

# Animals in Relationship with God

**Daniela Rizzo**

**H**ave you ever felt a profound sense of connection with animals that transcends words? Perhaps your bond with non-human creatures has grown through caring for domestic animals, experiencing a unique relationship expressed through shared affection, playful moments and emotional comfort.

Reconciling this love for animals within the Christian tradition can prove challenging. It can be difficult to explain to people how other creatures impact and enrich one's life and ministry as a Christian. Animal lovers understand the profound connection between humans and non-human creatures and recognise the richness animals bring to our lives. Yet when attempting to explain this connection to others, we often face criticism because of the belief that animals do not hold a significant place in heaven or the new earth, as humans are made in the image of God whereas animals are not.

## ANIMALS IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

This anthropocentric view has led to the notion that animals are merely part of the scenery, like props on a stage, and lack inherent value and significance in God's redemptive plan. This is a medieval view of a hierarchy of beings, which places humans at the apex of creation and devalues animals and plants. However, biblical writings place humans within the community of life rather than over it, and the concept of dominion does not authorise humans to exploit animals. To envision creation as a community has radical implications for human identity, as humans are meant to give and receive in mutual relationships with other creatures. All creatures share the same fundamental identity of belonging to the same generous God.

Christian theology has traditionally given limited attention to animals, and due to neo-Platonic views the importance of animals has largely been dismissed. However there have been exceptions. Ahead of his time in 1782, the Methodist evangelist and theologian John Wesley suggested that God's redemption would extend to all life, including animals. He believed that every animal's eschatological (future) being would exceed its current ontological state, including its level of intelligence which

would be increased to that of human intellect as a reward for what the animal suffered.

Today, there is a move to view the Christian tradition through an animal-friendly lens. This approach aims to appreciate the role of animals in God's creation and to re-examine those theological positions that have limited the recognition of their value. Efforts have been made to address the importance of animal life, either by positing the existence of a soul or by rejecting the notion of a soul altogether. However, rather than wading into this ongoing discourse, I would like to suggest a third option – moving beyond the notion of the soul and exploring other notable qualities possessed by animals, as well as the nature of salvation and its intended recipients.

The starting point for this discussion is to recognise animal sentience and what it entails. Sentience refers to an animal's capacity to experience both positive and negative emotions, including pain, joy and contentment. Although human moral behaviour is complex, animals can exhibit behaviours similar to human behaviour such as caring, comforting, playing and disciplining. Animals are not mere objects or mechanisms, but are subjects with an inner life similar to ours. Thus, recognising the differences between humans and animals does not undermine the significant similarities between the species regarding their capacity for affective experiences. Additionally, the concept of sentience may also include the presence of the Spirit within animals, as they are recipients of the life-giving breath of God. The Spirit is the immanent creative presence of God, bringing life and uniting all creatures in fellowship with their Creator. All creatures, including animals, owe their life, movement and activity to the Spirit. The presence of the Spirit in creation brings life, energy and renewal to all creatures, making both humans and animals integral to God's good and continuing creation.

## ANIMAL SPIRITUALITY

The discussion of animal sentience builds upon the notion that all creatures are created with autonomy and integrity. Christians are called to recognise and attend to the particularity of the lives of animals, who are inseparable companions to humanity in creation, reconciliation and redemption. One aspect of this companionship is the capacity of animals for praise and lament.

The biblical text offers a multifaceted view of praise

that extends beyond human worshippers, including a call for all of creation, animals included, to offer worship and reverence to God (Ps 148, 145:21; Is 66:23; Rev 5:13). While some interpretations limit the scope of these references to humans, the language used in the Psalms and prophetic writings suggests that all living creatures, both human and non-human, are called to worship. In Psalm 148, a wide variety of creatures are depicted as conveying the universal praise of all creation, including sea creatures, wild beasts, livestock, crawling insects and birds of the air. While animals may not express their praise to God as humans do, they do possess a spontaneity and consistency that humans lack. Animals can glorify God in their own distinctive ways without using human language. Psalm 148's depiction of praise by all creation, including animals, is not a rhetorical device but a revelation that animals are companions in the divine worship of God – fellow creatures with their own relationship to God who respond to the Creator's care in their lives. The psalmists discerned that the powerful roar of lions, the graceful flight of birds and the mysterious movements of sea creatures are all expressions of a God revered as both saviour and judge, not only of humanity but also of the animal kingdom.

The Bible also portrays animals as capable of mourning and lamenting. In Isaiah 43:20, wild animals are linked to sorrowful sounds in the wilderness, but their cries of lament are transformed into a melody of praise as God provides water. The animals' response is likened to that of God's people, suggesting that 'man and beast could rejoice and praise God together'. In Jonah 3:7-8, the king of Nineveh commands that humans

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and animals should cry out to God with great fervour, highlighting that animals are part of the community called to repentance. Hosea 4:3 describes a devastating ecological crisis in which the land and all who live in it, including the animals and fish, are perishing due to the lack of faithfulness, kindness and knowledge of God. These biblical passages reveal that animals are not only affected by environmental issues but are also capable of experiencing emotions and responding to God. With inspiration from Joel 1:18-20, it could be imagined that the whales would sing a mournful song. They would tell us that the oceans are polluted and our seas are darkened by greed. They may invite us to repent, for the harmony of the deep is disrupted and their kin suffer, calling us to turn our hearts to stewardship, lest the gentle giants of the sea become silent forever. A koala, who once roamed the eucalyptus forests as a symbol of tranquillity and grace, now laments her home that the flames have ravaged. She may tell us that the trees that sustain her kind are falling, the earth is scorched and she and her brethren are close to extinction. She implores us to turn our hearts to healing, lest the fires of destruction consume all. 'Embrace sustainability', she may cry, 'restore harmony with nature, and let the spirit

of repentance guide your actions'.

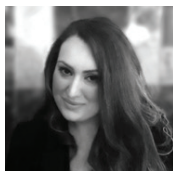
Describing animals as capable of praise and lament suggests that they live in relation to God and respond to divine love in accordance with their nature. The implication is that God hears the voices of his non-human creation and, while they do not have reflective consciousness like humans, they still bear witness to the power of the Creator.

To consider that spiritual experiences may not be exclusive to the *imago Dei* challenges the idea that divine relationship is a trait solely attributed to human beings. Animal spirituality may not include human-like characteristics such as self-transcendence and the search for meaning. Still, we should consider that it may involve subcortical, affective, extra-linguistic, relational, organismic, phenomenal and other experiences, without the need for interpretive cognitive functions. By defining spirituality as an experience that promotes creaturely flourishing and increases the meaning or purpose of its life, it becomes evident that animals, too, can possess a unique relationship with God just by living the specific lives they are called to by their Creator.

## THE REDEMPTION OF ALL CREATION

As we gain a deeper appreciation of the complex and nuanced lives of animals and their potential for spiritual experiences, it becomes even more compelling to recognise the direct and interactive relationship between God and animals and the mutual and reciprocal nature of their connection, as revealed in biblical texts that describe the redemptive activity of God that encompasses all creatures. The Psalms firmly place animals within the redemptive activity of God, using the vocabulary of redemption to refer to animals as well as humans in need of salvation. The Hebrew verb '*yasa*', translated as 'save', is a frequently used root word in the Old Testament that describes salvation, liberation and deliverance in various contexts, including references to God as the saviour. Animals are depicted in Psalm 145:15 as 'looking to' and 'waiting for the Lord', using the same verb employed elsewhere when a human speaker hopes for God's salvation (Ps 119:166). This relationship is mutual and reciprocal: God is deeply concerned for all his creatures, and they, in turn, respond to God's life-giving presence in accordance with their own nature.

For the Christian, everything in the world, including every living being, comes from the one gracious God who created everything out of love and who keeps every creature in existence. We can embrace a holistic approach to creation care that values and respects the lives of all animals, recognising them as beloved creatures of God who also play a vital role in the flourishing of the earth. Our love for animals can serve as a testament to the beauty and diversity of God's creation and inspire us to work towards a more just and compassionate world for all creatures.



### DANIELA RIZZO

is a third-year PhD candidate at Alphacrucis University College. She lives in a picturesque, environmentally focused coastal city on the Great Ocean Road. With ample bushland, beaches and wallabies to inspire her research, Daniela's dissertation focuses on God's concern for animals through a pneumatological (Spirit-centred) lens.