Guest Editor’s Introduction
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Religion and Other Animals: Ancient Themes, Contemporary Challenges

Religion is, by any definition, both for and about animals since, scientifically speaking, humans are animals. It is unlikely, however, that many readers of this special theme issue of *Society and Animals* will take the word “animals” in the phrase “religion and animals” as a reference to humans. Today, almost all readers take “animals” to mean something like “nonhuman animals,” and thus the phrase, “religion and animals” ends up meaning religion and its relation to nonhuman animals.

The study of religion and animals in this narrow sense engages both (a) religious believers’ and institutions’ multifaceted relationships with and effects upon all the other living beings on this planet, and (b) the impact those nonhuman beings have upon various aspects of humans’ religious experience and imagination. These are complicated topics for both obvious and peculiar reasons. Bias for or against religious ways of being in the world all too often has dominated the study of “Religion,” a complicated, internally diverse subject area. Many people, in light
of their own belief in some form of religion, remain overwhelmingly inclined to read religion as a benign phenomenon, denying even the obvious short-comings of certain religious claims and practices. Conversely, though often in identical ways, others so virulently oppose religion that they cannot - because of their own fundamentalism - see that from an ethical standpoint some religious traditions have had, and will continue to have, remarkably important features.

Minding and Mining the Difficulties

Even when pre-existing prejudices do not overwhelm discussion or study of religion, subject matter is inherently difficult. Great debate continues in the American Academy of Religion, the world’s largest gathering of scholars who study religious traditions regarding core issues - the value of attempts to define religion, the nature of religious phenomena, and what approaches best honor the depths, experiences, and the collective and individual insanities that can be found in today’s religions. Scholars today understand religion as an internally diverse collection of interests, concerns, and approaches. Reflecting the complexities of the subject, nontheistic religious traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism contradict the public’s often-facile tendency to equate religion with belief in God.

Ignorance and caricature - even if common among those who study religions - have been far more prominent in the study of nonhuman animals. We could say about those who study nonhuman animals what Montaigne once said about philosophers: “There is nothing so foolish but that some philosopher has not already said it.” Similarly, about nonhuman animals there may be nothing so foolish that someone won’t assert it.

Consider claims that dismiss and support nonhuman animals. On the dismissive side, Descartes’ uninformed and arrogant views regarding nonhuman animals still are often cited as if they had some authority. Equivalent absolute dismissals of all nonhuman animals, often clothed in the vocabulary of modern philosophy, continue to be advanced by those who fail to hear the common sense of respected Oxford historian Thomas (1984): “That there are some footsteps of reason, some strictures and emissions of ratiocination in the actions of some brutes, is too vulgarly known and too commonly granted to be doubted” (p. 124).