

“Worship or Praise?”

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Lawrence Park Community Church

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I live in the west end of Toronto, near Roncesvalles Village. A few years ago, the community sponsored the painting of a large mural on one of the side streets. This is what it looks like.

It was designed by local Ashinaabe artist Philip Côté. It is painted in the woodland style. This is a style made famous by Norval Morrisseau some years ago. This particular painting is part creation story, part prophecy about what would happen when whites and Indigenous people met.

I am not qualified to explain the full meaning of the painting. But I do want to point out some basic features which reveal how Indigenous cultures think about animals.

One of the features of this style is that when animals are depicted, we can often see inside their bodies.

Sometimes we can see what they have eaten, like a fish. This underlines that each animal does not stand alone, it depends on the lives of other animals and plants to exist.

In the Cote painting, we can see the heart within each animal. Here it is in a moose.

Here's a rabbit and a squirrel with its heart and insides showing. I spoke to the artist, and he told me that the inside of the animals is not a depiction of their literal organs. Instead, it is a depiction of their spiritual organs and being.

In Indigenous cultures, animals have agency - they are intelligent and conscious. They have what we would call a soul. But more than this, they share in the spirit which animates all of life, the plants, the other animals, even the rocks and the sun.

In Indigenous culture, animals are not lesser beings. Instead, they are equal parts of creation. They are seen as teachers. Humans have been called the only animal which does not know what it is doing. As a result, humans are called to learn from animals. I have heard Indigenous elders refer to the lessons beavers and can teach since they are so disciplined and industrious. Each kind of animal has its wisdom which we can learn from if we are open to it.

The other point to notice in this art is that there are lines emerging from each animal which lead to other animals in the painting. This expresses the idea that everything in life is interconnected. No animal or person stands alone.

The artist, Phillip Cote, has explained that every animal contains the sacred fire within them, and they are all linked to each other and the origin of the sacred fire which brought them into being.

The reason I wanted to start with this mural is to remind us that there are different ways of seeing animals than the one found in mainstream Western culture. For a very long time, our culture has seen animals as lesser beings who have nothing to teach us. They are not sacred, nor are they our friends and mentors. Some of us treat our pets as friends, even as children. But they are the exception - we do not see squirrels, raccoons or cows as children or friends.

This attitude is a secular one, but it has religious roots. Our culture inherited an anxiety about animals from our faith. We can see that anxiety in today's scripture reading.

It is the famous story of the golden calf. Moses has led the Israelites out of Egypt, across the Sea into the desert. They are no longer slaves.

Moses brings them to a mountain where God's spirit resides. Moses has gone up to the mountain to be taught by God for 40 days and 40 nights ( Exodus 24:18). The Israelites have become restless. They feel like they have been abandoned. They feel this God of Moses has led them into a desert to die. So, they decide to worship another god, whose image is a calf. They melt down their jewelry so they can make an idol and they begin to worship it, calling on this pagan god for help.

Moses comes down from the mountain with the ten commandments on tablets of stone. He sees the golden calf, and he gets so upset he throws down the tablets, breaking them. How could the Israelites be so fickle to worship another god, one in the shape of an animal?

This story casts a long shadow over Christianity. It symbolizes the kind of spirituality that Judaism and Christianity reject. The Bible is very clear that all the other pagan gods are fictions (Isaiah 44:9ff). There are no bull gods or gods of war. They are all figments of the human imagination. What's more, God's ten commandments forbids making any images of these false gods. The Israelites will be forbidden from making images of plants, animals and human beings, lest they start to worship them. Christians and Jews alike develop a deep suspicion of any culture which worships animals or considers them godlike.

These ideas were inherited by early Christians. They made fun of Romans, Greeks and Egyptians for worshipping gods that looked like animals.

Christians needed animals to survive, of course, both as food and for pulling carriages and plows. For a very long time, farmers in northern Europe had close relationships with their animals. They gave the family cows and pigs names. In the winter, the farm animals would be brought inside to share in the warmth of the farmer's fire. There would be a low wall separating the animals from the human area where the family ate, cooked and slept. One can only imagine the smell of having a cow and horse in the hut with you. But that was normal.

But during the late Middle Ages, a shift occurred in theology that changed everything. Christian theologians and early scientists became much more extreme in their ideas about animals. Drawing on rediscovered writings by Aristotle, theologians like Thomas Aquinas came to believe that what made humans special was our capacity for reason. This was provided by our souls. Animals lacked reason, so they didn't have souls.

This idea was taken even further by the French philosopher Rene Descartes. He famously declared, "I think, therefore I am." He argued that since animals could think rationally, they were soulless biological machines, running on instinct. Without souls or consciousness, animals could not feel pain or pleasure. People of the time said that if you hit an animal and it cried out, it was no different from hitting a key on a church organ to produce a sound. Animals were no more conscious than an organ, a house or a hammer.

This shift in theology was a doubling down on the implications of the golden calf story. If animals have no soul or consciousness, then Christians decided their only reason for existence must be to serve human beings. This became a key part of Protestant theology and our right to take over the natural world.

This attitude affected how people lived with animals. The family cow and donkey slowly moved out of the house, to live in stables. In our time, we have come to treat animals just as resources, so they can be born and raised in cramped factory farms to provide our food. If we believed animals had souls or consciousness, we would not treat them this way.

The idea that animals do not have souls also shaped politics, too. When Christian missionaries came to Canada in the 1600s, they met Indigenous people who had never heard of Aquinas or Descartes. The Jesuit missionaries were appalled by what the First Nations people thought of animals:

The Savages persuade themselves that not only men and other animals, but also all other things, are endowed with souls, and that all the souls are immortal. ( Father Paul Lejeune, 1634)

Moreover, dogs, deer, fish, and other animals have, in their opinion, immortal and reasonable souls. In proof of this, the old men relate certain fables, which they represent as true; they make no mention either of punishment or reward, in the place to which souls go after death. ( Jean de Brebeuf, 1635)

Indigenous people appealed to the spirits of the animals to have successful hunts. To the Jesuits, this sounded like worship - the golden calf problem all over again. The Jesuits wrote home that the First Nations people were in desperate need of Christianity and civilization. Their souls needed to be saved, while the souls of animals needed to be set aside as pagan folly.

That attitude became legislation in the 19th century. In the 1880s, Canada's Indian Act outlawed Indigenous religious ceremonies to snuff out their spiritual ideas and practices. Residential schools were created to, as they said, "take the Indian out of the child." Indigenous beliefs about the spirituality of all animals and all aspects of creation were to be replaced by Christianity, where only humans had souls.

We live in a world defined by this approach to animals. 24% of all the land on Earth is uninhabitable, covered by ice or deserts. The rest is good for living on. In our time, 45% of all that good land is devoted to agriculture. Of that, the majority - 80%- is devoted to raising cows. Their crops and pasture land.

If we could gather all the land devoted to cows in one place, it would be as large as North America and South America combined. Crops grown for human consumption is one fourth that size, about the size of China.

Our planet is basically defined by our belief that cows are soulless, unconscious animals which should be eaten. One third of the habitable land on this planet is devoted to making cows ready to eat. That's how much our view of animals has changed the entire planet. And this is a major problem in an era of global warming. We need forests to suck carbon out of the air. If those fields devoted to cows could grow back into forest, we could dramatically reduce the risk of climate change. But that would mean giving up eating beef, animals we assume have no souls, and only serve us.

But could we change our minds about the souls of animals, which is rooted in our faith and scripture? Well, we can do what Moses did. We can argue with God. When God saw the Israelites worshipping a golden calf, God declared that they should all be slaughtered. But Moses interjected and begged God not to do it. Moses isn't the only person to argue with God in the Bible - Abraham does it, so does Jacob and Job. Indeed, it seems that God often tests us by saying that God will commit a terrible act, to see if we will go along with it. We are expected to wrestle with our faith, to discern higher orders of behaviour and understanding.

That wrestling with God could take many forms. It could begin by looking at other parts of the Bible where animals are shown respect, and treated like they have minds and souls. In the story of the flood that covered the Earth, God promises to never do that again. But God makes the promise not just to Noah and his family, but also to the animals.

9 "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you 10 and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. 11 I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

Why would God do that if animals had no consciousness?

Our ideas about the value of animals will not be changed by a few Bible verses. In our time, if we want to reconsider the identity of animals, we need to rely on our gut instincts, on our lived experience, and also what science has been discovering about the intelligence and emotional life of animals. Christians stripped the souls away from animals, but it doesn't have to stay that way. We may need to admit that we were wrong about animals. They shouldn't be worshipped, but they can be respected and praised for deserving life, and for how they make this world a richer place.

Indigenous people may have been far closer to the truth. God made us all. If humans were to see animals as neighbours with things to teach us, perhaps the epidemic of extinctions could stop.

If we saw animals as neighbours, perhaps we would no longer feel so alone as the only conscious, intelligent species on Earth. Perhaps we could see God's spirit in every creature. That would indeed be a blessing - to them, and to us. Amen.