

Christianity & Therianthropy; A Hypothetical Theological Perspective

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Therianthropy is definable as the experiences and identity of an individual who identifies non-physically as a species of animal, or, in some cases, an individual who identifies non-physically as a type of categorically fantastical creature, but whose experiences within their identity are marked by a unique animality or similar quality. It would be largely assumed by the general public from that knowledge that Christianity would therefore assume a negative stance towards therianthropy, viewing it as either a competing religious force due to outsider misunderstandings of the identity, or evidence of some sort of demonic possession or influence, possibly a type of “straying away” from the light of the Abrahamic God and His intentions. For those more knowledgeable about Christian scripture and liturgy, more issues become apparent when trying to associate the two: most prominently that jumps to mind, is the hierarchical divine triptych which strictly separates the divine from mankind from the non-human animals.

But it must be admitted that there is more depth to the situational scripture than just what appears at face-value. Modern day interpretations of the triptych that so starkly separate the human from the non-human are potentially theologically inaccurate and, arguably, speciesist.

One Conservative Christian theologian, Andrew Lindzey, might be wont to argue that modern Western Christian traditions which prioritize mankind’s boot of supremacy over nature and animals oftentimes go against the value and purpose that non-human animals intrinsically have as God’s creatures, and that such traditions reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of “a divine mandate for human stewardship of creatures” (Patton 33). Ecological Christian theologians, such as Thomas Berry, also support the idea of their existing a significantly less strict, religiously authoritative divide between humans and animals than is customarily thought-- many ecological Christian writings rally against interpretations of the separation of the “human world” and the “animal world,” instead focusing on the idea of “the world” transcending arbitrary conceived boundaries, and truly being “that diverse whole in which God took

deep delight on the seventh day of creations” (McDaniel 134). And still others find they must raise an eyebrow at the way animals are viewed in modern Christian tradition and where such originated from, as one contemporary theologian, Lukas Visser, remarks, stating “The degradation of the status of animals to objects finds no justification in the Bible. While the cultural roots of it are in antiquity, it is essentially the product of the sequence of modern thought since Decartes (1596-1650) which has made humankind the center of the universe and has seen the outside world as subject to the human mind” (Vischer 2).

Though the bringing of Decartes into the discussion raises a relevant point in that a secondary issue of contention with Christianity and therianthropy is the trouble surrounding the idea of souls. Descartes infamously argues that animals do not have immortal and rational souls, rather merely “sensitive” souls (similarly to Aquinas and Aristotle’s arguments of such), and thus, that is in part why they are reduced to automatons, with his beliefs surrounding such have become largely popular in consumerist Christian traditions. But what does it mean to harbor a soul? And, could it be argued that perhaps, from a Christian perspective, one does not need to interpret it as a human with an “animal soul” at all?

The idea of “souls” is a contentious one, and one I am not fit to argue for or against in this essay. But with that said, it must be noted that they are said to exist within Christian tradition, and there are arguments that animals do certainly have souls. Descartes, Aristotle, and Aquinas all agreed on the idea of the “sensitive” soul of an animal, lacking in *logos* and therefore being fundamentally different than that of a human’s; John Wesley, co-founder of the Methodist church, to utilize an alternative viewpoint, has suggested that individual animals, like individual humans, will experience and enjoy Salvation and a life after death, implying some fundamental similarities in animals’ non-corporeal beings to humankind’s. While there are disagreements upon the substance, there are plenty of records which demonstrate theological arguments that behind an animal’s eyes is *something*, even if that something is only, as Decartes might argue, temporary and automatic. Given God’s infinite power, why would it be unsubstantial for an individual to believe that He granted them aspects

of both a human soul and an animal soul, in whatever ways one might parse it out? To simultaneously exist as both human and non-human, to be able to experience being both the Saint, the protector of his animal companions, and his animal companions, proving the divine stewardship and goodness of their respective Saint? There is a moment to be taken to turn to Jesus, the sacrificial lamb, and the existence of His divine soul within a human vessel. There is also relevancy to be noted in parallel with scripture regarding more literal sacrificial lambs; that is to say, stories and texts which reference animals that have divine purpose beyond human need. Surely the idea of an animal soul within a human vessel, one still laced with divine purpose, is neither a step forward nor backwards from where scripture already places us with such. It is just another form of being, or of wholeness, a different form of image made by God's hand than is traditionally written about, but not one so far from contemplation or understanding.

Ware talks about seeing things in nature in religious contemplation, to appreciate the sheer "thusness" and "thisness" of God's unique creations individually. He writes, "We are to see each stone, each leaf, each blade of grass, each frog, each human face, for what it truly is, in all its distinction and intensity of its specific being" (Ware 119). What if we, for a moment, shelve the ideas of souls aside entirely in favor of viewing therianthropy through a more radical, yet easily understood lens: the lens of an intensity of "thusness" and "thisness" experienced by an individual on such an intrinsic level as to be inseparable from their own "thusness" and "thisness." We think, therefore we are, Descartes argues; could, in the same vein of thought, it not be argued that we feel, therefore we are? If a therianthrope knows themselves rationally to be a wolf because of the intensity of their Knowing, then why would that not make them to be functionally, for the intents and purposes of what they are at the incorporeal center of their being, a wolf? Kai writes about this idea further in their essay Christian Therianthropy, remarking, "I believe that when God spoke everything into existence his words gave a sort of resonance to each creature's soul, and so that humans could better relate and communicate with the creatures they're supposed to be caring for, he gives some a soul that resonates similarly with certain creature(s). This would give an individual a feeling as though they are supposed to be said creature. Technically the soul

itself is still human since it possesses the breath of God, but God also made it so that it strongly relates to, or resembles in frequency, one or more creatures, causing a form of spiritual therianthropy, but one that's compatible with Christian beliefs."

There are divides between interpretation, tradition, and modes of thought throughout contemporary Christianity and there are negative historical traditions which do view animals more as automatons and machines than true servants of God, this much is true. With that said, there is still a definable basis for arguing not only that therianthropy is acceptable from a Christian perspective, but that it is actually a positive attribute to have, even so far as being interpretable as a mark of divine favor or divine providence.

Were I a Christian myself, I would make the staunch argument that therianthropy is demonstrative of a divine extension of what theologian Walter Brueggemann terms "the prophetic imagination," which "lies in critiquing the dominant modes of thought and practice in one's age, insofar as they are unjust and unsustainable; and opening oneself to fresh possibilities for new and hopeful futures" (McDaniel 135); that the amazement of someone who is both human and non-human in a society which so wrecks havoc upon God's non-human creations is reflective of His will to heal and mend the gap in which has been created between not only humans and animals, but humans and the natural world as a whole. To help defend and prove, to quote a '98 report to the World Council of Churches, "the integrity of creation," defined as "the value of all creatures in and for themselves, for one another, and for God, and their interconnectedness in a diverse whole that has unique value for God."

Citations

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