

BEYOND THE RAINBOW BRIDGE

Many Christians believe that animals have souls of some sort. But are all of God's creatures—human and animal alike—immortal?

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We humans are at the top of God's creation on earth, made in God's image, endowed with superior intelligence and free will, given dominion and responsibility for the rest of God's earthly creation, and cognizant of a relationship with our Maker. We have souls. In Christianity, we live in the faith that our souls are eternal, and that through redemption by God our souls will be gathered into heaven.

Although we have an elevated position among living beings, we are the tiny minority, outnumbered at least 10,000 to 1 by other vertebrates and 10,000,000 to 1 by invertebrates. By choice, most of us live in close quarters with one or more of these creatures. There are 70 million pet dogs and more than 80 million pet cats in the United States. Over half of all American households have at least one canine or feline, in addition to hamsters, birds, frogs, lizards, turtles, snakes, fish, and other animals.

Our pets become family members. We bond with them. We can distinguish our family pets from other animals of the same species by their unique personalities, habits, and level of intelligence. Many of us travel with our pets and share important family events with them. And when they die, we experience much the same grief and bereavement that we feel at the loss of a human family member or friend.

At death, what becomes of our pets, and of other animals? We are assured in the Bible that God watches over all His creation—even the sparrows. So are we to believe that a loving God would endow all His creation—human and animal alike—with souls and bring them all together in the eternal order?

A poem entitled "The Rainbow Bridge" expresses the feelings of many pet owners on these questions:

Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge. When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge.

There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable. All the animals who had been ill and old are restored to health and vigor; those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by.

The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing: They each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.

They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent; his eager body quivers. Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster.

You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.

Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together....

(Author unknown)

Actually, "The Rainbow Bridge" is a popular expression of a Christian theology of animals that has been evolving for more than 1,600 years. It raises the following questions:

1. Do animals have souls?
2. If animals have souls, how are their souls viewed by God relative to human souls?
3. Do animals have a spiritual relationship with God?
4. Are animal souls or spirits immortal?

The Soul

Before tackling these issues, it is necessary to explore the concept of the soul itself. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the English word *soul* can be traced to a translation of the Greek word *psyche*, which in turn was the translation of the Hebrew word *nephesh*, meaning life or vital breath.

Plato (427-347 BC) considered the soul (*psyche*) to be the essential part of the human being, encompassing the mind, emotion, desires, and behavior, and existing eternally. Plato's student Aristotle (384-322 BC) extended the Platonic model, but he asserted that since the soul is the actualization of the body, it cannot exist outside the body and therefore cannot be immortal.¹ Sixteen centuries later, the Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) argued that since the rational aspects of the human soul were without form and matter, the soul could not be destroyed by physical processes and could therefore subsist apart from the body. However, Thomas held that immortality of the human soul was linked to its infusion by God into the body in this life.²

Questions about the meaning of immortality, the linkage to redemption, and the disposition of the soul in the interim between the death of the body in this life and the establishment of the eternal order have occupied Christians over two millennia. Some believe that the soul is immortal at death, while others consider the soul to be linked to life, ending at death but restored at the resurrection. The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church prescribes that upon death of the body, the soul goes to Heaven, to Purgatory, or to Hell, depending upon the purity and repentance of the soul during life. Many Protestants hold that the soul is renewed through reconciliation to Christ and redemption by his death and resurrection: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"³ Since this reconciliation occurs during life, the implication is that the soul does not need to be renewed following death; rather, it is gathered up immediately by God.

In any case, Christians are united in the belief that after the final resurrection our souls will live on in God's eternal order. But what about the rest of God's creation—in particular, the animal kingdom?

Development of Animal Theology

The origin of a Christian theology of animals can be traced back to St. Augustine's 4th-century writings.^{4,5} Augustine's views were simple and categorical: Animals were subordinate to Man because they lack mankind's reasoning abilities. They possessed souls only in the sense that they were alive, but theirs was not the rational or spiritual soul of human beings. Eight centuries and the Dark Ages would have to pass before the works of St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) began to enlighten Christians to the spiritual aspects of the relationship of animals to Man and to God. He was known to address animals directly, preaching and admonishing them to praise God. Today Francis is regarded as the patron saint of animals, and many Catholic parishes bless animals in ceremonies on October 4, his feast day.

Francis was a minister, but not a prolific writer. It was left to Thomas Aquinas to document the Catholic doctrine of animals, and his view was decidedly more conservative than that of St. Francis. According to Thomas, "the life of animals and plants is preserved not for themselves but for man. Hence, as Augustine says, 'by a most just ordinance of the Creator, both their life and their death are subject to our

¹ Aristotle, *De Anima*

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*

³ 2 Corinthians 5:17

⁴ Augustine, "83 Questions on Various Topics," *Corpus Christianorum*

⁵ Augustine, "On Free Choice," *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum*

use.”⁶ The hierarchical, human-centered Thomist model of God’s creation prevailed in Catholic theology into the 20th century.

Protestants were not as categorical. While Martin Luther (1483-1546) did not focus on animals as a theological issue, he did consider them in the order of creation. He affirmed that Man had dominion over the animal kingdom,⁷ but he was also mindful of Paul’s writings:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.⁸

Luther concluded that “one day [complete] harmony between man and animals will be restored and all creation will be made anew as Christ will be in all and all.”⁹

The French theologian John Calvin (1509-1564) also believed that animals were subject to humans and suffered due to mankind’s fall and continued sin. However, his interpretation of Paul’s letter to the Romans was somewhat more qualified with respect to the question of animal immortality:

...It hence also appears to what excelling glory the sons of God shall be exalted; for all creatures shall be renewed in order to amplify it, and to render it illustrious.

But [Paul] means not that all creatures shall be partakers of the same glory with the sons of God; but that they, according to their nature, shall be participators of a better condition; for God will restore to a perfect state the world, now fallen, together with mankind. But what that perfection will be, as to beasts as well as plants and metals, it is not meet nor right in us to inquire more curiously; for the chief effect of corruption is decay. Some subtle men, but hardly sober-minded, inquire whether all kinds of animals will be immortal; but if reins be given to speculations where will they at length lead us? Let us then be content with this simple doctrine— that such will be the constitution and the complete order of things, that nothing will be deformed or fading.¹⁰

John Wesley (1703-1791) wrote extensively on the role of animals in creation, the fall of Man, redemption, and the eternal kingdom.¹¹ He recognized that before the fall, “man was God’s deputy regent, the prince and governor of this lower world; and the blessings of God flowed through him to the inferior creatures.” However, after Man rebelled against God, “man made himself incapable of transmitting those blessings...and then it was that ‘the creature,’ every creature, ‘was subjected to vanity,’ to sorrow, to pain of every kind, to all manner of evils: Not, indeed, ‘willingly,’ not by its own choice, not by any act or deed of its own; ‘but by reason of Him that subjected it,’ by the wise permission of God, determining to draw eternal good out of this temporary evil.” And, more than any other Protestant founder, Wesley ventured further to describe the fate of animals in this “eternal good”:

But will “the creature,” will even the brute creation, always remain in this deplorable condition? God forbid that we should affirm this; yea or even entertain such a thought! While “the whole creation groaneth together” (whether men attend or not), their groans are not dispersed in idle air, but enter into the ears of Him that made them. While his creatures “travail together in

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, reprinted in *Political Theory and Animal Rights*, ed. by P. A. B. Clarke and Andrew Linzey, Pluto Press (1990), p. 103

⁷ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*

⁸ Romans 8:18-23

⁹ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* and other comments

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*

¹¹ John Wesley, Sermon 60 on “The General Deliverance of Creation”

pain," he knoweth all their pain, and is bringing them nearer and nearer to the birth, which shall be accomplished in its season. He seeth "the earnest expectation" wherewith the whole animated creation "waiteth for" that final "manifestation of the sons of God;" in which "they themselves also shall be delivered" (not by annihilation; annihilation is not deliverance) from the present "bondage of corruption," into a measure of "the glorious liberty of the children of God."

...A general view of this is given us in the twenty-first chapter of the Revelation. When He that "sitteth on the great white throne" hath pronounced, "Behold, I make all things new" when the word is fulfilled, "The tabernacle of God is with men and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them and be their God"—then the following blessing shall take place (not only on the children of men; there is no such restriction in the text; but) on every creature according to its capacity: "God shall wipe away all tears from the eyes. And there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying. Neither shall there be any more pain: For the former things are passed away."

To descend to a few particulars; The whole brute creation will then, undoubtedly, be restored, not only to the vigor, strength, and swiftness which they had at their creation, but to a far higher degree of each than they ever enjoyed. They will be restored, not only to that measure of understanding which they had in paradise, but to a degree of it as much higher than that, as the understanding of an elephant is beyond that of a worm.

...But though I doubt not that the Father of All has a tender regard for even his lowest creatures, and that, in consequence of this, he will make them large amends for all they suffer while under their present bondage; yet I dare not affirm that he has an equal regard for them and for the children of men....God regards his meanest creatures much; but he regards man much more....Let it suffice, that God regards everything that he hath made, in its own order, and in proportion to that measure of his own image which he has stamped upon it.

...If it be objected to all this (as very probably it will), "But of what use will those creatures be in that future state?" I answer this by another question, what use are they of now?...Consider this; consider how little we know of even the present designs of God; and then you will not wonder that we know still less of what he designs to do in the new heavens and the new earth.

...May it not answer another end; namely, furnish us with a full answer to a plausible objection against the justice of God, in suffering numberless creatures that never had sinned to be so severely punished? They could not sin, for they were not moral agents. Yet how severely do they suffer! Yea, many of them, beasts of burden in particular, almost the whole time of their abode on earth; so that they can have no retribution here below. But the objection vanishes away, if we consider that something better remains after death for these poor creatures also; that these, likewise, shall one day be delivered from this bondage of corruption, and shall then receive an ample amends for all their present sufferings.

More recently, another notable Christian weighed in on the role of animals in creation and the eternal order. Pope John Paul II stirred the Catholic Church in 1990 when he proclaimed that "the animals possess a soul and men must love and feel solidarity with our smaller brethren," adding that all animals are "fruit of the creative action of the Holy Spirit and merit respect." Quoting from several verses in Genesis, he stated,

...In the account of the Creation, the way in which man was created suggests a relationship with the spirit or "breath" of God. And one reads that after having created man from the dust of the earth, the Lord God "breathed life into his nostrils and man became a living soul."

The Holy Scriptures thereby make clear that God intervened by means of His breath of life of Spirit to make man a living soul. In man there is the "breath of life" which came from the "breath" of God Himself. In him lives breath which is similar to the very breath of God.

...In Genesis, Chapter 2, where there is reference to the creation of the animals, there is not given a similar account of their relationship with the divine spirit of God as is given of that relationship with man. From the previous chapter we learn that "Man was created in the image and likeness of God."

However, other texts state that animals have the breath of life and were given it by God. In this respect man, created by the hand of God, is identical with all other living creatures. And so in

Psalm 103 there is no distinction between man and beasts when it reads, addressing God: "...These wait all upon thee; that thou mayest give them their meat in due course. That thou givest them, they gather: thou openest thy hand, they are filled with good."¹²

Conclusions

Over the years since Wesley's time, there has been a growing acceptance that animals possess souls, based on the original Hebrew texts in Genesis Chapters 1-3, where the term *nephesh chayah* (living soul) applies to both humankind and animals. (In English translations, this term has been translated as *living soul* for humans, but it has been changed to *living creatures* in references to animals.) There is also general agreement that animal souls are not on the same plane as human souls, since God gave Man dominion over the animals and since only humans are created in the image of God. However, there is considerable uncertainty and controversy over the spiritual relationship of animals with God. One question is whether or not animals have knowledge of God. Another is the degree to which animals can exercise free will. The answers are not easily generalized, considering the varying degrees of intelligence and of moral sense of right and wrong extant across the animal kingdom.

As for the immortality of animal souls or spirits, most of the arguments cite the inclusion of all creation in Paul's portrayal of eternal life (Romans 8:18-23, cited previously) and in several other Biblical passages, including Isaiah's prophecy of the eternal order:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind....No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress....The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.¹³

and John's vision of heaven:

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with a full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the elders fell down and worshiped.¹⁴

Exactly what happens to our souls and those of animals when we die will always be subject to conjecture, but "The Rainbow Bridge" simply and beautifully expresses the belief of many Christians. In the end, we can only accept on faith that when we encounter the Rainbow Bridge, we'll cross it together with the rest of God's creation.

Acknowledgements and References

We are grateful to Pastor Bill Bryan for his discussions, comments, and references on the theology of the soul, which were very helpful in the structure of this review.

In addition to the commentators whose references are cited in the footnotes, several other references are recommended for further reading:

¹² Pope John Paul II, General Audience, January 10, 1990

¹³ Isaiah 65:17-25

¹⁴ Revelation 5:11-14

- Elijah D. Buckner, MD, *The Immortality of Animals*, George W. Jacobs & Company, Philadelphia, 1903 (available online from Google Books)—somewhat dated, but a good introduction to the subject
- Mary Buddemeyer-Porter, *Animals, Immortal Beings: Scriptural Evidence of The Immortality of Animals*, Eden Publications, Manchester, Missouri, 2005—a history of the arguments for animal immortality
- Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto, eds., *Animals on the Agenda: Questions about Animals for Theology and Ethics*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Illinois, 1998—a collection of 20 essays reflecting current thinking of theologians, philosophers, and other scholars, annotated with extensive references

Questions for Further Study

Animal theology has ramifications in the areas of animal rights, food sources, and environmental protection. We look forward to additional research and a dialog on these topics in the future.

Mark and Laurel Fleming are longtime members of Grace United Methodist Church. In addition to their two teenage sons Andrew and Alex, their family includes Murphy the Airedale; cats Sophie and Rosie; Smokey, their grandkitten; Charlene, a 6¹/₂-inch painted turtle; LeVar, an 8-year-old goldfish; Horris the garter snake; Froggie, a 1-inch African dwarf frog; and Ivanka the Chilean rosehair tarantula.

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