

## Animals in Mythology, Theology and Culture

Rawal Deepak  
Department of Zoology  
Mohanlal Sukhadia University Udaipur  
Email: DEEPAKRAWAL5@GMAIL.COM

**Abstract:** Animals have played a significant role in cultural customs, religious beliefs, mythological stories, and theological frameworks throughout human history in a variety of civilisations. Through an analysis of their sacred roles, symbolic meanings, and theological implications, this thorough review explores the many facets of animals' roles in human spiritual and cultural consciousness from antiquity to the present. The analysis, which covers the main world religions, mythological traditions, and cultural customs, shows how animals act as conduits between the material and spiritual worlds by representing cosmological principles, divine qualities, and moral lessons.

**Keywords:** Theology, Mythology, Religion, Zodiac, Hinduism, Aztec

### Introduction

Human and animal relationships are deeply ingrained in human consciousness and spiritual understanding, reaching well beyond the biological sphere. From the Lascaux cave paintings to contemporary religious rituals, animals have been used as potent symbols, holy creatures, and theological themes that shed light on how humans perceive the divine, the natural world, and our role in it (1). This review examines how various civilisations have conceived of animal-human-divine relationships by synthesising recent research on the role of animals in culture, religion, mythology, and theology. A number of essential facets of human experience and thought are reflected in the importance of animals in human spiritual life. Animals are ideal vehicles for conveying difficult theological and philosophical ideas because they frequently exhibit traits that humans find admirable, frightening, or difficult to comprehend (2). Furthermore, early human societies' close ties to animals for hunting, domestication, and everyday survival forged deep spiritual bonds that are still felt in modern religious and cultural customs. Perhaps the most complex system of animal worship and symbolism in human history can be found in the ancient Egyptian civilisation. Animals were viewed as living expressions of divine powers in the intricate theological framework that the Egyptians developed (3). Anubis was linked to the jackal, Bastet to the cat, Thoth to the ibis, and Horus to the falcon, among other major deities. The Egyptian belief that animals had innate sacred qualities that directly connected them to the divine realm was reflected in this zoomorphic depiction of divinity. The theological significance of animals as intermediaries between the earthly and divine realms is demonstrated by the Egyptian practice of animal mummification (4). Millions of mummified animals, such as bulls, crocodiles, ibises, and cats, have been found through archaeological evidence, indicating that these animals were thought to carry out their sacred roles in the afterlife. This belief system is best illustrated by the Apis bull cult in Memphis, where a live bull was revered as the earthly embodiment of the god Ptah.

### Results and Discussion

Western culture is still influenced by the timeless archetypal relationships that Greek mythology established between animals and divine qualities. In Greek theological thought, Zeus's changes into a bull, swan, and eagle, among other animals, illustrate the hazy lines separating divine and animal nature (5). The dove stood for Aphrodite's realm of beauty and love, while the Athena owl symbolised wisdom. These animal associations were passed down and modified in Roman religion, which also created novel customs like augury, in which the behaviour of birds was seen as a form of divine communication (6). As the she-wolf rearing Romulus and Remus created fundamental mythological narratives linking animal care with national destiny, the Roman eagle emerged as a potent symbol of imperial authority and divine favour. The World Tree Yggdrasil and its companion animals are at the heart of the rich tapestry of animal symbolism found in Norse mythology. Odin's eight-legged horse Sleipnir symbolised shamanic travel between worlds, while his ravens, Huginn and Muninn, stood for memory and thought (7). The complex moral universe of Norse theology was reflected in the wolves Fenrir, Geri, and Freki, who represented both the protective and destructive aspects of divine power. Norse culture viewed animals as essential to human spiritual identity, as evidenced by the idea of fylgja, or animal spirits that lived with people throughout their lives (8). These ideas still have resonance in modern neo-pagan movements and impacted later European folklore. One of the most thorough theological frameworks for considering animals to be sacred beings is found in Hinduism. The idea that all living things have souls (atman) and take part in the cycle of reincarnation is reflected in the concept of ahimsa, or non-violence, towards animals (9). The cow (a symbol of wealth and motherhood), the elephant (a manifestation of Ganesha), the monkey (Hanuman), and the snake (a symbol of Shiva) are all considered sacred animals in Hinduism. Vishnu's manifestations as a fish (Matsya), turtle (Kurma), and boar (Varaha) are among the many divine incarnations (avatars) in animal form that are described in the Bhagavata Purana and other sacred texts (10). According to these theological accounts, animals are able to represent divine consciousness and act as conduits for the salvation of the cosmos. Buddhist theology places animals in the same moral universe as humans, emphasising the interconnectedness of all sentient beings. According to the idea of Buddha-nature, all living things, including animals, have the capacity to become enlightened (11). The Jataka stories illustrate how animal life can be a

means of achieving spiritual growth by describing the Buddha's past incarnations as different animals. Numerous Buddhist cultures have created complex customs for safeguarding and caring for animals as manifestations of spiritual virtue, and the Buddhist concept of loving-kindness (metta) is explicitly applicable to animals (12). The Dalai Lama regularly highlights the value of animal compassion as a cornerstone of Buddhist practice in his teachings. In the past, Christian theology has upheld a nuanced view of animals, striking a balance between acknowledging their divine creation and purpose and anthropocentric interpretations. The Genesis creation story affirms that all creatures are "good" in God's eyes while also establishing humans as stewards of animals (13). Early Christian authors such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas created theological frameworks that upheld human spiritual superiority while acknowledging the natural functions of animals. Scholars like Andrew Linzey have argued for the theological significance of animals as God's creatures deserving of moral consideration, and contemporary Christian theology has increasingly embraced ecological and animal-friendly interpretations (14). Stronger ties to ecological theology and animal blessing customs have persisted in the Orthodox tradition.

Islamic theology provides a thorough framework for animal welfare that is founded on the ideas of stewardship (khalifa) and tawhid (divine unity). Many references to treating animals humanely can be found in the Quran and Hadith literature, with Prophet Muhammad's teachings placing a strong emphasis on justice and compassion for all living things (15). The spiritual significance of animals in Islamic mysticism is illustrated by the story of the Prophet's Night Journey (Isra and Mi'raj) on the horse-like creature Buraq. Sharia, or Islamic law, established comprehensive rules governing the treatment of animals, such as requirements for humane slaughter procedures and bans on animal abuse (16). The idea that animals are "communities like yourselves" (Quran 6:38) implies that animal societies and their inherent worth are acknowledged theologically. Through ideas like tza'ar ba'alei chayim (prevention of animal suffering) and the acknowledgement of animals as God's creatures deserving of respect and protection, Jewish theology has created complex frameworks for comprehending human-animal relationships (17). The commandment to assist animals in need and the ban on muzzling oxen while threshing are just two examples of the many verses in the Hebrew Bible that address humane treatment of animals. Through in-depth examinations of animal welfare in settings ranging from agriculture to ritual practice, Rabbinic literature extended these ideas. Compassion for animals was established as a sign of spiritual development by the Talmudic principle that "the righteous person knows the soul of their beast" (Proverbs 12:10) (18). Diverse yet related conceptions of animals as spiritual beings, teachers, and relatives have been developed by Native American traditions throughout North America. Beliefs regarding the spiritual strength and knowledge that animals possess and can impart to humans are reflected in the idea of animal spirits, also known as totems (19). Animal spirits that offer strength and direction are frequently encountered during vision quests and other spiritual activities. In Plains Indian traditions, the wolf, bear, eagle, and buffalo are especially important because they symbolise different facets of spiritual strength and tribal identity (20). A theological framework that acknowledges animal societies as valid spiritual and political entities is reflected in the idea that animals are "nations" that are comparable to human nations. Through the Dreamtime stories, Aboriginal Australian culture offers one of the oldest ongoing traditions of animal spirituality in the world. These tales explain how ancestral beings, many of whom assumed animal forms like the Rainbow Serpent, Kangaroo, and Emu, created the world (21). The idea of totemic relationships creates kinship ties that cut across species boundaries by associating people and clans with particular animals. Aboriginal communities recognised their obligation to preserve spiritual ties with animal species in order to ensure their continued abundance and spiritual presence, as evidenced by the practice of increase ceremonies (22). These ideas have impacted ecological theology and current environmental movements.

Rich traditions of animal symbolism and spiritual practice have been developed by African traditional religions throughout the continent. Numerous animal-related deities, such as Ogun (associated with hunting and iron) and Oya (associated with the buffalo), are part of the Yoruba orisha tradition (23). Beliefs that animals can act as a mediator between the spiritual and human worlds are reflected in the practice of animal sacrifice and divination. In many African traditions, the idea of animal ancestors implies that dead animals, especially those killed during rituals or hunting, still have an impact on the spiritual well-being of communities (24). These ideas have influenced the intricate moral systems that regulate interactions between people and animals. Questions concerning animal souls, consciousness, and spiritual status have become more and more prominent in contemporary theological scholarship. Charles Hartshorne and other process theologians have maintained that animals have inherent worth and experiences that call for theological acceptance (25). Concern for the oppressed has been expanded by liberation theologians to include animals as objects of divine concern. Across religious traditions, the issue of animal souls has sparked intense discussion. While some academics maintain clear distinctions between human and animal spiritual nature, others argue for continuity (26). These discussions affect everything from vegetarianism and environmental ethics to animal sacrifice. In modern religious thought, theological debates regarding the ultimate fate of animals have become more prevalent. Citing biblical passages about the peaceable kingdom and the renewal of creation, some Christian theologians have suggested that animals are involved in divine salvation (27). Animals can attain emancipation through reincarnation and spiritual growth, according to long-standing Buddhist and Hindu beliefs. Theological concerns regarding the extent of salvation, the nature of divine justice, and the ultimate goal of creation are all related to these eschatological questions (28). The ramifications reach into current animal rights and environmental ethics movements. In today's religious discourse, animal sacrifice is still a controversial topic. Animal sacrifice has become less common in many traditions, but it is still a necessary religious practice in others (29). Themes of substitution, divine command, and sacred reciprocity are frequently highlighted in theological defences of animal sacrifice. Animal sacrifice critics contend that a theological reexamination of these customs is necessary in light of our current understanding of animal consciousness and suffering (30). This discussion raises more general issues

regarding how traditional religious practice and developing ethical knowledge relate to one another. From Aesop's fables to modern fiction, animals have functioned as potent literary symbols throughout history. Animals' profound cultural significance is reflected in their use as metaphors for human traits, ethical teachings, and spiritual truths (31). Animals are portrayed in epic literature such as the *Odyssey* and the *Ramayana* as both aids and hindrances on spiritual quests.

Animal consciousness and spirituality are still being explored in modern literature, with writers such as Richard Adams and Ursula K. Le Guin crafting intricate tales that subvert anthropocentric notions of animal experience (32). These pieces add to larger cultural discussions about environmental ethics and animal rights. Animals have long been portrayed as spiritually significant subjects in religious art from many cultures. Visual depictions of animals have been used to communicate intricate theological ideas since the time of the ancient Egyptian animal-headed gods and the Christian lamb and dove symbols (33). Christian art from the Byzantine and mediaeval periods created complex symbolic systems that linked animals to spiritual states, vices, and virtues. Animal themes are still explored in contemporary religious art, which frequently incorporates ecological issues and animal rights viewpoints into conventional spiritual contexts (34). These creative manifestations support the growing theological comprehension of the interactions between humans and animals. Animal movements, sounds, and symbolic meanings have all been incorporated into spiritual practices through musical traditions across cultures. Hindu devotional music contains compositions devoted to animal deities such as Ganesha and Hanuman, while Native American powwow music features songs that honour particular animals and their spiritual attributes (35). As theological concern for creation care grows, contemporary religious music has increasingly tackled themes of environmental stewardship and animal compassion (36). Diverse audiences can better understand difficult theological concepts regarding human-animal relationships thanks to these musical expressions. The current environmental crisis has heightened theological contemplation regarding the interactions between humans and animals. Religious communities have been forced to reevaluate their theological frameworks regarding animals and environmental stewardship in light of climate change, habitat destruction, and species extinction (37). New theological resources are being developed by numerous religious traditions to address these issues. Scholars such as Sallie McFague and Thomas Berry have proposed new models for comprehending human-animal-divine relationships in the context of environmental crisis, leading to the emergence of the concept of "eco-theology" as a significant area of theological development (38). These methods frequently incorporate modern ecological science and indigenous wisdom traditions. There has been substantial theological advancement in this field as a result of the contemporary animal rights movement's challenges to conventional religious perspectives on animal care. Religious intellectuals have been persuaded to reevaluate the moral standing of animals by philosophers such as Tom Regan and Peter Singer (39). While preserving their traditional spiritual practices, many religious communities have created new ethical frameworks that take animal rights issues into account. There is ongoing discussion about the conflict between religious freedom and animal welfare issues, especially in relation to topics like religious animal sacrifice and dietary customs (40). These conversations touch on more general issues regarding how religious tradition and developing ethical knowledge relate to one another. Technological developments have produced new frameworks for comprehending animal spirituality and consciousness. Numerous traditional religious beliefs regarding animal consciousness have received scientific validation thanks to research on animal cognition, emotion, and communication (41). Artificial intelligence and virtual reality bring up fresh issues regarding the nature of spiritual experience and consciousness that may affect both people and animals. The creation and modification of animal life raises previously unheard-of theological issues in light of genetic engineering and synthetic biology (42). Religious groups are starting to approach these problems by using conventional theological ideas about stewardship and creation as a framework.

## Conclusion

One of the most important and enduring facets of religious and cultural development is the connection between animals and human spiritual life. Animals have been used as companions, teachers, symbols, and spiritual beings throughout history, shedding light on important issues regarding the nature of existence, consciousness, and divine purpose. Current issues like the environmental crisis, animal rights issues, and technological advancement necessitate ongoing cultural adaptation and theological contemplation. According to the data analysed in this article, animals hold a significant place in human spiritual consciousness that cuts across religious and cultural divides. The universality of animal symbolism and spiritual significance suggests something fundamental about the human condition and our relationship to the natural world, even though specific beliefs and practices differ greatly amongst traditions. While keeping in mind the various ways that various cultures view human-animal relationships, future research in this field should keep examining the nexus between conventional wisdom and modern scientific understanding. Addressing the issues of the twenty-first century will require the creation of inclusive theological frameworks that respect both religious tradition and modern ethical insights. The interdependence of all life and the responsibility that accompanies human consciousness and spiritual awareness are ultimately revealed through the study of animals in culture, religion, mythology, and theology. The knowledge ingrained in these traditions provides invaluable tools for creating more sustainable and compassionate relationships with other living things as we confront previously unheard-of threats to the environment and animal life.

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