



**International Symposium
Paris, November 16th–17th, 2022**

**Animals as Worshippers of God First of All
On Animal Piety in Islam**



The Squall of the Deer and the Language of Birds¹

¹ Martina Rugiadi, “Un-broken Iconography. The Bird and Quadruped Ceramic Fragment from the Masjid al-jum’a of Isfahan”, *Maḥabbatnāma*, Rome, Istituto per l’Oriente, 2020.

﴿أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَالطَّيْرِ صَافَّاتٍ
كُلُّ قَدْ عَلِمَ صَلَاتَهُ وَتَسْبِيحَهُ﴾ (24:41)

“If God did not exist, to whom could we address our praises?”

Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*

“Everything is a sign for whoever became a sign, and everything speaks, even dimly, for whoever holds the speech.”

Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Saint Augustin and the Acts of Speech*

“All the humanity before us lived illuminated by the idea that the universe we inhabit is nothing but pure obedience.”

Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*

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Following the path of animal studies,² research on animals in Islam has expanded outside of its traditional areas, i.e. history of zoology³ and fables literature,⁴ which has resulted in works falling under the jurisdiction of philosophy,⁵ Qur'anic studies,⁶ law (*fiqh*),⁷ and mysticism⁸.

Therefore, it is time to open up these different disciplines to study animals in all their aspects and historical specificity, in order to answer the question of what an animal in classical Islam is. In comparison, disciplinary studies are at the risk of losing this historical specificity by analysing it in the frame of anachronistic methodology. For instance, zoology may project its own interest in taxonomy on an Islamic bestiary that is more a list of nations of creatures than a list of species of living beings. In the same way, animal ethics may substitute their own concern for animal pain and hedonistic background to elements that fall under the domain of soteriology and theodicy. Indeed, did not theologians approach animal pain only to find out whether animals will be rewarded in the hereafter and whether they are entitled to compensation for unjustified sufferings? Thus, it is needful to grasp the animal in classical Islam in its historical specificity. Some monographs dealing with certain specific animals already syncretise these manifold approaches.⁹

Classical Islamic texts, including zoological ones,¹⁰ testify to the importance of the religious nature of animality. Hence, we may rightly claim that a key part of what the inquiry on animals is about is the religious nature of animality. To make this general statement clearer, we may say that, by religious nature, we do not mean the theoretical and practical needs for locating the animal in the legal framework of the pure and the impure, i.e. as an object of ritualised administration of Muslim environments.¹¹ Rather, we are identifying the religiousness that the animal develops, in the sense that the animal is endowed with some form

² Paul Waldau, *Animal Studies: An Introduction*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2013.

³ Remke Kruk, "Ibn Abī l-Ash'ath's *Kitāb al-Hayawān*. A Scientific Approach to Anthropology, Dietetics and Zoological Systematics", *ZGAIW*, 14 (2001), p. 119–168; Herbert Eisenstein, "Arabische Systematiken des Tierreichs", *ZDMG*, supplément 8 (1988), p. 184–190; Ahmed Aarab and Philippe Lherminier, *Le livre des animaux d'al-Jāhiz*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2015 ; Meyssa Ben Saad et Saïda Aroua, "Examen de quelques textes de zoologie arabe sur la dynamique du monde vivant : Al-Ġāhiz (IX^e), Iḥwān al-ṣafā (X^e) et Ibn Haldūn (XIV^e). Première approche historique et didactique", *Arabic Biology and Medicine*, vol. 4–1 (2013), p. 70–102; Meyssa Ben Saad et Mehrnaz Katouzian-Safadi, "Quelques interprétations de la diversité du monde vivant chez le savant arabe al-Djāhiz (776-868)", *Bibnum*, 1 mars 2012, "Les Insectes dans la classification des animaux chez le savant al-Jāhiz (776-868) : entre mythe et raison", Toulouse, Museum d'histoire naturelle de Toulouse, 2010; "Réflexions sur un critère de classification des animaux chez le savant al-Djāhiz (776-868) : le mode de reproduction chez les reptiles et les oiseaux", *al-Mukhatabat*, vol. 7 (2013), p. 69–86.

⁴ Goodman (Lenn Evan), *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn: A Tenth-century Ecological Fable of the Pure Brethren of Basra*, Woodbridge, 1978; *Iḥwān al-ṣafā, Le procès animal de la domination humaine*, presentation by G. de Vaulx d'Arcy, Paris, Belles Lettres, 2021.

⁵ Peter Adamson, "Ābū Bakr al-Rāzī on Animals", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 2012, vol. 94, p. 249–73 ; Peter Adamson, "Human and Animal Nature in the Philosophy of the Islamic World", dans P. Adamson et G. Fay Edwards, *Animals: A History*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 91–113.

⁶ Sarra Tlili, *Animals in the Qur'an*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012; Nicolas Payen, "The Representation of Animals in the Qur'an and the *Mufaddaliyyāt*", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, vol. 23–2 (2021), p. 112–158.

⁷ Michael Cook, « Ibn Qutayba and the Monkeys », *Studia Islamica*, 1999, vol. 89, p. 43–74.

⁸ Pierre Lory, *La dignité de l'homme face aux anges, aux animaux et aux djinns*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2018.

⁹ For instance, André Miquel, *Les Arabes et l'ours*, Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1994; Christiane Tortel, *Sacralisé, diabolisé. Le paon dans les religions, de l'Asie à la Méditerranée*, Paris, Geuthner, 2019. We can also evoke Remke Kruk, "The Saddest Beast? Notes on the Pig in Arabic Culture", *Quaderni di Studi Arabi, Nuova Serie*, 14 (2019), p. 243–261.

¹⁰ Guillaume de Vaulx d'Arcy, "The *Tashīr* Problem: Did Islamic Theology Influence Arabic Zoology?", *Mélanges de l'Université St Joseph* (forthcoming).

¹¹ See on this point the work of Hocine Benkeira, and specifically *Islam et interdits alimentaires. Juguler l'animalité*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2000.

of religiousness.¹² The most prominent and distinctive phenomenon is what we may term “animal piety.” Such piety is anchored in many Qur’anic verses and takes two fundamental forms:

- On the one hand, it consists in a description of how animals worship God, which implies a detailed hermeneutic of animal behaviour and sounds in terms of prayers and praises to God. This worship is attested by Qur’anic verses celebrating creatures’ praises to God (17:44, 21:79, 24:41).
- On the other hand, it consists in animal submission to the human being (16:5–7, 45:13).

Thus, animal religiousness may be situated at the intersection of *tasbīḥ* and *tashīr*, and animals may be first characterized as worshippers of God. Their religiousness is not a primitive form of worship but a fully-fledged one, such that pious animals become models of piety. On an academic level, while scholars have already flagged *tashīr* as an important theological concept,¹³ specifically animal *tasbīḥ* still does not constitute an object of study, even though a significant amount of written work was dedicated to this phenomenon in classical Islam, the reference book on the topic being perhaps *Al-nuṭq al-mafhūm min ahl al-ṣamt al-ma’lūm*, which contains edifying stories about a multitude of animals (*nāṭiq*) and mute creatures (*ḡayr nāṭiq*).¹⁴

This sort of religious animal figure must be distinguished from other figures of animality also explored in classical Islam:

- The political animal figure, mainly developed in animal fables from the perspective of mirrors for princes and people.¹⁵ In such a view, human-nonhuman relations project political relations between social classes.
- The animal as a creature of God and an inhabitant of His creation, as described in books on wonders (*‘ajā’ib*), which aim at describing the Creator’s work.¹⁶

The religious figure is not alien to any of these two cases, as their comparison may reveal. On the one side, political obedience depends on religious submission and gets its justification from it. Indeed, the concepts of *tashīr* and *taḍlīl* both suggest such a religious inscription of the political bound. The books of wonders flush out traces of the Creator’s skills in His creation: the creatures therein inspire a sense of wonder in whoever contemplates them until the latter grows to admire their Creator. Contemplation of the world and its wonders associated with piety leads to the revival of human piety.

In what follows, we suggest different orientations to track animal piety in Islam.

¹² Richard J. A. McGregor, “Religions and the Religion of Animals. Ethics, Self, and Language in Tenth-Century Iraq”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 2015, vol. 35, no 2, p. 222–31.

¹³ Sarra Tlili, *Animals in the Qur’an*, p. 74–114 ; Ikhwān al-ṣafā, *Le procès animal de la domination humaine*, présentation p. 54–63.

¹⁴ A printed edition of this text exists, attributed to Aḥmad b. Ṭaḡbar Bak and probably printed at the end of the 19th century, but it contains no indication of its editing context. It can be found on [al-Mostafa](#) website. A manuscript exists also at the Bnf recorded under the number Arab. 3558, and attributed by Georges Vajda to ‘Alī al-Marāḡī al-Qabbānī who authored the copy. A philological study of the text is still needed.

¹⁵ Ibn al-Muqaffa’, *Kitāb Kalīla wa-Dimna*; Sahl b. Hārūn, *Kitāb al-nimr wa-l-ṭa’lab*; Rasā’il Iḥwān al-ṣafā, épître 22 – “Tadā’ī al-ḡayawān ‘alā l-insān imām malik al-ḡinn”; *Alf Layla wa-layla*. For an presentation of the distinction between mirrors for princes and mirrors for people, see *Iḥwān al-ṣafā, Le procès animal de la domination humaine*, presentation by G. de Vaulx d’Arcy, p. 49–54 et p. 70–6.

¹⁶ Zakariyyā al-Qazwīnī, *‘Aḡā’ib al-maḥlūqāt wa-ḡarā’ib al-mawḡūdāt*, édition F. Wüstenfeld, Dieterische Verlag Buchhandlung, Göttingen, 1848; Šaraf al-Zamān al-Marwazī s. d., *Ṭabā’i’ al-ḡayawān*. [University of California, Los Angeles, Arabic Medical Manuscript Collection, MS 52]; Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Waṭwāt, *Manāhiḡ al-fikar wa-mabāhiḡ al-‘ibar*, ed. by ‘Abd al-Razzāq Aḥmad al-‘Abd a, Beirut, Dār al-‘arabiyya li-l-mawsū’āt, 2000.

I. Islamic Studies

Theology

The first question to ask is what differentiates animal religiousness from that of non-speaking, immobile (miracles excepted) creatures (e.g. the type of religiousness that consists in the perfect submission of celestial bodies or the mountains' worship of God) on the one side, and from that of human beings, which is instituted by prophets.

To say it bluntly, what sort of worshippers of God, i.e. which kind of Muslims, are animals? Can we call an animal a monotheist (*muwahḥid*) and a Muslim, as al-Jāḥiẓ wondered, and as the *Epistles of the Brethren in Purity* concluded unhesitatingly?¹⁷ The question involves a contested soteriological implication, namely, if one accepts animal religiousness, should one concede that animals have access to the resurrection? Animal soteriology in Islam is not limited to the issue of suffering, but rather it is also about the Last Judgment. One may conclude from the Qur'an and the hadith that some animals access paradise (e.g. the dove), while others fall into hell (e.g. the peacock). This notwithstanding, is this destiny an individual one that concerns, for instance, Noah's dove alone among all doves, or is it related to the species as a whole?

An important corollary of the figure of the animal as a worshipper of God is that the human being is only one kind of worshipper among others. Then, to ask what kind of worshipper the animal is, leads to the following question: what kind of worshippers are humans? Here stands the distinction between religion (*dīn*) and religious law (*ṣarī'a*).

Case Studies

Animal piety is a recurrent topic in hadith literature. It is connected to a set of especially important species, either because they are found in the surroundings of human dwellings in Islamicate societies, or because they are mentioned in the Qur'an (e.g. the hoopoe and the ant). A crucial question concerning this corpus is whether narratives are always structured in the same way, applying practices performed during human rituals to animals (e.g. call for prayer, prostration, and psalmody), or whether one may identify specific animal figures that convey a religious interpretation of behaviours proper to certain animal species?¹⁸

The concept of "effective myth (*mythe en acte*)" developed by Roger Caillois concerning the 'praying' mantis can be a methodological starting point to analyse such figures in Islam.¹⁹

Sufism

Although a large number of stories on ascetic individuals mention animals, does Sufi literature develop the figure of the animal worshipper? Indeed, in these stories, the model of piety is the ascetic, while animals only play the roles of exclusive (and pious) witnesses. It may have changed with Ibn 'Arabī who, in the general economy of the creation, places animals among the kinds of creatures that possess governance (*tadbīr*), responsibility (*taklīf*), innate science of God, and language intended for God's praise. Animals' high ability in *tasbīḥ* as compared to human beings suggests the command of *tashīr* and reverses the human-animal

¹⁷ Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, ed. by 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn, vol. IV, p. 78–80 ; *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā*, Beirut edition, II 325.

¹⁸ See André Miquel, *Les Arabes et l'ours*, Heidelberg, C. Winter, 1994; Michael Cook, "Ibn Qutayba and the Monkeys", *Studia Islamica*, 1999, vol. 89, p. 43–74; Harald Motzki, "The Prophet and the Cat: On Dating Mālik's *Muwaṭṭa'* and Legal Traditions", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, vol. 22 (1998), p. 18–83.

¹⁹ Roger Caillois, *Le mythe et l'homme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, II.1 "La mante religieuse".

hierarchy. At any rate, Ibn ʿArabī initiated the most rigorous thematization of animal piety, whose tradition may be investigated.²⁰

II. Social Sciences

Ethnology

The vitality of this representation of animals as worshippers of God is striking among contemporary Muslim groups. To refer to a marginal and unexpected case that popped up in a French suburb, in the 2019-film *Les Misérables* directed by Ladj Ly, the only religious expression of the character Salah, the owner of a kebab restaurant and a pious Muslim figure, consists in alluding to the lion's piety.²¹ More generally, pious interpretations of animal behaviours abound in popular Islam. A compilation of testimonies and folk wisdoms remains to be done, as well as its analysis in comparison with the written tradition, in order to establish the relation between the two. Such a compilation is even more pressing as the advanced urbanization of Muslim societies threatens the sets of beliefs that depict animals as worshippers of God.

History

The quest for the origin of animal religiousness in Islam leads to a comparative study with its manifestations in other Oriental creeds, especially ancient religions, beginning with Judaism, since the Bible contains many occurrences of animal praises to God.²²

One may supplement this descriptive dimension with a genealogical enquiry: how did it happen that animals became examples of piety? Since this seems to be conditional on the prioritization of animals over humans, we are tempted to return to ancient paganism, characterized by its totemic worship of sacred animals, thence to ask the question of the transition to monotheism, which confesses God's unity and transcendence. In this regard, what used to be called 'Islamic aniconism' may be re-baptised as 'Islamic anidolism,' since its aims may have been to put an end to representations and worship of sacred animals. Animal piety may in the end result from the transformation of the worshipped figure into a figure that exhibits model religiousness toward the transcendent power. Hence, the object of praise would become a fully-fledged subject, and the worshipped one a high-profile worshipper. Analogical evidence for this conversion may be found in the integration of astral religiousness in Islam by assimilating previously divinised planets to angels, especially in 3rd/9th-century *falsafa*.²³

In another field of research, William Robertson Smith's anthropological enquiry into pre-Islamic totemism and Joseph Chelhod's criticisms of it in his statement concerning sacrifice as a communion act with the worshipped entity all deserve to be re-evaluated, and the debate needs to be taken further.²⁴

²⁰ Ibn Arabi, *Al-futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, Dār al-kutub al-ʿarabiyya al-kubrā, undated, chap. 198, vol. II 390-478 and chap. 378, vol. III, p. 489-491; Denis Gril, "Le saint et le maître ou la sainteté comme science de l'Homme, d'après le *Rūḥ al-quds* d'Ibn ʿArabī", p. 90-1.

²¹ He attributes to the beast of prey the following prayer: "Oh Allah, prevent me from attacking caring and virtuous prey".

²² For instance, Psalm 104:21, 27–32, 148:1–10, Daniel 3,51-90.

²³ See al-Kindī, "Fī tahrīr waqt^m yurḡā fihi iḡābat al-duʿā", ed. by ʿUṭmān Amīn, in *Nuṣūṣ falsafiyya muhdāh ilā al-duktūr Ibrāhīm Madkūr*, Cairo, al-Hayʾa al-miṣriyya li-l-kitāb, 1976, p. 65–68; *Rasāʾil Iḥwān al-ṣafā*, epistle 3. Al-Kindī cleverly reversed the historical succession between polytheist 'deviation' and monotheist original path in which stars were already worshippers of God and go-betweens of human prayers to God.

²⁴ William Robertson Smith, "Animal Worship and Animal Tribes among the Arabs and in the Old Testament", *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, chap. VII "Totemism", *Animal Worship and Animal Tribes among the*

Comparative studies

A comparative study with Christian texts may shed light on the conditions needed for the figure of the animal as a worshipper to exist.

It would first enlighten its historical conditions through the investigation of the transmission of Syriac material into the Islamic religious corpus. Indeed, the Syriac *Horarum* of *Adam's Testament*, a Christian work in which each liturgical hour corresponds with a specific set of creatures praising God, was integrated into hadith literature.²⁵

The second group of conditions are theological. Does the Christian symbolization of incarnation through the metaphor of the Lamb of God allow for a kind of worship oriented toward a symbolic animal (rather than a kind of worship performed by an animal)? Does this metaphor hinder the development of a vision of animals as worshippers of God, as found in Islam? One might also think of a comparison between Islamic and Latin books of wonders (*Curiositas*).²⁶

Theology of religions

Theology of religions is the branch of theology that addresses the status of the dogma within a definitely pluralistic world. It deals with the way different sects and religions consider other beliefs. The first specific problem addressed by the theology of religions concerns the access atheists and believers from other religions have to salvation. For such salvation to be possible, one must distinguish religious piety from membership in a particular church or sect. The practical issue at stake is the theological legitimacy or illegitimacy of the coexistence of beliefs.

The figure of the animal as a worshipper of God may open a new line of questioning in the theology of religions and expand its field beyond instituted sects and religions. Indeed, the figure of the animal manifests another and more radical type of religious alterity, which can be reduced neither to one's own creed and neither to any particular confession. Can one distinguish between religious piety and religious confession? This distinction is necessitated by the conventionality of religious rituals, whose social expression tends to conceal the cosmic dimension of religion. To hypothesize the existence of animal religiousness is to ask whether believers still worship the Creator of the universe or only the symbolic representation of their social group. Conceiving of the universality of worship among all types of creatures may condition the preservation of the religious actuality of denominations. Can one really praise God without assuming that even animals praise Him? What is at stake with this question is the universal dimension of worship, against the risk of formalism and identity-based rationales for faith.

Arabs and in the Old Testament; Joseph Chelhod, *Le sacrifice chez les Arabes*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1955, *Les structures du sacré chez les Arabes*, Paris, Maisonneuve Larose, 1964, chap. 6.

²⁵ Abū l-Šayḥ al-Aṣbahānī (d. 369/979), *al-ʿAzama*, 5 vols, ed. by Riḍāʾ Allāh b. Muḥammad Idrīs al-Mubārakfūrī. Riyadh, Dār al-ʿāšima, 1998, V, 1716-1717 (n°1175).

²⁶ See the results of the symposium entitled “Curiositas. Animals as Signs of the Creator”, which took place in Köln from September 17th to 20th, 2020.

III. Animality called into question

Epistemology

The methodological question here is concerned with the nature of the line of reasoning that ascribes religious subjectivity to animals. A starting point could be Frederik Buytendijk's general statements concerning analogical reasoning in the very beginning of *Man and Animal*. Buytendijk aimed at laying the foundations for a type of animal psychology that would move away from human psychology, which is based on the concept of consciousness, and zoological reductionism, which is based on the concept of animal-machine. Instead, analogical reasoning would become the projection of human consciousness onto animals. When applying such analogical reasoning between types of creatures onto Islamic material, one notices that this issue echoes the debate on *tašbīh*, i.e. the application of analogy to the knowledge of God.

Another (abovementioned) element is the notion of nations or communities (*umam*, see Qur'an, 6:38), which is sometimes used when classifying animals as well as people. Thus, zoological taxonomy may mirror human taxonomy.²⁷

Finally, the issue of the degree of belief in the religious interpretations of animal behaviours and sounds emerges from subject-related debates, e.g. that on the Qur'anic verse according to which a beast will arise from the earth to address people (27:82).²⁸

Philosophical anthropology

From a critical perspective vis-à-vis animal studies, we must recall Günther Anders's warning against exaggerated fascination for animals as intellectual objects:

“In order to define man, it is philosophically dangerous to refer to a model that is now not the one which the human existence depends on: we do not live any longer among bees, crabs, and chimpanzees, but rather we are surrounded by radios and bulb factories.”²⁹

Drawing on his criticism, one may wonder whether a study on animals' worship of God lacks philosophical legitimacy. To study an obsolete world full of animals is at the minor expense of pulling a veil over the absolute power of technology on our lives and thoughts. Yet, our contemporary representation of animality is so alien to worshipping animals that it even more clearly manifests the distance between classical Islam and the current “technocosmos”,³⁰ between our world full of engines and instruments directed to our use, on the one hand, and a world full of subjects that pray to God, on the other hand.

Of course, such religious consideration may not obliterate the technical and productive function of animals throughout history. An analysis of the *tashīr* dogma within the frame of the history of technology is meaningful, inasmuch as it may highlight the productive mobilization of animal energy and functions. The *tashīr* may lead to deflating the distinction between the world of God's creatures, which are religiously defined, and the world of anthropocentric tools, while paving the way for an anthropology of technology as developed by Dominique Vidal about Hinduism and robotics.³¹

²⁷ See Pierre Lory, *La dignité des hommes*, p. 146; *Ikhwān al-ṣafā, Le procès animal de la domination humaine*, presentation, p. 41.

²⁸ See for instance al-Jāhiz, *K. al-ḥayawān*, vol. VII, p. 50.

²⁹ Günther Anders, *L'obsolescence de l'homme*, I, p. 50, § 4, note 10. This footnote written for the fifth edition of *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* is absent from the previous editions as well as the English translation by Christopher John Müller, *Prometheanism*, London–New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2016.

³⁰ Gilbert Hottois, *Le signe et la technique*.

³¹ Dominique Vidal, “Anthropomorphism or Sub-Anthropomorphism? An Anthropological Approach to Gods and Robots », *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 13 (2007), p. 917-933.