

ANIMAL RELIGIOSITY: OPPORTUNITIES AND ONTOLOGICAL LIMITS OF AN IMPERVIOUS PHILOSOPHICAL PROPOSAL

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the fascinating hypothesis of animal religiosity. In this respect, we are interested in Donovan Schaefer's philosophical proposal, specifically his text *Religious Affects*. In Schaefer's conceptual framework, the 'theory of affects' finds a privileged place, basically as an emphasis on the importance of the pre-linguistic affective sphere. Here, man and animal can learn about kinship, which, according to Schaefer, also implies religious experience. However, this kind of concept of 'religious feeling' distances itself from the legacy of the phenomenology of religion. By criticizing this specific aspect, we will try to understand where this proposal can generate aporetic signs of discontinuity with a reliable concept of religiosity. In our concluding thesis, we will show that the importance given to animals, given correct ecological thinking, does not have an enemy in the religious specificity of man.

Keywords

Animal; Religiosity; Affects; Sacred; Ontology

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The contemporary philosophy of religion questions a specific passage in the vast field of Animal Studies.¹ We refer to the hypothesis of an animal religiosity, i.e. an ascertainment of the animal's faculty to

¹ See Robert. N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2011); Rob Boddice, *Anthropocentrism. Humans, Animals, Environment* (Boston: Brill, 2011); Aaron Gross, *The Question of the Animal and Religion: Theoretical Stakes, Practical Implications* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Clair Linzey, *Developing Animal Theology an Engagement with Leonardo Boff* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

feel religious and to behave accordingly, breaking, in fact, the chain of mechanistic actions and reactions devoid of subjectivity that anthropocentric philosophy would have favoured for centuries in defining the animal. This is the critical position of some contemporary philosophers, who, for the aforementioned purpose, must resort to dialogues with other scientific dimensions, such as sociology, anthropology and, in particular, ethology. This is the case with Donovan Schaefer,² who has the merit of producing one of the most disruptive studies representing this reading of reality. The potential convergence between Animal Studies and Religious Studies poses a challenge to the contemporary philosophy of religion: to look at the foundation of actions that we often connote as religious from an animal perspective. However, some theoretical difficulties arise with respect to the way in which the subject is represented for such a suggestive concept. Schaefer intends, in a functional sense, to ‘overcome’ the proposed break with the anthropocentric tradition by incorporating specific philosophers into the so-called ‘phenomenological’ tradition.

At this introductory juncture, it is essential to summarise Schaefer’s proposal and the critical positioning from which this article draws its doubts, as well as its point of convergence in opposition to radical atheism.

Before directly addressing the question of animals, it is helpful to examine some foundational aspects of Schaefer’s approach, particularly as outlined in his pivotal 2014 paper ‘Blessed, Precious Mistakes: Deconstruction, Evolution, and New Atheism in America’.³ This work offers a profound and innovative critique of American New Atheism, particularly as exemplified by Daniel C. Dennett. Schaefer’s scholarship stands out for its interdisciplinary methodology, which synthesises insights from deconstruction – especially the philosophy of Jacques Derrida – with post-adaptationist evolutionary biology. This convergence enables him to challenge the prevailing notion that religion is merely a collection of propositional beliefs requiring correction or elimination, a perspective he identifies as distinctly American.⁴

² Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies, University of Pennsylvania. For biographical notes: <http://donovanschaefer.com/bio/>.

³ Donovan Schaefer, ‘Blessed, precious mistakes: deconstruction, evolution, and New Atheism in America,’ *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 76 (2014): 75–94. doi: 10.1007/s11153-014-9446-5.

⁴ Schaefer, ‘Blessed, precious mistakes,’ 95.

A key strength of Schaefer's argument lies in his ability to draw parallels between the theme of accident in pluralist evolutionary biology and the continental philosophy of religion. By foregrounding accident as a central concept, Schaefer creates new spaces for discourse that contest the overconfidence in human reason as an infallible means of understanding the world – an epistemic stance characteristic of New Atheism. He contends that deconstruction and pluralist evolutionary theory critique the assumptions underpinning American atheism, suggesting that religion is not merely a misguided form of science but rather a complex and contingent phenomenon.⁵

Schaefer's critique of Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*⁶ is particularly forceful. He highlights how Dennett's framework rests on an overestimation of human reason and a presupposition about religion deeply rooted in an American Protestant emphasis on belief. Schaefer argues that Dennett's model, which equates religion with economic and meteorological systems, is fundamentally flawed because it fails to consider biological and religious systems' inherent complexity and unpredictability.⁷

Furthermore, Schaefer's interdisciplinary approach is innovative and highly relevant to contemporary academic discourse. By integrating deconstruction with evolutionary biology, he advances a more polyvalent understanding of religion that moves beyond the rigid frameworks of New Atheism. This perspective acknowledges the intricacy, contingency, and incalculability of religious phenomena, thereby opening possibilities for new, post-secular forms of atheism that are more attuned to the complexities of human experience.⁸

Beyond his critique of New Atheism, the most interesting point for us is that Schaefer's work has significant implications for studying animals and their potential religiosity. His methodology, which emphasises the complexity and unpredictability of life, can be extended to the analysis of animal behaviour. The critique of reductionist and mechanistic perspectives can be functional to the argument of animal religiosity, advocating instead for a framework that acknowledges animals' intricate roles within broader ecological and evolutionary systems.

⁵ Schaefer, 'Blessed, precious mistakes,' 97.

⁶ See Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

⁷ Schaefer, 'Blessed, precious mistakes,' 78.

⁸ Schaefer, 'Blessed, precious mistakes,' 79.

Such a perspective can enrich discussions on the boundaries of living beings, suggesting that non-human animals, like humans, may engage in complex behaviours and are not easily reducible to simple anthropocentric explanations.

Overall, Schaefer's innovative perspective contributes substantially to the link between the philosophy of religion and evolutionary biology. His interpretation of nature gives many opportunities for confrontations: by emphasising the themes of accident and complexity, Schaefer paves the way for a new intellectual inquiry that is certainly relevant to contemporary debates. For example, his contribution is significant as it broadens the scope of contemporary philosophical inquiry – even the political one – facilitating the exploration of how emotions and bodily sensations influence power structures and social relations. Furthermore, Schaefer's affect theory challenges conventional notions of subjectivity and agency, proposing that human beings are not merely rational and linguistic entities but rather intricate systems of affective forces. However, the comparison intended to be established in this paper does not claim exhaustiveness and is intended to confront only a specific theoretical segment concerning the ontology of religion.

The volume *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power*⁹ by Donovan O. Schaefer represents a significant and innovative contribution to religious studies and is characterised by strong materialism and a multidisciplinary approach that integrates affective theories, materiality studies, and post-humanist perspectives. Schaefer followed the footsteps traced by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour, tackling an approach that rejects traditional separations between nature and culture, and human and animal. The theoretical legacies of such a work are manifold, ranging from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, to Silvan Tomkins' theory of affect, via Derrida's post-structuralist critique and Darwin's evolutionary theory. Schaefer draws on these traditions to construct a theoretical framework emphasising materialism, rejecting Cartesian transcendence or dualism. From this perspective, religion is a phenomenon deeply rooted in bodies' materiality and interactions with the world.

The main goals of the Schaeferian proposal are to overcome the 'linguistic fallacy' that attributes excessive centrality to textuality in

⁹ See Donovan Schaefer, *Religious Affects: animality, evolution and power* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015).

religion (as in the case of sacred texts) and to demonstrate that religion is a phenomenon rooted in the materiality of bodies and their interactions with the world; this, in addition to the aforementioned intention to challenge traditional dichotomies between human and animal, natural and cultural, so that a holistic and dynamic view of religiosity is given, encompassing religious and spiritual practices in the animal kingdom.

In this volume, the concept of power is central to understanding the dynamics of religion. Power is portrayed as a multifaceted and pervasive shaping force, which is itself shaped by religious practices and beliefs. It can reveal how religious institutions and practices exert control and influence over individuals and communities. Still, it can also lead to the marginalisation of certain groups and the imposition of dominant ideologies. It is inherently problematic and contentious to link power to religion, as it can both illuminate and obscure the true nature of religious experiences, often dictating who has the authority to define and practice religion. This interplay raises critical questions regarding authenticity, authority, and the inclusivity of religious practices, highlighting the need for a more nuanced and equitable approach to understanding religious phenomena.

However, addressing the issue of power in this context is out of our range, as our primary focus is on the aporias of assimilating the same concept of religiosity for both humans and animals. Our essentialist position comes from a philosophical heritage that sees religion as an inherently human phenomenon, rooted in the intuition of the sacred, of ritual elaboration, symbolisation and myth-making. In Schaefer's reading, one is curious to challenge the paradigm that sees only human beings as possessing the capacity to transcend their existence through language and ethics in connection with the sacred, which is unique and not replicable in animals. While worthy of respect and protection, animals do not offer sufficient evidence of experiencing something similar to religion, intended as a complex of matters such as faith and revelation. In this view, the sacred is manifested through hierarchies of meanings and symbols that only humans seem to understand and articulate. Animals can be seen as part of the created sacred, and thus respected from this fundamental ethical assumption. Still, with respect to their feeling of the holy, we believe it is necessary to suspend judgment and not to confuse religious feelings with sensations and emotions, which are still too closely tied to the biological sphere.

Schaefer considers a strong materialistic approach to be sufficient without considering certain junctures in the ontology of the sacred, which, in our opinion, deserve proper consideration. A typical phenomenon discussed in the contemporary philosophical debate, which is also present in the philosophy of religion, is the multiplication of perspectives. We also encounter it in the field of animal studies. The tendency towards fragmentation of knowledge generates a series of effects in both instances: the substantial abandonment of the idea of truth, to which corresponds, at best, the search for the ideal of objectivity, and at worst, the simple retreat to merely individual perspectives. Also, the search for novel interpretations that mark a discontinuity with the previous tradition, to which corresponds a marked self-referentiality in disciplinary confrontation,¹⁰ for instance, the openness to cultural studies and gender studies, are perceived as capable of expanding the methodology of the philosophy of religion perceived as too narrow.¹¹ It will be Schaefer himself,¹² as happened shortly before in one of his teachers, Aaron Gross,¹³ who will make explicit the merits of Gender Studies as a forerunner of a critical approach capable of subverting the particularisms of the pre-established philosophical observatory, seen as anthropocentric, androcentric, and substantially lacking in a ‘conceptual ecology’, i.e. a vision capable of accounting for complexity by departing from the philosophical paradigms which claimed, in the history of the West, to define reality in a restrictive manner and, in this specific case, at the expense of animals.

1. Dancing Animals and Proposals of Religiosity

Donovan Schaefer is a philosopher who argues that we must dismiss the priority of a linguistic construct or a set of propositional beliefs to understand how religion shapes human relationships with fields of power. Instead, he proposes to think of religion in its animality

¹⁰ See Andrea Aguti, ‘La filosofia delle religioni. Introduzione tematica e rassegna dei principali modelli contemporanei,’ in *Isonomia, Online Philosophical Journal of the University of Urbino ‘Carlo Bo’* (2010).

¹¹ See Sarah Coakley, ‘Feminism and Analytic Philosophy of Religion,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. W. J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 494–525.

¹² Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 15.

¹³ Gross, *The Question of Animal and religion*, 80.

dimension, looking at embodied emotions rather than words as the source of the meaning of religious foundations.

In this respect, he combines an essentially post-atheist position with a well-documented interest in ‘affect theory’, which will serve him well in animal discourse. By ‘post-atheism’, in Schaefer’s case, we refer to a position which, albeit largely secularist, also distances itself from positivist excesses:

Post-atheism emerges after the disruption of the positivist overconfidence that religion can be disbanded under the pressure of a fine-tuned rational critique. By insisting that the artifacts of evolution are rational and that religion is a corrupt form of rationality, Dennett and other American New Atheists remain stuck in an unproductive atheism of calculators.¹⁴

In *Religious Affects*, Donovan O. Schaefer has the ambition to overcome this atheistic ‘unproductivity’ by incorporating affect theory and critical animal studies into the field of religious studies.

The intention that permeates the entirety of the essay is to take the notion of animal religion seriously, putting the emerging field of affect theory into dialogue with the discipline of religious studies in a way that the author considers exhaustive for a renewal of the consideration of the prelinguistic sphere. This dimension constitutes the feeling that unites both humans and animals in a religious feeling.

In its introduction, the book analyses the phenomenon of the ‘waterfall dance of chimpanzees’ described by Jane Goodall.¹⁵ Out of fear of natural phenomena (including wind, fire, and waterfalls), groups of primates express themselves in what appear as ritual dances.

Jane Goodall writes that the chimpanzee waterfall dance, disconnected from linguistically mediated belief, can be understood as an animal religion. Both the affective and the animal turns help to clarify this classification by clarifying links between bodies and systems of power outside the language register. [...] (in a ritual that, were we to see it in humans, would undoubtedly be labeled as ‘religion’), but how human religion can itself be understood as a pre-linguistic dance. The affective/animalist approach

¹⁴ Schaefer, *Animal religiosity*, 94.

¹⁵ See Jane Goodall, *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey* (New York: Soko, 1999).

fleshes out the materialist phenomenology of religion, diagramming religion as a complex, embodied response to a world.¹⁶

The idea that this dance constitutes a ‘religion’ is not intended to be justified with particularly complex ontological arguments, as Schaefer considers it sufficient to draw, from this anecdote, the valuable elements to validate the entry of ‘affect theory’ within the discourse on the religious, in which the equality between the human and the non-human animal can find common ground to discuss the importance of the body as a source of meaning. As Schaefer states regarding dance,

The dance is a dance in the way that it recapitulates and replays the affective ligaments tying bodies to worlds. Drawing lines between a set of interlocking but nonstreamlined embodied elements, religion traffics in a network of effects better understood as a regime of accidents than an icon of rationally organized logos. This template allows religious studies to consider human and nonhuman animal religion side by side.¹⁷

The problem we intend to address in this essay concerns the difficulty of taking the notion of ‘religion’ for granted, based on such empirical assumption. Despite the extensive documentation as displayed in the bibliography, Schaefer has no interest in measuring himself against the Western philosophy of religion as it has manifested itself over the centuries. His main ambition remains to address the issue with the tools of the more recent philosophy while maintaining a dialogue with biological evolutionism. Later in the text, Schaefer merely entrusts the solidity of his approach to the notion of ‘religion’ with a highly schematic definition of religion borrowed from Stephen Prothero:

In *God is not One*, Boston University professor Stephen Prothero places religion on the dissection table and finds it to contain four parts: there is a problem, then a solution (the ‘goal’ of any religion); there are techniques for reaching this goal and exemplars who lead the way. In Christianity, for instance, the problem is that the world is sinful; grace through Christ or faith or works is the solution and the practice; Jesus the mythological figure is the exemplar [...] It is difficult to escape the conclusion that

¹⁶ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 179.

¹⁷ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 17.

assessing all religions as beginning with problems fundamentally orients religion to cognitive-linguistic axis [...] This model is no doubt useful in many contexts, and Prothero is exactly right to push back on the tendency to extract religions from a historical frame by flattering their conceptual differences.¹⁸

This debt declared by Schaefer depicts a highly stylised conception of religion, in which the leading role is played by the ‘goal’ without specifying the difference between eschatology and soteriology, which could change the essence of the ‘goal’ itself. Schaefer does not even expound on which links it has with the conceptions of time underlying the religions themselves. On these premises, the underlying argument shows a postmodern side that is hugely discontinuous with traditionally understood philosophising. In this context, for the benefit of the affirmation of the position we are gradually taking on the subject, it is essential to provide a reference by the Italian philosopher of religion, Andrea Aguti:

La filosofia mira a cogliere l'essenza di un determinato fenomeno e non può accettare il presupposto di un 'ateismo metodologico'. Ne consegue che da questo punto di vista non è lecito separare la funzione della religione dalla sua essenza [...] A questo proposito Lubbe ha parlato di un 'effetto placebo' per indicare il mantenersi della funzione della religione anche in assenza del riferimento al soprannaturale; non sarebbe necessaria l'esistenza del soprannaturale, ma soltanto la credenza in esso. Tuttavia l'argomento sembra soltanto un espediente metodologico per legittimare la distanza dello studioso rispetto a un giudizio di verità o falsità sulla religione e per isolare la questione della funzione della religione dalla sua essenza.¹⁹

¹⁸ Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 19.

¹⁹ Andrea Aguti, *Introduzione alla Filosofia della religione* (Brescia: La scuola, 2016), 37. Author's translation: 'Philosophy aims to grasp the essence of a given phenomenon and cannot accept the assumption of a "methodological atheism". From this point of view, it is not permissible to separate the function of religion from its essence [...]. In this regard, Lubbe spoke of a "placebo effect" to indicate the maintenance of the function of religion even in the absence of reference to the supernatural; the existence of the supernatural would not be necessary, but only belief in it. However, the argument seems merely a methodological expedient to legitimise the distance of the scholar from a judgement of truth or falsity on religion and to isolate the question of the function of religion from its essence.'

The reference to the supernatural, natural, or believed to be accurate is thus inescapable to understanding religion and not to give it a reductive interpretation.

Schaefer's theoretical core, which occupies more space in his dissertation, concerns the 'affective turn' as a necessary response to the 'linguistic turn', which Schaefer links mainly to the figure of Jonathan Z. Smith. According to Schaefer, the feature that affective theory has to offer religion is a way to recover the centrality of feeling. From a philosophical point of view, this implies a theoretical affinity with the so-called phenomenology of religion, as in the case of James, Otto and Eliade. However, Schaefer, in the wake of Smith, misses no opportunity to distance himself from it:

The earlier methods [...] presumed that religion was an ahistorical phenomenon, a transcendent source of meaning from beyond human circumstances [...] For Smith, the phenomenological approach to religion was a depoliticizing analytics that, like all attempts to mask the motions of power and history, risked sinister outcomes [...] By contrast, affect theory offers resources for charting maps of power that are not limited to the plane of language. It proposes that – contrary to earlier phenomenologists of religion who saw religion as *sui generis* – phenomenology is itself political.²⁰

This school of thought, as opposed by Smith²¹ and Vasquez,²² both critical figures in Schaefer's background, could potentially offer the tools for an ontological understanding of the sacred. However, lumping these three authors together involves due differentiations that Schaefer does not feel the need to address. In the dense bibliography of references, which certainly makes this essay a point of contact for studies on the 'affect theory', Rudolf Otto is only present on three occasions, in which he essentially only emphasises how his approach to the religious is precisely *sui generis* and 'private'.²³ Based on the fact that Otto 'identified the core religious feeling as the *mysterium tremendum*, wonder combined with what he calls "tremor"', Schaefer shows very slight

²⁰ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 6–7.

²¹ See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is not territory: studies in the history of religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

²² See Manuel Vasquez, *More than belief: a materialist theory of religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²³ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 5.

convergences: ‘Affect theory allows us to reexamine this older phenomenological model of religion with a twist: where Otto saw religious emotion as transcendent and apolitical, affect theory prompts us to ask how these embodied affective potentials form and accelerate systems of power.’²⁴ In Otto the prelinguistic affect ‘was put forwards the cradle of religion as such. Affect theory turns back to those resources, but, building on the linguistic turn, radically redraws the map of theoretical engagements between religion and emotion by explicitly linking affects to frames of power.’²⁵

It is curious how, in remembering Otto, no space is given, for example, to Schleiermacher, who with full merit could be taken as an example on the subject of religious feeling, considering the importance he played in the formation of Rudolf Otto himself.²⁶ However, an in-depth acquaintance with the bibliography related to Otto is enough to be unable to accept a reductionism of this kind. Otto folds religious sentiment into an *a priori* derived from Kant, Fries, and Soderblom, but he does not limit himself to a *sui generis* and a historical position. The evolution of religion depends on factors that Philip Almond, one of Otto’s most significant interpreters, explains very clearly: ‘Only when religious feeling is purified of natural feeling is first awakened, and when it may be aroused independently of the stimulus and incitement caused by these, may religion said to be present.’²⁷

This emerges in a specific section in which Otto shows how it is not enough to consider him the theorist of ‘mystery’: ‘When the more developed elements of “awe” came upon the scene and went to shape the more elevated ideas of the demonic and the divine, sacer and sanctus, things could become “unclean” or “impure”, in the numinous sense without any substratum of “natural” impurity to serve as point of departure.’²⁸

In our view, Rudolf Otto brings the question of affect to a decisive stage in understanding the transition from the pre-linguistic to the linguistic, but what Schaefer wants to summarise as a ‘phenomenological’

²⁴ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 54.

²⁵ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 59.

²⁶ Andrew Dole, ‘Schleiermacher and Otto on Religion,’ *Religious Studies* 40, no. 4 (2004): 389–413. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20008553>.

²⁷ Philip Almond, *Rudolf Otto. An introduction to his philosophical theology* (North Carolina: The University Of North Carolina Press, 1984), 80.

²⁸ Rudolf Otto, *The idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 80.

perspective has the defect of pandering to the anthropocentrism that has characterised the history of Western thought, failing to find a space of dignity for animal feeling. Schaefer also argues that the religiosity called into question by phenomenology is *sui generis*, i.e. it is content with a solid transcendental vocation without descending into the materiality of its manifestations. In this centrality of the material sphere of the religious, Schaefer leans towards Klassen, who argues that any theory of the religion disregards gender, race, class, and other social formative categories, ‘categories with profound effects both as cultural and individual levels – will only answer very limited questions, for a very limited audience.’²⁹

A key factor of religious materialism thus emerges: it is more important to highlight the rights and dynamics of the living beings involved in religion than to try to speculate about the ontological root of what religion is.

For Schaefer, the centrality of language in religious studies has obscured crucial religious phenomena. Foregrounding affects, which Schaefer first defines as ‘the flow of forces through bodies outside of, prior to, or underneath language’,⁵⁰ can bring such phenomena to light and make them explicit. Affect theory can explain ‘how discourses attach to bodies and get them to move; it is not “baffled” when bodies sincerely “believe” one thing and do another’.⁵¹

According to Schaefer’s theory, starting with the affective subject, it entails rejecting any idea of an autonomous self.

Appearing subjects, both human and animal, are dynamic, constantly inhabited by pre-linguistic and intersubjective energies; bodies, here, precede minds and words. Bodies are invested, individually and *en masse*, with feelings as diverse as belonging, disgust and joy: affects that function both to create communities (religious and otherwise) and to maintain and control their boundaries.

Religious Affects is essentially a book about the insufficiency of words: ‘The *I found myself* is the passive case of affect. It suggests the ways that affects and affectively organized desiders [...] surge though bodies and compose themselves in religious forms.’⁵²

²⁹ Pamela E. Klassen, ‘Ritual,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*, edited by John Corrigan, 143–161 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 157.

⁵⁰ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 4.

⁵¹ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 35.

⁵² Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 117.

Regardless of how the claim of animal religion may or may not be received, *Religious Affects* is an invitation to decentralise our anthropo-centric assumptions more generally and, by appealing to human animality, to provide a provocative angle for imagining affects beyond the all-too-human parameters that usually characterise religious studies. Rather than privileging rationality and human exceptionalism, human beings should be brought back to the corporeal, the material and the animal. The primary theoretical opponent of this perspective is the 'angelic' view of man. Schaefer conducts a real battle: 'understanding religion means pulling humans out of the domain of the angelic – which means out of the domain of self-determination though sovereign reason.'⁵³ Elsewhere: 'thinking of bodies as affective animals rather than as angelic subjects expands the available dimensions to track where bodies go.'⁵⁴ However, it is in a specific passage that Schaefer deserves to be quoted in full, which highlights the need to polarise the dualism animal/angelical:

We fail to see nonhuman animal religion because we only search for religion in places where we already know we will find it. Religion, too, as Derrida suggested, may be a heterogeneous multiplicity. Animal religion calls us to look at the movements of animals differently, to hear their calls differently, to watch their interactions with their worlds and with other bodies differently. It means opening the possibility that there is a phenomenological, affective depth to these gestures [...] this means erasing the myth that we are angels.⁵⁵

Religious Affects seeks to give solidity to the material perspective of religion by focusing on experienced religious feelings.

Schaefer illustrates that studying religion affectively means imagining religion as a body: 'Religion, viewed affectively [as] a bulging mass rather than a pristine dictionary.'⁵⁶ Studying the mass (religion) and its relations to power means tracing and mapping affects. Schaefer emphasises the debt to an apodictic definition by Pellegrini: 'at the end of the day, the ability to win over converts or spark spiritual rededication does not rise and fall on fact checking of biblical hermeneutics. It is

⁵³ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 12.

⁵⁴ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 208.

⁵⁵ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 212.

⁵⁶ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 34.

a matter rather of affective congruences.’³⁷ Bodies must be reanimated better to understand their connections to religion, culture and politics; this is Schaefer’s view.

Finally, *Religious Affects* defends the fundamental contingency of the human-animal condition. The book offers a much more intricate look at life than rationalist evolution theorists do, who, contrarily, tend to reduce existence to a rational calculation of survival. Alternatively, Schaefer conceives religious affections as a biological accident, a product of evolutionary landscapes that do not present a linear development: ‘being itself is a junkyard, a sedimented landscape of accidents. Animality, the heterogeneous multiplicity of bodies, is a disorganized archive of ongoing play of differences in the creation of species.’³⁸ In light of this consideration bordering on ill-concealed nihilism, it is easy to understand why Schaefer’s perspective is so keen to distance itself from the essentialisms of 20th-century religious hermeneutics. The tones of rupture are unequivocal: ‘the animalist approach, by focusing on the organization of power outside of “logos”, interrupts carno-phallocentrism by separating bodies from the necessity of language for thought, cognition, sensation and movement. It extinguishes the vestigial euro-enlightenment axiom that language is necessary for depth.’³⁹

2. To Talk About Animal Religiosity, We Must Remember to Ask Ourselves What Religiosity Is

The Schaeferian proposal of animal religiosity, which is understood as an attempt to widening the scientific field of religious experience, has no antecedents in the genealogical branch of posthuman philosophy alone. Performing an acrobatic exercise, we could place this stance invoking the inclusion of the animal as a form of religious pluralism – a pluralism that not only looks at the transversality of religious denominations and spiritual traditions, but it focuses, for once, on the plurality of those who experience the religious content.

In the field of philosophy of religion, the most revealing and discussed contribution to the theory of religious pluralism is that of

³⁷ Ann Pellegrini, ‘Signaling through the Flames; hell house performance and structures of religious feeling,’ *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 917.

³⁸ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 155.

³⁹ Schaefer, *Religious affects*, 202–203.

J. Hick,⁴⁰ who, considering the problems generated by exclusivism insurmountable, and the attempted solution of inclusivism unsatisfactory, believes that it is precisely the pluralist hypothesis to provide a solution to the conflict posed by each religion's claim to truth. It is based on the Kantian distinction between what is authentic and accurate according to human perception and experience. Thus, it admits that the real is universally present to humanity, but experienced and conceived differently. The two qualifying concepts are deity, or personal Real, and the absolute, or impersonal Real.

The former is typical of theistic religions, whereas the latter involves non-theistic ones. The pluralistic hypothesis differs from the solution that considers mysticism as the core of all religions and religious conflict arising from the differentiation of this core at a popular level. Religious conflict is eliminated because of the thesis, according to which, different religions are all equally manifestations of the Real, which is expressed, however, in a different manner. As Andrea Aguti puts it:

Il problema del pluralismo religioso appare produttivo in filosofia della religione quando non è percepito come un mero dato fattuale, che chiede semplicemente di essere meglio compreso nella sua effettività e arricchito nella sua fenomenologia, ma quando lo è come problema di diritto.⁴¹

For this reason, although the theoretical problems arising from Schaefer's theories do not detract from the tremendous ethical dignity they raise, on the level of interest in placing the animal on a group of importance, that is not merely objective, instrumental.

In this sense, the discourse on Animal Religion may find a highly plausible framework, which, at the same time, if also addressed to ontology, turns out to be a multiplier of problems: what deity interests the chimpanzee dancing in front of a waterfall? Can we speak of religiosity without it being the development of a series of experiences that find a name at the perturbing source? Does the 'worshipped' object, be it disturbing or surprising in the broadest sense of the term, remain in the animal an unthinking 'in itself'? Suppose the theory of affects

⁴⁰ See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁴¹ Aguti, 'La Filosofia delle religioni,' 19. 'The problem of religious pluralism appears productive in the philosophy of religion when it is not perceived as a mere factual datum, which simply begs to be better understood in its actuality and enriched in its phenomenology, but when it is as a problem of law.' Translation by the author.

wants to call ‘religious’ an energy flow which allows the animal to break out of its behavioural routine. In that case, binding itself to the gestural apparatus alone will not be sufficient. However, such a theory will somehow have to address the link between a creature and its creatureliness, that is, whether there is, in that dance, a specific link with a god or not. Stopping at the dance of the animal creates an essentially aesthetic suggestion in man. The philosopher who looks at the dancing animal presumes to place this fascinating moment at the rank of an exquisitely human concept, and he does so through words. Thus, overcoming the ‘linguistic turn’ is a goal of philosophers such as Schaefer, to be preferred over affects. However, at the same time, such philosophy cannot relegate the vision of the affects to a specific semantic field, that of a philosophy of secular religion, which deliberately reflects on what is religious or not on the basis of non-theological critics, as opposed to environmentalist neopagan currents⁴² in which nature shows a sacred feature in the traditional sense of ‘sacred,’ thus religious. It is an ontological sacredness that transforms nature into Nature, lacking unambiguous dogmatics and inspired by different religious models, while preliminarily rejecting Christianity.⁴⁵

The religious materialism witnessed by Schaefer, on the other hand, with all the genealogical lines that we have seen in Smith, Vasquez, Gross, and Pellegrini, has no interest in posing itself as a *version* of religion, but in observing it as an external spectator, limiting itself to taking its cue from religion to constitute a political philosophy on bio-energetic (or rather zoo-energetic) bases.

The danger of religious materialism that intends to start again from the affection of the animal, without presenting a doctrine of the soul or an idea of God, is that of posing itself as an occult atheism that may not be clear about the importance of religion for the understanding of life. A theory that risks being an implicit version of Feuerbach’s approach, but with an aftertaste of a sort of ‘ontological cancel culture’. Religious sentiment is at the heart of the experience of the numinous, to return to Rudolf Otto’s language. However, rather than true sentiment in animal religiosity, it is more appropriate to speak of

⁴² See Joanne Pearson J., Richard H. Roberts, Geoffrey Samuel, *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the modern world* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

⁴⁵ See Giovanni Filoramo, *Sui sentieri del sacro. Processi di sacralizzazione nella società contemporanea* (Roma: Franco Angeli, 2022).

presentiment – a presentiment grounded in an environment in which instincts and emotions find themselves without tools in the face of astonishment.

In this framework, the traditionally understood ontology gives way to an approach devoted to evidence-based science, in a way that philosophical discourse cannot disagree with a specific language that is not too covertly scientific and atheist. The reference to biology, in Schaefer, takes up more argumentative space than a St. Bonaventure, for instance, which we, however, consider consistent with the theme, inasmuch Bonaventure placed animals in a dimension of proximity to the divine because of their sinlessness. As chance would have it, another Schaefer, a Bonaventure scholar, realised in the 1960s that, with respect to animals, ‘St. Bonaventure considers their life and death as a decoration of the universe and compares their succession and order with a most beautiful poem in which one syllable follows the other.’⁴⁴ However, there are also examples of theologies that focus on the existence, conversely, of sin in the animal realm to hold Christ’s work as redemptive and reconciling for all creaturehood. Although this is a borderline example, it is of absolute interest in understanding the complexity of the link between religion and animality.⁴⁵

The opportunities provided by theology are almost entirely unnoticed in Schaefer’s work, which gives prominence to the sphere of power. There is a widespread impression that he has chosen to emphasise the political role of the body in the spiritual sphere, even at the expense of a clear definition of spirituality itself.

The paradox ensues in the crude materialism of such a vision; by dint of searching for evidence, one falls into the irrationalism of an idea to which one attributes an arbitrary or substantially inaccurate meaning, philosophically, in our case. The study of the dancing animal provides elements of unquestionable interest in the field of neuroscience and ethology in attempting to understand the link between biological evolutionism and the animal affective sphere, in fact fostering, hopefully, growing attention and solid respect towards the mystery in which the animal kingdom consists. However, precisely as a kingdom, our

⁴⁴ Alexander Schaefer, ‘The Position and Function of Man in the Created World according to Saint Bonaventure,’ *Franciscan Studies* 21, no. 3–4 (1961): 324.

⁴⁵ See David L. Clough, *On animals*, Vol. I, *Systematic Theology* (New York: T and T Clark International, 2012).

concern is not necessarily manifested straightforwardly when we place the animal on our throne with our vestiges. Suppose it is true that man, in order to know himself better, must also thoroughly understand the animality of which he is made up. Is it not also possible that the animal is made up of a celestial offspring that does not make mere sporadic feeling necessary for him since he is enveloped in a creatureliness that is already imbued with spirit? Moreover, in front of a waterfall, does it not simply rejoice in the beauty of the divine instant without the need to venerate it? Veneration, in man, is a mental itinerary to approach with different timing, logic, and destiny towards the same spiritual source of life, of which the animal has already been a sacred inhabitant from time immemorial.

For the animal, it is home; for man, it is a return journey. Religion dwells precisely in this transit. That is why, instead of thinking of the religiosity of the animal, as if it needed rituals, it is important to focus primarily on its indefatigable sacredness, as a mysterious being pointing to cosmological complexity as a good to be preserved and as an inspiration. According to Schaefer, it also remains to be understood how the ‘effects’ of a chimpanzee would relate to that of a tick, an ostrich, a swordfish, or a rattlesnake. Even the generic container ‘animal’ might not lead to simple outcomes from this perspective if one does not go down to the phenotype level.

It is not necessarily the case that, from an ethical point of view, respect for the animal’s dignity must necessarily pass through a coercive theoretical superimposition of its way of life with ours. Would this way of categorizing not, albeit synthetically functional to a theoretical construct, also suffer from an implicit anthropocentrism? What should remain as most religious about animals is our sense of humility, responsibility, and love. These are the cornerstones by which we know the animal if we have a theology of creation as our foundation.⁴⁶

In other strands of study, we also note the occurrence of a return to philosophical schools of thought that understand nature as imbued with sacredness on an animistic or pantheistic basis, as studied in-depth by Bron Taylor in his famous *Dark Green Religion*.⁴⁷ For this, it is challenging to espouse a postmodern cause that believes it has left behind

⁴⁶ See Lucie Kolářová, ‘The Animal within Creation: Thoughts from Christian Theology,’ *AUC Theologica* 15, no. 1 (2023): 43–66. doi: 10.14712/23563398.2023.14.

⁴⁷ See Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010).

any possible return of metaphysical glimpses, be they immanentist or transcendentalist, in the religious sphere. A linear reading of the history of philosophy does not do much good in the complex conceptual world that has sprung up over time between man and nature since involving the most ancestral of themes; it tends to reappear in a miscellany of past influences, translated on the basis of the demands of the present. Materialism, in this sense, betrays an uncertainty which stems from a high primacy of contingency, motivated by activistic anxiety, in part rightly dictated by environmental ethical emergencies and partly the by-product of a systemic difficulty in reading the categories of the divine will as the key to understanding the modern human.⁴⁸

Indeed, any suggestion of the richness of animal living and experiencing the world is part of our curiosity towards them, their acting, in continuity and harmony with their nature and their surroundings. However, suppose we do not place our love for the whole creatural world at the centre; in that case, we will not advance one step in the petition for change and progressive improvement in environmental ethics, either if we are proponents of a deleterious anthropocentrism or a de-spiritualised biologism. As Pope Francis stated:

It follows that our indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings. We have only one heart, and the same wretchedness which leads us to mistreat an animal will not be long in showing itself in our relationships with other people. Every act of cruelty towards any creature is 'contrary to human dignity'. We can hardly consider ourselves to be fully loving if we disregard any aspect of reality.⁴⁹

Moreover, it is precisely because of this intrinsic eternal sacredness that the animal has, over time, suggested a myriad of zoomorphic symbols to human beings, in order to motivate their religious experience in harmony with nature, while, at the same time, wanting to acknowledge themselves in their inextricable speciality, as the fascinating reality of

⁴⁸ See Paolo Costa, *La città post-secolare. Il nuovo dibattito sulla secolarizzazione* (Brescia: Queriniana 2019).

⁴⁹ Pope Francis. *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, 92. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

bestiaries teaches us.⁵⁰ Bestiaries were popularised in the Middle Ages in illustrated volumes which described a variety of animals. A moral lesson frequently followed the natural history and illustration of each animal. This reflected the belief that the world itself was the Word of God, and that every living thing had a special meaning. Here, the Word, in the theological sphere, is not just about the logical-argumentative ‘linguistic turn’, but points to the breath of life, endowed with meaning even in the most disparate creaturely recess. A medieval Jane Goodall, probably, in the impossibility of travelling as we do today, would have had to thank an illustrated bestiary for an effective form of empathy that spoke to the heart and spirit.

Conclusion

The contemporary authors we have dealt with sometimes miss the opportunity to analyse a greater diversification in stretches of the history of thought that can show both the best and worst sides of the human relationship with the animal. This is the intrinsic danger of our philosophical age, in which we rush to provide ourselves with ‘post’ (post-humanism, post-atheism, etc.) without bothering to understand the kinship with past eras. Is not this growing dislike of the multi-millennial philosophical legacy itself an argument against us being anthropocentric? What if ‘centrism’ is understood as a generalised *zeitgeist*, as the prevailing spirit of the times is much more akin to a fanaticism for our circumscribed contemporary time-spectrum?

Human inattention to the creaturely good, rather than from a religious imposture, may stem from our technocratic ambitions that allow our desire to gain more and more power over the world and history. More than the anthropocentric disproportion in religious experience, the objectively more dangerous approach to the animality of humans and non-humans is the violence that humans perpetrate on the planet. There is a constant state of ‘shame’ in man concerning his technological products, as Guenther Anders would say.⁵¹ The awareness of this shame does not need to be reviewed by a critique of a human ‘monopoly’

⁵⁰ Peter Dendle, ‘Cryptozoology in the Medieval and Modern Worlds,’ *Folklore* 117, no. 2 (2006): 190–206. doi: 10.1080/00155870600707888.

⁵¹ Christian Fuchs, ‘Günther Anders’ Undiscovered Critical Theory of Technology in the Age of Big Data Capitalism,’ *tripleC* 15, no. 2 (2017): 582–611. doi: 10.31269/tripleC.v15i2.898.

of religious sentiment but by a radical review of how far man has just dangerously deviated from his religious capacity to read the world so that he can respect it in an accomplished manner.

When we know, contextually, that we cannot treat ourselves and the world only from a utilitarian perspective, we will rediscover our animal self and our specific spiritual tension, which is contemplative.⁵² This is an exquisitely human activity that should not be read as a form of absence from the real, but as a permeation of the real in which man does not automatically long for power; this pure religious approach allows him in the first instance a capacity for attention towards the totality of meanings in which he can then, in the second instance, act ethically and spiritually.

Only by grasping the immense scope of wisdom of all human religious experience over millennia will we be able to integrate it with astonishment towards the animal, in such a way as to reactivate our sense of respect and love for nature. It will not suffice to argue with the history of thought from a revisionist perspective; we must possess the foundations of the greatest longings for wisdom that have spanned ages, philosophers, and spiritual currents. We will discover that we will not need to ‘cheer’ for any anthropocentrism, but only to study the ‘Anthropos’ in all its dignified demand for meaning. We will rediscover the preciousness of focusing on the sacred to foster a balance in our actions and design an ecologically-oriented life only if humanity learns how to cultivate beauty through knowing itself.

In conclusion, it is important to step out of the polemical pattern toward Schaefer and highlight some ethical possibilities that arise from both our essentialist position and the materialist position he advanced. To move from ontology or phenomenology to ethics as far as animals are concerned, a separate methodological step must be taken, following this order: recognising that the understanding of the being of animals is not neutral but influenced by cultural and historical biases, whether they guiltily reduce the richness of the animal or attribute uncertifiable characteristics to it; in any case, a critical analysis of the ontological categories used will always be required.

⁵² Byung-Chul Han, *Vita contemplativa: In praise of inactivity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023).

One ethical principle that should always be considered is the following: a phenomenological approach must be taken that considers the lived experience of animals by acknowledging their subjectivity and experiences as morally relevant, regardless of our feelings towards them. This will require formulating ethical principles that reflect the inherent dignity and value of animals, involving an interdisciplinary dialogue with philosophers, ethologists, biologists, and other experts. After these theoretical aspects, the obligatory and practical steps will involve translating these ethical principles into concrete practices, such as promoting laws and policies that protect animal rights, adopting more ethical husbandry and consumption practices, and educating the public about the importance of respecting animals and caring for them. What philosophy will always be about, however, is the capacity for reflection that remains open to difficulty – unafraid to begin from divergent assumptions, guided by a commitment to the good and inspired by the sacred.

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