

Animal Symbolism in Religions



By Sami Backleh



Religion is all about beliefs – beliefs about creation, purpose, destiny, life, and love. What people believe or disbelieve about God and the world affects all aspects of their being, including their day-to-day behavior. As nature-protection movements are hoping to change people's behavior towards biodiversity, emphasize the need to preserve the wealth of creation, and protect the earth's wildlife, they also affect people's belief systems – and vice versa. It is important to take into consideration that religion can affect attitudes towards animals, and the way in which animals are treated, either positively or negatively. Thus religion can be important to wildlife conservation and protection in various ways. First, it can be used in support of animal protection, which can be particularly useful and powerful in countries where religion is important and influential. Second, religion is sometimes used to justify cruel treatment – and even the ritual sacrifice – of animals. Some animal protectionists fight against these cruelties carried out in the name of religion.

All major religions of the world praise creation and acknowledge that humankind depends on nature for its own survival. They also teach compassion and love of all living creatures. Nearly all religions recognize the inherent value of animal life and the need to avoid animal suffering. Such positive attitudes are probably generated from the fact that religious texts and scriptures promote these attitudes.

Christianity shares the story of creation that is often interpreted as commanding respect for all of nature and its inhabitants. This sentiment was also reflected in Jesus' ministry that stressed love and peace for all of God's creation. Recognizing this, many

devout Christians have been leaders of peacekeeping, environmental, and animal advocacy movements. For example, St. Francis of Assisi encouraged respect and reverence for all life.

In many stories, Christian saints have gained animal companions that they have cared for or healed. Abbot Gerasimus removed a large splinter from the paw of a lion that then carried water for his monastery and, following the abbot's death, lay down on his grave and died. Macarius healed a hyena whelp of blindness and slept for the rest of his life on the sheepskin that its mother carried to him in thanks. Many other narratives highlight animals performing invaluable functions for humans, displaying intuition and care. They become moral exemplars

that "the birds of the air are fed by God," implying that if God cares for animals, he will also take care of believers. On Palm Sunday, a donkey carried Jesus into Jerusalem. Jesus is represented as a slain lamb, and after his resurrection, he cooked and ate fish with his disciples to prove his bodily existence.

Christian folk traditions, expanding on biblical texts, present certain animals that play positive roles in biblical stories. Farm animals were present in the stable at Jesus' birth. Biblical references and traditions show that animals play important, positive roles in Jesus' life and in subsequent Christian understandings of that life.

Moreover, the four Gospels are sometimes identified with various living beings. The lion, representing Mark, signifies the voice of John the



An icon illustrating the story of St. Gerasimus removing a large splinter from the paw of a lion. Image courtesy of *Russian Icons and Their Interpretation*.

for humans, showing the care they should give to each other.

Several of Jesus' apostles were fishermen, and the image of catching fish is used to represent the Christian mission. Furthermore, Jesus said

Baptist crying in the wilderness. The ox is associated with Luke because it is a sacrificial animal. The eagle soars and was believed to be the only animal able to gaze directly into the sun, and so represents John who contemplates the truth of Christ. Alongside these



The four winged creatures that symbolize the four evangelists surround Christ in the central tympanum of the western façade of the Church of St. Trophime in Arles, France. Image courtesy of Images of Medieval Art and Architecture."

animals, a human being symbolizes Matthew, who lists Christ's human ancestors.

The **Holy Qur'an** presents to us various stories of the Prophet. Within these stories we find a group of animals that have played a great and significant role in history.

The Holy Qur'an mentions animals, birds, and plants in stories that related miracles, some of which are also told in Christianity. For example, Musa's staff was turned into a snake, a wolf was falsely accused of eating Yusuf (Joseph) when his brothers presented the bloody garment to his grieving father. According to the Qur'an, a hoopoe informed Sulayman (Solomon) about the blasphemy of the Queen of Sheba, a whale swallowed Yunus (Jonah) for a while and then threw him onto the land because Jonah in his distress remembered God and asked for his help. Consequently, according to the Qur'an, he was among those who praise Allah. Abrahah's elephant was ordered to destroy the Ka'bah but was frozen in its place and thus could not proceed because of his fear of Allah.

In such stories, we may come to know a group of beings from the animal kingdom that played their roles in life and appeared on the platform of events for a while before the curtain was finally let down. The Holy Qur'an has only mentioned them or flashed a certain instance of their life before us,

whereas the other details of their lives remain vague. However, the message is clearly manifested that animals have been considered as divine messengers of lessons for humanity.

Allah says, *"There are [manifest] signs [of truth] in the creation of [humanity and numerous types of] animals scattered [on the earth] for those who believe [in Allah]."* (45:4)

From an Islamic point of view, not only animals but God's entire creation is a sign of His might and wisdom. For instance, Allah says, *"Do they see how [useful] a camel is created?"* (88:17). Several Qur'an verses invite humans to learn lessons from animals, birds, ants, and honeybees. Believers in God learn from studying animals as divine

signs, and in addition to opening up new horizons of knowledge and science, they deepen their faith.

It has been indicated that the Holy Qur'an has over two hundred verses that deal with animals and six chapters that are named after animals. From the Qur'an, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and the narrations of the righteous leaders that came after him, a comprehensive legislative system regarding animals has been created.

The above narration shows us how some of the greatest men ever to walk upon the earth took lessons from the animal kingdom. The guidelines and rules were drawn up at a time when the rights of animals were abused, when animals were made to fight one another



The Qur'an stresses the importance of grazing animals, and among them camels are highlighted because they are remarkable animals that provide great benefit to many people. Photo courtesy of the author.



Arabic zoomorphic script "In the name of God the all-merciful and compassionate." Image courtesy of ArtInIndia.ⁱⁱⁱ

for fun, and they were hunted for sport.

We are told in the Qur'an how animals have been created as communities in their own right, with the ability to communicate with one another. The following verse illustrates that, as indeed the human race is a community of needs, be they physical or mental, so the animal kingdom has certain needs too.

"And there is no creature on [or within] the earth or bird that flies with its wings except [that they are] communities like you..."

(Al- An'am 6:38)

In Islam, as in Christianity, there is the view that man has authority over the animal kingdom, yet this is an authority that comes with responsibility. Islamic teachings, moreover, discuss animal consciousness and assert that they suffer from pain and pleasure, but unlike humans they do not have the ability to rationalize. This fact has been scientifically proven: also in animals the release of endorphins is caused by stress and pain.

It is because of this that humane treatment of animals is obligatory, and an example of this is the manner in which we must co-habit with the animal kingdom. We must allow them to eat, and provide for those animals that are within our custody.

"Then let mankind look at his food – How We poured down water in torrents, then We broke open the earth, splitting [it with sprouts], and caused to grow within it grain and grapes and herbage and olives and palm trees and gardens of dense shrubbery and fruit and grass – [as] enjoyment [i.e., provision] for you and your grazing livestock."

Qur'an 80:24–32

To kill animals to satisfy the human thirst for trophies goes completely against Islamic tradition. To kill animals for their fur and to use it in unnecessary areas such as floor coverings, or to kill animals to hang their heads on walls is cruelty to animals. To undertake unnecessary experimentation for cosmetics or toiletries is against the humane treatment of animals and is a disgrace.

Islam permits the use of animals, the use of their strength and the use of their meat and skin where necessary. It is binding upon mankind to treat animals in a humane manner and to treat those within or outside one's custody with care, humility, and respect, not only for their physical well-being but for their mental health as well. Mistreatment of any part of nature, be it the animal kingdom or the earth itself, is a major sin and condemned in Islam.^{iv}

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ⁱ Available at <https://russianicons.wordpress.com/2015/04/01/the-lion-the-splinter-and-folktales-motif-156/>.

ⁱⁱ Available at <http://www.medart.pitt.edu/image/France/aries/arlmain.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ available at <http://www.artindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/018b.jpg>.

^{iv} See also Harfiyah Haleem, «Animal Rights in Islam», available at <https://www.docdroid.net/n0yw/animal-rights-in-islam.pdf.html>.