

## All the Christian Birds Chanted

The weather reports predicted a dire tropical storm for the first Sunday in October, the day of the Blessing of the Pets at All Saints Episcopal Church in the southeastern United States, but I was not going to miss the opportunity. Since it is one of the most popular church days of the year, other folks were not going to miss it either, and I arrived to find a church room filled with twenty-four dogs, two cats, their caregivers, and other congregants. An image of Francis of Assisi, the Christian patron saint of animals, adorned the cover of the day's program, and the service praised Francis many times. The atmosphere was both solemn and lighthearted, engendering jokes along with serious religion. When the chief pastor, Reverend John, entreated the congregation *Let us pray*, a wolfhound who had otherwise been silent began to bark, eliciting peals of good-natured laughter. After this prayer, instead of the traditional request to the congregation, *Please be seated*, Reverend John insisted, *Sit!* as one would command a dog, again prompting happy guffaws from the group. During quiet moments in the service, congregants and pets noiselessly socialized freely and for the most part amiably, although the cats remained quite concerned about the canine gathering that surrounded them.

An assistant pastor started the service with a reading from Genesis 1:20–31, a passage to which I will return:<sup>1</sup>

And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."

And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.

And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds." And it was so. And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the cattle according to their kinds, and everything that creeps upon the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day.

After this, a reading of Psalm 148 encouraged the congregation to praise God and to recognize nature's praise of God. Then Reverend John delivered the sermon. Claiming that humans are not the only species on earth whom God loves, Reverend John implored us to thank pets for the good things they bring to us and mentioned his own experience with Stripes, his rescue kitten. Stripes, he told us, is a good

teacher, because like Francis of Assisi he practices what he preaches and so has helped to lead Reverend John to God's teachings about love, compassion, and trust. After this sermon, congregants silently joined Reverend John in the Blessing of the Animals prayer:

Most high, almighty Lord, our Creator, yours are the praise, the glory, the honor and all blessings! To you alone do all things belong. Be praised for giving us the animals, birds and fish which fill your world. May we think of you and thank you when we play with and care for our pets. Be praised for making us so happy to have our pets and to have them to play with. We ask you, Lord, that we may be good to our pets always, so that they may be happy also. Help us always to take care of them so that they will be healthy. O God, your world is wonderful. May we all come into your even greater world of the kingdom of heaven, where we shall see even more wonderful things, and where we shall live and love for ever. This we ask to your eternal praise, and to our blessing. Amen.

As is standard Episcopal Church practice, an assistant pastor sanctified the service with sweet incense from the smoking censer he waved while walking through the sanctuary. Then he walked through the sanctuary again and, using a long-handled spoon, sent sprinkles of holy water throughout the church, these drops landing on humans and pets alike. In this way the pets in attendance were blessed.

When it came time for the Eucharist, the offering of bread and wine, leashed pets and their humans approached the altar in a line. First came Dale, smartly dressed in a white shirt and tie, with his schnauzer projecting an attitude every bit as regal as Dale's. A poor young lady in an African-print skirt followed, struggling with one Labrador retriever who could not wait to get to the altar and another Lab, who pulled in the opposite direction to play with dogs in the back of the church. Then Cora, in a blue flower-print dress, was led by her energetic husky dog Skipper to the altar.

Following the others, Skipper and Cora went first to the right of the altar, where an attendant gave Skipper a smile, a pat on the head, and an ordinary dog biscuit (cats got fish-flavored treats). Then Skipper and

Cora moved to their left, where the chief pastor offered a smile to Skipper and consecrated bread and wine to Cora. Then Skipper and Cora returned to their seats. In this way all twenty-six pets and their humans made it through the Communion ritual in surprisingly good order. The service ended after the Eucharist, and Skipper and Cora went home. Cora was satisfied that she had fulfilled her religious obligations to herself and was happy to have included Skipper in the religion of Jesus. Skipper seemed glad to have enjoyed a snack and lots of friendly pats from strangers.

Such events with animals in the church are exceptional, as they would not have happened even a few years ago. Christianity has a long history of blessing working farm animals on the feast day of St. Anthony Abbot in January, and globally there still are working-animal blessing rituals done in connection with Anthony. But it is only since the 1980s that we find an explosion of blessing ceremonies specifically for pets rather than for working animals, like the one that Skipper attended. Most of these new rituals appeal to St. Francis of Assisi rather than St. Anthony, and they are timed for Francis's feast day, October 4. The scholar of Christianity and animals Laura Hobgood-Oster traces this pet blessing movement to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City in the 1980s, followed by emulators then spreading rapidly to virtually every state in the United States. This reorientation of the ritual of the blessing of farm animals derives from many Christian pet keepers who want their beloved pets to participate in their religion, as they participate in other family activities, and this expansive movement spawns numerous Internet sites such as [blessingoftheanimals.com](http://blessingoftheanimals.com). Some commentators cite influence from New Age sources in energizing this movement, and others mention the movement's inter-faith character. The adoption of this ritual, often in an ad-hoc form, changes the Christian world in practice, if not yet in theory, as animals come to church now far more than ever before in Christianity's two-thousand-year history. This situation begs the following questions: Why is this unprecedented, historic movement happening now and

taking the forms that it does? What may be the positive effects of this innovation? How should its practitioners, and their animal friends, understand their places in Christian history?<sup>2</sup>

Answering these questions highlights two principal approaches to nature in the Christian world. On one hand, Christians have deeply loved animals, as the church has understood animals as friends of saints, who have prayed for and protected a variety of species. The church also self-consciously did away with the practice of animal sacrifice that was so widespread in the ancient Mediterranean world. At times animals even practice religion like humans, as a donkey shows spiritual insight, birds pray and prophesy, a variety of animals venerate saints, crickets celebrate the Mass, and in apocryphal texts lions receive baptism. Christians also express love for animals through the recent creative expansion of pet blessing ceremonies like Skipper's.

But it is also generally true that in Christianity animals, like all other natural beings, stand inferior to humans, who exercise dominion over them. Normally animals are thought to lack souls and therefore relevance in the quest for salvation, usually resulting in the extreme marginalization of animals within Christianity, as we have already seen in Muir's childhood brand of it. Across the three branches of Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism, major Christian thinkers consistently have allotted high places to humans and low places to animals—if they have even thought about animals at all. Because of this relative lack of regard for natural entities, Laura Hobgood-Oster, who works as hard as anyone to make Christianity more animal-friendly, nonetheless morosely laments that animals have “no input whatsoever with respect to theology and practices. . . . Christianity seems to embody the pinnacle of the religion of ‘the human.’ . . . Christianity generates a gulf between human animals and all other animals that might be impossible to bridge.” So what we find in this chapter is that Christianity, although embodying many different outlooks, historically considers animals worthy of sometimes lavish love but not worthy of salvation, equality with humans, or a true place in

religion. The new blessing-of-the-pets movement arises as something of a challenge to this legacy.<sup>3</sup>

To understand properly how these attitudes of love for and superiority over animals coexist, we need to survey some Christian theological history, beginning with Egypt in antiquity. Around the time of Jesus's birth, Greeks, Romans, and Jews remarked, sometimes derisively, about the intensity with which ancient Egyptians revered animals. Egyptians regarded animals such as falcons, ibises, rams, gazelles, baboons, dogs, cats, mongooses, shrews, crocodiles, snakes, scorpions, and scarab beetles as sacred through their intimate associations with various gods, so they were protected by royal decrees. Egyptian temples typically enshrined live animals as objects of veneration, the most famous of these temple animals being the Apis Bull of Memphis, who symbolized the nation as the presence on earth of the creator deity, Ptah. When one Apis Bull died, the nation both mourned the dead bull and celebrated as another bull was anointed. After death, such temple animals received very elaborate funerals, which included full-scale mummification. These mummies might later be used for divination by priests, who would, through a ritual called incubation, sleep in the temple and wait for the animal's spirit to send a prophetic dream.<sup>4</sup>

Such animal veneration dismayed Greeks and Romans, who preferred anthropomorphic gods; likewise dismayed were the great Christian evangelist Paul, who counseled against animal worship in Romans 1:22–23, and the early Christian leader Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215 C.E.), who in his *Paedagogus* wrote of Egyptian temples:<sup>5</sup>

The temples sparkle with gold, silver and mat gold and flash with coloured stones from India and Ethiopia. The sanctuaries are overshadowed by cloths studded with gold. If, however, you enter the interior of the enclosure, hastening towards the sight of the almighty and look for the statue residing in the temple and if a *pastophoros* [shrine priest] or another celebrant, after having solemnly looked round the sanctuary, singing a song in the language of the Egyptians, draws back the curtain a little to show the god, he will make us laugh about the object of worship. For we shall not find the god for whom

we have been looking inside, the god towards whom we have hastened, but a cat or a crocodile, or a native snake or a similar animal, which should not be in a temple, but in a cleft or a den or on a dung heap. The god of the Egyptians appears on a purple couch as a wallowing animal.

Clement's disdain for "wallowing" animals exemplifies a primary Christian approach to the natural world, which begins with the biblical passage from Genesis 1:20–31 that we saw previously, and passages like this from Psalms 8:3–8:

When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,  
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;  
what is man that thou art mindful of him,  
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?  
Yet thou hast made him little less than God,  
and dost crown him with glory and honor.  
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands;  
thou hast put all things under his feet,  
all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the sea.

These biblical passages from Genesis and Psalms clarify several things regarding human relationships with natural beings. First, humans, and only humans, are made in God's image. Waterfalls may thrill, and hawks amaze, but only humans rejoice in the divine imprint. This instantly elevates humans above all other natural beings, as a human is worth more than "many sparrows" (Luke 12:7). But there is more. Genesis 1, Psalms 8, and other biblical passages explicitly enjoin humans to enjoy "dominion" over nature and be managers, as it were, of the natural world. The earth, in fact, should be "subdued." What this means has been debated often, of course. Descriptions for "dominion" have included "to shepherd," "to lead about," "to govern," "to dominate despotically," or "to tame." Some contemporary Christians use the word "stewardship" rather than "dominion," emphasizing that God is

the owner and humans manage nature simply on loan. But whether it is the word “dominion” or “stewardship” that one chooses to use, in the Christian universe humans generally are empowered managers of the natural world and have significant discretion in how they manage things. This sense of superior human command of inferior nature historically has permeated all three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.<sup>6</sup>

These biblical notions of human superiority are central in Christianity, having been bolstered with such elements of Greek philosophy as the Great Chain of Being. This concept, described by Arthur O. Lovejoy as “one of the half-dozen most potent and persistent presuppositions in Western thought,” has dominated Christian cultures for so long that Christian and post-Christian Euro-Americans fairly may be suspected to embrace it unconsciously. In a tour de force the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle set about the task, later embraced by Linnaeus, of classifying all natural beings. Grouping and subgrouping entities through their noteworthy characteristics, Aristotle wrote of a continuum from minerals to plants to animals to humans to the Unmoved Mover. In the *History of Animals* and *On the Soul (De Anima)*, Aristotle stressed that these realms were not separate classes but blended into each other, much as the colors of the spectrum of light gently transition from one hue to another. Thus, in its purest Aristotelian form, the Great Chain of Being includes the idea of continuity rather than separation between species, and Aristotle himself resisted thinking in terms of a hierarchy. Nonetheless he wrote of the “perfections” of various types, thus opening the door to hierarchical thinking. Several philosophers then barged through this door, reifying Aristotle’s types into exclusively classed levels. From this reification, Jews, Christians, and Muslims adopted a ladderlike Great Chain of Being, integrating angels as a class ranked above humans but below God. Over time the Great Chain of Being solidified within Western cultures as a ranked ordering of the universe, with minerals at the forgotten bottom of the chain, having only existence; above minerals are plants, which possess exist-



ence and life; animals, which add motion and appetite to the qualities of plants; humans, having a rational, spiritual soul not found in supposedly lower forms; angels, which are pure spirit; and finally God, absolute perfection, above everything else.<sup>7</sup>

Because of their places below animals at the bottom of the Great Chain of Being, minerals, water, and plants enjoy almost no religious regard in Christianity. People in church call God their “rock”; Jesus walked on water, and Moses parted the Red Sea; and the Psalms praise the cedars of Lebanon. But aside from relatively undeveloped, trivial appearances like these, Christian regard for the universes of minerals, water, and plants pales in comparison with some other religious forms that we will see in this book. For one example: holy water is not sacred in itself but is made sacred only by human blessing rituals. In the end animals alone exist near enough to humans in the Great Chain of Being to make a dent in the Christian religion. For this reason, as in all Abrahamic religions the Christian story of religion and nature predominantly involves only animals, since minerals, water, and plants have virtually no religious relevance in themselves, although they may be tools for human religious ends.

However, Christianity is no one thing. Ethiopia provides a fascinating exception to this last principle, since the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the largest of the so-called Oriental Orthodox churches, partly embraces ecocentric sacred regard for minerals, water, and plants—on church properties. This church split with the rest of the Western Christian world at the Council of Chalcedon, in 451 C.E., the Ethiopian church preferring to retain its miaphysite understanding of Jesus’s having just one nature. Because it did not conceptually split Jesus’s human and divine natures, as did the Western churches, the Ethiopian church better retained an ethos wherein the natural world is not separate from the sacred. As well, because of its relative geographic isolation, the Ethiopian church developed somewhat independently of Europe, along a trajectory that included elements from indigenous Ethiopian culture.

Reflecting beliefs found in Ethiopian folk religions, saints are thought to physically reside in natural beings on church properties, so

that diverse natural forms appear more like the god-animals of the ancient Egyptians than they do like Clement's "wallowing" animals. For instance, Mary, Mother of God, may be found in a sycamore, as she prefers residing in the "tree of life" that has been revered in the region since antiquity. In practical reality this means that current-day Ethiopian churches function as sacred nature sanctuaries, with churches typically maintaining large forests on their premises despite the rampant and problematic deforestation in the rest of the country. On church land digging the earth is forbidden; one may not cut plants, regardless of economic impact; nor may one hunt animals that seek refuge, as all natural beings, including the earth, enjoy a sense of divinity. This sense of a sacred nature preserve appears in John Binns's description of the Abo church in Gondar: "It is a tranquil spot. There are many trees with an abundance of birds with brightly coloured plumage and a continual singing. From the edge of the ridge are glorious views over the valley of the Angareb River below." Bodies of water such as Lake Tana also may contain divinity, at least at times. Although outside of church lands an ethic of dominion resembling that of the rest of the Christian world applies, Ethiopian church grounds nonetheless inject an ecocentric sense of spiritual respect for minerals, water, and plants that is largely out of step with the rest of Christendom.<sup>8</sup>

But natural beings in the churches of Ethiopia are not sacred in themselves. Instead, they are sacred because they provide homes for the saints and God. Sycamores enjoy holiness only because Mary, Mother of God, cavorts in them, not because sycamores possess intrinsic divine energy. Even the sun is not divine, as according to the Ethiopian holy book *Kebra Negast*, Ethiopians of old were cured of their misguided solar veneration when Makeda, queen of Sheba, learned from Solomon to revere the otherworldly, invisible deity of the Bible instead.

Thus Ethiopia, despite its ecocentric church sanctuaries, joins the rest of the Christian world in teaching, following the Great Chain of Being, that nonhuman natural beings have no souls. It was a constant of ancient Greek philosophers, apart from the Pythagoreans, to affirm

that humans have souls—typically, rational souls, based on language use—which animals do not have. Moreover, we know that the human incarnation is different from others from 1 Corinthians 15:39: “For not all flesh is alike, but there is one kind for men, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish.”

Influenced by this environment, the monumental Christian figure Augustine (354–430 C.E.) taught that the rational souls of humans go to an afterlife but animals are soulless. For him, irrational animals by constitution can seek only physical bodily peace, not a spot in heaven. Unlike animals, a human possesses a rational soul, which subordinates “all that part of his nature which he shares with the beasts.” Humans, and humans alone, may seek the “peace of the rational soul,” which requires divine guidance to realize a seat in heaven. Augustine’s voice in denying rational souls, and hence heaven, to animals became and remains the theological standard everywhere but at the farthest fringes of the Christian world. As the saying has it, “All dogs go to heaven”; but they do so within folk belief outside Christianity, not in the official doctrines of mainline churches. Revelation 22:25 specifically denies dogs entry into the heavenly New Jerusalem. This is why, to my knowledge, there are many church-oriented programs to save animals from mistreatment but there are no mainline church missions to save the souls of animals.<sup>9</sup>

Humans thus have dominion over nature, reside at a higher level in the Great Chain of Being, solely retain God’s image, and alone possess salvific souls. Christianity uniquely adds one more human-superior claim to this mix: from a Christian point of view it is indisputable that if God incarnates in creation, God does so not as a turtle or a cucumber vine but specifically as Jesus, a human being. As we read in Genesis, humans, and only humans, are Godlike. For these reasons many scholars have described Christianity as possibly the most anthropocentric of all religions. In general Christianity supports an entirely human-centered vision, and animals appear only on the periphery.

Animals have almost never been able to join the church, although, paradoxically, animals have been excommunicated from the church at