

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of
Animals and World Religions

Lisa Kemmerer
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SIDNEY BLANKENSHIP
Oxford University
sidneyadrian@aol.com

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The genius of this book is that it is so appropriately structured, both chronologically and topically. It begins with indigenous religions, identifying the very source of religion itself in the human wonder of interacting with other creatures. The sheer beauty of her research is that it maintains this basis of awareness and responsibility throughout the independent development of the historically prominent major traditions. Its academic relevance lies in the capacity to unite all religions, not just in abstract principle, but in an ethic based on love for animals in all traditions that have carried this ancient ethical nexus to our present day. She is an activist by admission, and one is led into the faith that a transformation can be achieved in the physical and spiritual well-being of earth's inhabitants of all species, including humans.

The chapters are divided into each of seven different traditions: Indigenous, Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese, Jewish, Christian, Islamic. Acknowledgements and a Foreword by Norm Phelps, a lucid Introduction, an Appendix on Factory Farming, in-text References, a very impressive Bibliography that documents various traditions and authors (both historic and modern), as well as an Index, make this a useful beginning for a subject worthy of deep and enduring engagement. The earliest traditions (Indigenous) are worldwide and rather timeless in their interaction with nature. This has to include those of geographies where the most ancient organized religions evolved. They, in turn, interact with one another in ways that invite ethical comparison for human response. Indigenous experience is overlaid with the migration of religions from other cultures. One has to weigh the best of both.

This book would maintain a responsibility for the integrity of indigenous animals and habitat when that happens, based on duties toward animals that reside at the core of all religious

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traditions, but in relative geographic isolation. The human response in animal interaction penetrates into pre-literate deep time, or such as recently discovered at Gobekli Tepe. One may even view the experience of the classic “Gods” of the Vedas in such a way, although the fixed expression of language and literature marks the point of departure for the earliest traditions; and many historically significant traditions and cultures do not form a continuous historic lineage with the major religions of our time. Even the Norse gods, the Classic Greek and Roman deities, or the essential background of Egypt and the Middle East, have nature and the animals as their basis. These may be held to influence the development of the major traditions, but are not treated.

The unifying element in the major surviving traditions is a call to compassion and remedial response to injustice. The Oxford Latin Dictionary defines *religio* as “supernatural feeling of constraint; scruple, sanction; religious awe, superstition, ritual, consciousness.” Ethical response is based upon such formative impetus, drawing upon the physical and numinous interaction of the fullness and freedom in created diversity and evolutionary occurrence. Through all of this experience, the thread of compassion is the supreme marker of continuity that is necessary as an ethical response to the animals. This constitutes religion. Boundaries are drawn in nature and societal norms begin to reflect the human response. Different geographies and origins are represented with primary lessons related by individuals lost to history. Collective myths arising from ancient memory are told and retold. Societal norms congeal, as in the Tao of China. The Hindu tradition had absorbed nature and its inhabitants into itself in such a fashion that humans and animals were deeply connected in this response and representa-

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tion. The earliest texts reflecting these two traditions are “radically” animal oriented and societally positive.

Two aspects of the work are of note. The use of “anymal” in place of “animal” is an effort to emphasize that none is to be excluded from an assessment of divine care and consideration. The other is the conclusion that a vegan diet is the only appropriate solution to the historic problem of human exploitation and animal suffering. Whether ancient or modern, this ethical tenet is found in the core teachings of all traditions. She makes the point that the traditions as they may be claimed do not always reflect this fact, but that it is there nonetheless in the oral history and founding documents. This book can be seen as that witness.

Each chapter explores comparisons reflecting a range of common concerns, as well as unique features and terminology. Using her distinct reference, they include “Sacred Nature, Sacred Anymals,” “Divine-Anymal Relations,” “Human-Anymal Relations,” “Interpenetrability” (especially important in the first three traditions with re-incarnation or transmigration of souls), “Anymal Powers,” and a section at the end of each chapter on its tradition and “Anymal Liberation.” Kinship and community with animals, individual animals, dependence, hunting, diet are among the issues explored in each chapter, again demonstrating a unity of awareness and ethic surprisingly similar at its basic core. “Philosophy and Morality” is treated in Chinese thought. Unique concepts such as karma, unity, ahimsa in Hinduism, and their consequent appearance in Buddhism are recognized. Others such as an animal’s “way of being” (*te*), or heaven (*tian*), virtue (*ren*), and (*junzi*) a noble, or moral person, are reflected in the Chinese tradition. Other terminology illustrates the “three central moral treasures” of Daoist (*Tao*) philosophy:

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deep, abiding love (*ci*), restraint, or frugality (*jian*), and “not daring to be at the forefront of the world” (*bugan wei tianxia xian*). Also treated are transformation, unity of being, attitudes toward death, harmony, peace, and *wuwei* (as action that does not interfere or compete with nature). The Daoist principle “Do not kill or cause harm” is a particularly important and primary precept, a first principle of Buddhism as well.

Although Buddhism has historic roots in Hindu tradition, and reflects many of its ethical dimensions such as non-violence (*ahimsa*) and karma, it rests primarily on the mental and spiritual awakening that is unique in its focus on alleviating pain (*metta*) and bringing happiness (*karuna*) to all creatures. Bodhicitta is the “selfless service” of the Bodhisattva in implementing this focus. Reincarnation and the afterlife due to karma are bound up with the “unreality of the self” (*anatta*) in a world of oneness and interdependence of animals as illustrated by the Jataka tales where human and animal lives mirror one another. The One and the Many of the Hindu Upanishads contemplates a plethora of creatures that share a single existence, where Dharma and philosophy meet. Divine love and meditation are key features of both Hinduism and Buddhism.

The chapter on Judaism reveals a religion that shares its background with a broader Middle Eastern heritage. Abraham, Moses, and the history of Israel (and even Jesus) contribute to its inception, even though Judaism has been defined primarily by the text of the *Tanakh* and its legacy for over two thousand years. It is unique in being such a text-based religion, and as such it reveals narrative history and law, together with prophecies and writings within its historic purview. Neither Christianity nor Islam can be understood apart from its background. It is a monotheistic heritage that contributed to both, especially

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the concept of the One God as Creator of all that exists. His creation is good. An ethic that defines the proper response is central to that belief. The inherited sacrificial system of the Old World issues in a moral concern for the animals that succeeds in overcoming such negative cultural intransigence. Judaism as a religion parallels Christianity in a post-sacrificial world, much of whose symbolism and animal ethic reflects on the nature of that history. Its saving grace was evidenced in Covenant (with the animals) and a communal promise of salvation mediated through faith in the Creator's revelations. Many examples of animal interactions may be found in the Biblical texts, and many more are developed in traditional literature. For Jewish philosophy and morality the injunction of mercy and compassion becomes paramount. A wealth of textual materials (*Torah*, *Nebhi'im* and *Ketubhim*) began the long history of ethical reflection on its heritage.

Christianity and Islam could well be considered together with Judaism if not for the centrality of Jesus and Muhammad as powerful revelatory figures in the consequent history. They develop that expanding history in changing times with a significantly diverse following, and in different cultures. However, as the many well-selected examples in the book indicate, the estimation and divine place of the animals seems to shine equally brilliant in the best of all three religions, wherever they settle. The hagiographa of the Saints, Allah "the merciful and compassionate One" in the Qur'an, and the full range of literature from all three traditions produced remarkably similar responses of compassionate interaction with animals well into the Middle Ages and beyond.

This is a summary reference work that animal lovers who identify with any of these traditions need to keep close to the

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heart. It exposes the real bridge between traditions, the concern for animals and the natural world that inspired them all. As the Qur`an says, originally there was only one religion. In a sense it comes full circle with indigenous traditions around the world. *Dharma* (the Hindu word for religion) seeks expression as Law, but religious law is often culturally and geographically unique. Such a “law of God,” even though it informs historic circumstance and remedial approaches leading back to the original wonder and reverence, fails in extensive casuistry, but succeeds in human involvement. Hence, there are lessons learned, but the real goal is a positive and peaceful interaction with “anymals.” The human response involved in the divine imperative of reverence is an awakening to joy and freedom.

Special credit should be given to the author, Lisa Kemmerer, whose meticulous detail is revealed in the abundance of creatures interspersed into the text to illustrate the meaning of “anymals.” One can detect her heartfelt devotion and personal experience with many cultures and unique fauna through her travels, especially in the Himalayas. This presents a unique complement to her abiding familiarity with the sources. She has done an immense service to all religious traditions in her very positive focus on the depth of our relations with the “anymals,” a term that she employs with empathy and immediate concern. Attention should also be given to the character of the bibliography, some of it inviting online access to source materials as well as to faithful modern practitioners within their respective traditions. This book is a unifying work sublime in its interest and purpose, reflecting the divinity that is infused in the myriad of creatures whose lives invite respect, love, and compassion in every human individual and tradition.