

# The word of dog

An imaginative exploration of how religion can be experienced without language

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Donovan O. Schaefer

RELIGIOUS AFFECTS

Animality, evolution, and power

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Spectacular waterfalls in a forest, storms, or blazing wildfires can cause a chimpanzee, usually a male, to stand upright, performing what Jane Goodall has called a “magnificent display” for up to fifteen minutes, swaying, stamping rhythmically, hurling rocks. Perhaps, she speculates, these displays are precursors of religious ritual, stimulated by feelings akin to awe. Donovan O. Schaefer goes further in *Religious Affects: Animality, evolution, and power*, arguing that post-Darwinian science has dethroned almost every other presumed indicator of human uniqueness, but animals are wrongly excluded from contemporary religious studies. The dark obverse of the chimpanzees’ celebratory “waterfall dance” is the frenzied aggressiveness they can show towards out-groups, though Goodall, like Frans de Waal, has also postulated a prelinguistic form of morality as underpinning normal chimpanzee behaviour. Schaefer, being a materialist by conviction, cannot follow Goodall in her allusion to “primate spirituality”, preferring the term “animal religion”, conceived as including human religion. This does not have quite the same shock value in academia, where the definition of religion is strongly contested and recognized as having a political bearing, as it could have for unreflecting devotees of a particular faith. For

a more precise explanation of the chimpanzees’ dance than the waterfall’s awesomeness, Schaefer cites the cognitive anthropologist Stewart Guthrie, who suggests that, in keeping with a broad animal tendency to experience the world as alive, the chimpanzees see the waterfall as a living, potentially hostile agent, and their display is a reaction of over-cautiousness.

Another instance analysed by Schaefer is an experimental art project carried out by a French sculptor, Hubert Duprat, with caddisfly (Trichoptera) aquatic larvae. These juveniles extrude silk to glue together protective tubes from materials such as sand, plant matter and other debris, till after a few weeks a fully developed caddisfly emerges and takes wing. Duprat collects them from rivers, gently removes their existing cocoons, and replaces them in artificial environments containing precious stones and metals: “the larvae harvest this new palette to construct glittering, polymorphous carapaces”. Schaefer contends that this process is best understood as a sort of pedagogy, in that the larva is taught by its environment to choose from “the repertoire of a self-formation”. To the objection that Duprat imposes an essentially human meaning on the resulting artefacts – which he exhibits on pedestals – Schaefer replies that, on the contrary, we here encounter “conjoined syzygies of meaning, two affective-aesthetic-technological worlds knitting together”.

In this imaginative addition to the ever-expanding research literature on religion, the following are some of the chief explanatory approaches prayed in aid by Schaefer, who is a lecturer in science and religion at the University of Oxford, with a North American background. Most important is affect theory, which comes in two different, but according to

him compatible, currents. Affects are the propulsive elements of experience, thought and action that are not necessarily capturable by language or by seemingly autonomous consciousness. The first current, indebted to Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze, interprets bodies as matrices of crisscrossing lines of force below the threshold of perceptibility. If we are deceived by what Schaefer calls the “linguistic fallacy”, we assume that, for instance, the present-day alliance between right-wing evangelical Christianity and corporate capitalism is based on a shared set of propositions. He prefers to see it as a “resonance machine”, a loose association of precognitive compulsions which are irreducibly bodily and autonomic. The second current, deriving from phenomenology, sees affects as woven into the textures of experience, “hovering around, rather than beneath, the line of ‘conscious’ awareness”. This gives students of religion resources for analysing a finite number of emotions, such as shame, happiness, fear and anger, which Schaefer calls “intransigent structures”. Schaefer pursues his line of thought, psychoanalytic in origin, to warn that exclusivist ideologies, ostensibly founded in rationality, are suffused with eroticized anger. War is frequently an addiction, alleviating the boredom and trivia of life at peace. But the responsiveness of bodies to other bodies can also elicit compassion across unfriendly borders.

Another key reference for Schaefer is the anti-mechanistic concept of the *Umwelt* or lifeworld, a mode of interpreting signs specific to each species, formulated by the influential biologist and semiotician Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944). “As the spider spins its threads”, wrote von Uexküll, “every subject spins his relations to certain characters of the things around him, and weaves them into a firm web which carries his existence.” A tick parasite has its own lifeworld: so do astronomers, though theirs is more complex. By accepting our animality, according to Schaefer, we can avoid what Jacques Derrida called “carno-phallogocentrism”, the arrogance

of the language-using, animal-eating, male subject who masters the world.

Schaefer’s use of queer theory may cause some puzzlement. The challenge to “heteronormativity” has had evident practical success in demonstrating the fluidity of gender and in alleviating the stigmas attached to same-sex desire and intersexuality. But as developed by Schaefer and some other authors whom he cites, queer theory expands beyond the domain of sex and gender narrowly defined, to include any disruption of the normal, legitimate and dominant. If we mentally replace the word “queer”, occurring in many of Schaefer’s sentences, with a word such as “disorienting” or “subversive”, there is some gain in intelligibility but a loss in frisson.

Finally, an essential component of Schaefer’s argument is his opposition to both functionalist (including Marxist) and adaptationist interpretations of religion. Higgledy-piggledy accident, and change at variable speeds, are at the heart of Darwinism. The survival values pertaining to an organism’s environment that are inherent in natural selection are at cross purposes with the sexual selection exhibited by, for instance, male birds displaying their gorgeous plumage. Sexual selection favours the frivolous, the unnecessary, the pleasing – hence much of what we call human culture. “Animalism calls on us to consider religion as an affective economy in its complexity, as a hybrid system driven by erotic accident in conjunction with rationalized lines of force.”

**S**chaefer is so scrupulous in acknowledging other scholars that it might seem ungracious to play down his originality, and he is blazing a trail in religious studies. But in anthropology an influential trend has been questioning the “linguistic fallacy” since the early 1970s, as in the essay “Do Dogs Laugh? A cross-cultural approach to body symbolism” (1971) by Mary Douglas, whom he does not cite: “Speech has been over-emphasized as the privileged means of human communication, and the body

neglected. It is time to rectify this neglect and to become aware of the body as the physical channel of meaning". In *The Ceremonial Animal: A new portrait of anthropology* (2003), a lucid overview of the discipline, Wendy James emphasizes "the pre-linguistic social and cultural capacities of human beings, and the deep roots of shared 'symbolic' consciousness", and she gives as much attention to gesture, dance, music and visual art as she does to language – while also accepting that language "changes all the rules". As for affect theory, it has not been widely co-opted by anthropologists, partly because its terminology is so unclear. The editors of a special issue of the journal *Anthropology of Consciousness* (Fall 2015) explore in their introduction the potential of affect theory for "evocative ethnography", while observing that numerous anthropologists have already incorporated emotion and the subjective dimension in their theories. Ian Skoggard and Alisse Waterston express their worry that "as scholars seek to construct, define, and theorize a new field, they will lose themselves and the rest of us in impossible, arcane language". Schaefer runs this risk. In his *Umwelt*, neologisms are like a food source. Reading them can feel like chewing on gristle. But his case studies give some sustaining nourishment.

His commentary on Park51, the abortive project to build an Islamic community centre near the site of Ground Zero in New York, does boil down to a bland conclusion that religiosity can be both aggressive and eirenic. (He justly criticizes the Islamophobic opposition to the project, but omits to mention that some prominent Muslims also opposed it, on the grounds that it would cause unnecessary offence to the bereaved.) And he has nothing to say on the question of animal rights – which presumably ought to be at least considered, if religion is ascribed to non-human animals – beyond a brief condemnation of factory farming.

Schaefer is at his best when he explains how,

because all human beings need "affective oxygen" to maintain their lifeworlds, the mind-destroying ordeal of solitary confinement can be experienced by prisoners as the most extreme punishment short of death. If this "torture by subtraction" horrifies us less than physical torture does, this is because neither imagery nor language does it justice, and we have an ingrained understanding of bodies as subjects independent enough to withstand solitude.

One chapter of *Religious Affects* is largely devoted to *Jesus Camp*, a well-known documentary film, shot during the George W. Bush presidency, about a Charismatic Christian summer camp in North Dakota called Kids on Fire. Schaefer analyses the film and draws on discussions he had with his students when it was screened in a class he taught at Haverford College, Pennsylvania, in 2013. Reception of the film when it was released in 2006 was bifurcated, reflecting deep cultural divisions in the United States. Many conservative Christians responded favourably to the emotional intensity elicited from the children by the camp director: she used the film herself as a proselytizing vehicle. Those on the political Left and centre, however, were alarmed by what they denounced as brainwashing. Schaefer's commentary is acute, though underestimating the extent to which the non-verbal power of film as a medium has been recognized since its earliest days and extensively studied. At some points his theoretical excursions provide a convincing "value added". As a foil to the authoritarian camp director, the film shows us a liberal Christian radio talk-show host, highly critical of Kids on Fire, who wants to draw a sharp line between the religious and the political, private and public, adducing the "establishment of religion" clause in the First Amendment to the US Constitution. The camp director denies that her project has a political intent, but she says that she has no problem in telling the children in her care that she is opposed to abortion. For Schaefer, imagining bodies as fluid systems of force is incompatible with classical secularism: "public and private are a Möbius strip of intertwined power relations". Brainwashing, through the media and the educational

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system, is everywhere.

Will Donovan O. Schaefer's attraction towards succulent words, such as "bloom space" and "auto-affection", adapt to the demands of a wider readership than those he addresses at present? It is a rational inference from his theory of the "linguistic fallacy" and the insidious potency of the non-verbal that more, rather than less, attention needs to be given to a rigorous, even forensic, use of language.