective in evolutionary biology helps to highlight the accidental nature of evolution. What this means is that the set of phenomena we call religion is not the rational production of a resource but is instead the long sedimentation of many sets of collisions and accidents without apparent purpose or design. Religion evolved, perhaps, not as something that was meant to help us survive or reproduce, but as something that we *felt like doing* with our animal bodies (173).

The key theoretical resource that Schaefer utilizes throughout the book is affect theory. In conversation, particularly, with thinkers such as Sara Ahmed, Eve Sedgwick, and Teresa Brennan, Schaefer is interested in the way that a focus on feeling and affect can decentralize our theoretical obsessions with logic and reason while offering a theoretical framework that circulates in and around bodies. It is affect theory, in other words, that helps Schaefer ground his own theory in the life of the apes rather than the realm of the angels. And it is also affect theory that sharpens his theoretical focus on the evolution of religion as a feeling-oriented (rather than a rational purpose-oriented) development. To think about affect is to think about power, and how it works both in and around us, influencing movement and action. Affects, says Schaefer, “sit closer to the engines of power than reasons, circulating their own compulsions that easily and often overwhelm rational, logocentric determination” (174). More importantly for the arguments that he makes about animal lives, affect is something that we not only share with other animals but which also functions in and through the most stereotypically “animal” elements of our human bodies. Theorizing religion as an affective, rather than a purely intellectual, phenomenon exposes its animality.

Barbara Allen’s *Animals in Religion: Devotion, Symbol, and Ritual* is not a densely theoretical book, like Schaefer’s. In fact, Allen takes an almost encyclopedic approach to the topic. She discusses the role of animals in different religious traditions — including Ancient Egyptian mythology and (as I believe no previous book in the field has done) in Celtic and Viking religio-theological folklore. Given that the chapters of the book are broken down by religious tradition, it would seem that the text takes more of a tradition-based approach (albeit, thinking comparatively about animals, between these traditions). Additionally, Allen is a minister in the Uniting Church in Australia. So there is a sense in which this book reads more like a resource for people who practice a religious tradition, rather than a text that troubles at the notion of what religion is, in the first place. Nevertheless, there are some elements of this book that I think illuminate

this newer approach to a study of religion and animals, thus keeping an evolutionary theory at the forefront, and ultimately raising questions about what religion is in the first place.

Take, for instance, Allen's introduction to the book. Noting that animals have long played a deeply ambivalent role in religious traditions around the world, Allen also observes that religion itself is — institutionally — “on the decline in the West.” This poses the question, for her, of whether this decline will “be a sign of hope, or hindrance, for non-human species” (7). If many religious traditions have, historically, assigned animals a lowly status — wouldn't the decline or disappearance of these patterns of life, thought, and ritual ultimately be a good thing?

Allen does not answer this question outright, but does suggest that we may be misunderstanding religion itself, if this is our view. Making reference to the evolution of religious worship and ritual, Allen raises the topic of the Paleolithic cave paintings in places like southern France and Spain. The figures of animals on these cave walls appear with some frequency in discussions about the origin or evolution of religious life. Allen notes that there are a host of different theories about what these paintings could have meant, or what purpose they could have served, for ancient humans. Were these images that were meant to generate a kind of good fortune, for hunting magic? Were these animals figures of worship? Allen acknowledges that it may be impossible to know whether these paintings ever really served a purpose that we, today, would deem religious. Instead, they help her make a different point. What we *do* know, she argues, is it that “animal deities preceded anthropomorphic ones” and that the first divine powers in human life were animal (9). Taking an evolutionary perspective on theological ideas, then, one is challenged to think about the gods' origins within animal life. The gods were always already animal.

In other words, Allen seems to suggest that the evisceration of the connection between religion and animal lives may create a kind of amnesia about what kinds of bodies produced religious worship and ritual, in the first place. But even more than this, Allen also argues that keeping alive this connection between animal life and sacred or holy power can help to keep in view the sacralization of animal life. We live in a cultural context in which the predominant view of animals is that they are commodities or products. To keep animals in conversation with their varied histories in religious life is to remember that they have also been deemed sacred. And, as Allen suggests, when we actively de-sacralize animal life, “we rob them of their holy qualities and, in the process, de-humanize ourselves” (12).

In sum, Schaefer's and Allen's books are divergent — they have different aims, and approach their themes using different methods. But one can see, in each of them, traces of an emerging disciplinary approach to the study of religion and animals. This is an approach that is, from the outset, oriented around animal lives. But it also promises to generate more complicated questions about how animals may actually be foundational to things that seem as if they were built by, and for, humans alone: religious life, and even divinity itself.

Note

* See his discussion in Dave Aftandilian, "Animals and Religion" in *Grounding Religion: A Field Guide to the Study of Religion and Ecology*, Edited by Whitney A. Bauman, Richard R. Bohannon II, and Kevin J. O'Brien (Abingdon, Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2011).