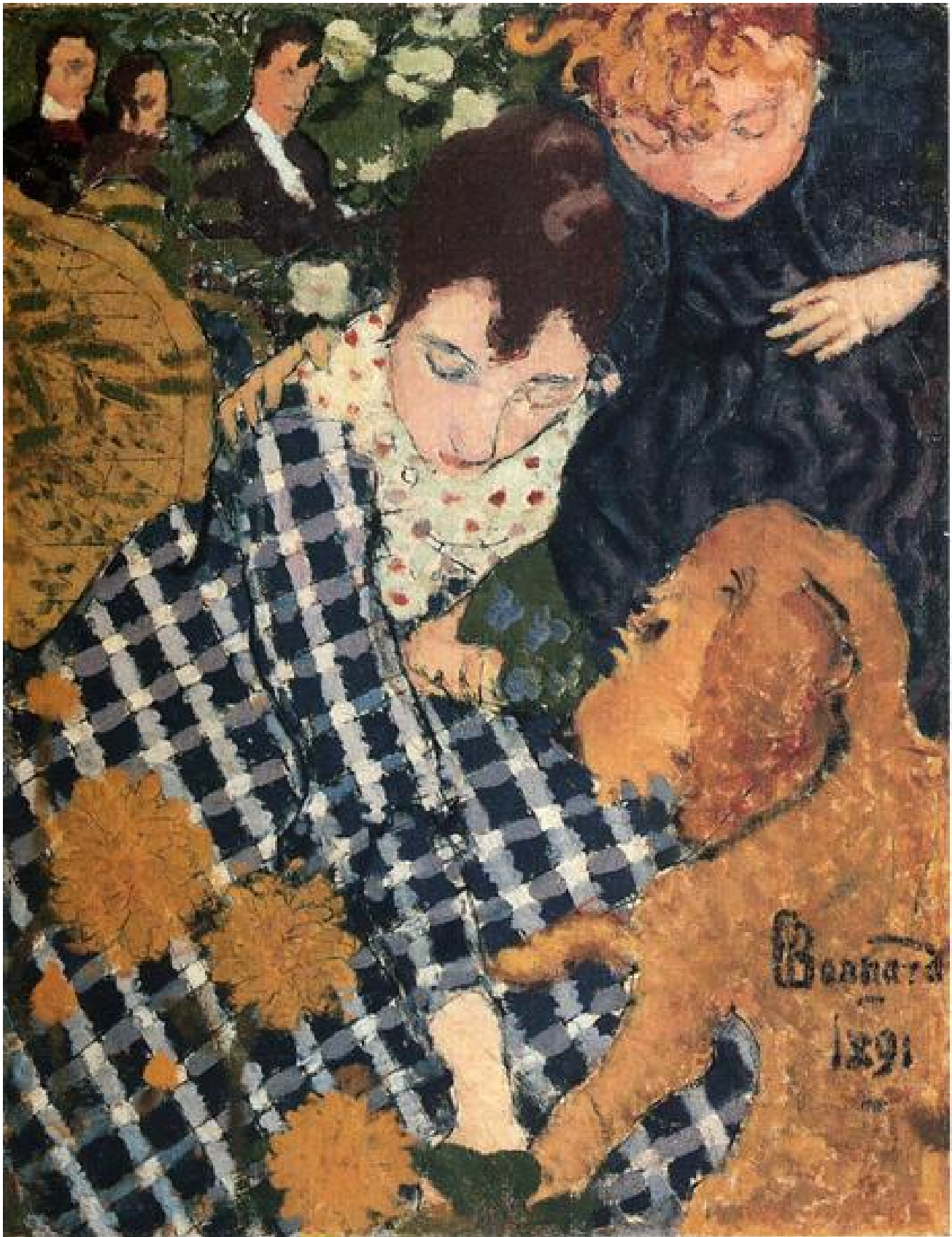


Do Dogs Go to Heaven?

by [Boyd Cathey](#) (April 2020)



Woman with Dog, Pierre Bonnard, 1891

Several years ago four writers, two from the United States and two from Great Britain, engaged in a conversation from a Christian perspective on the general topic of what happens to "the souls of animals" after death. The traditional Christian faith holds that after physical death, those humans who die in God's grace will experience "beatific vision," that is, they will behold and be united with their Creator in Heaven. Leaving aside questions that often divide individual faith communions, these scholars speculated if there were room for the concept that animals, too, might experience some form of afterlife.

The conversation that follows includes an initial presentation by Boyd D. Cathey (D.Phil., in History and Philosophy, University of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain), with comments by Timothy Stanley (D.Phil., in History, Cambridge University), Daniel Joyce (D.Phil., in Theology, Cambridge University), and Paul Gottfried, Raffensperger Professor of Humanities (emeritus), Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania (Ph.D. in Political Philosophy, Yale University).

Boyd D. Cathey: In 1993 theologian Dr. John Warwick Montgomery authored a short essay, ["Fido in Heaven?"](#) published in the *New Oxford Review*. In this short piece, he briefly critiques a slim study by Eugen Drewermann on the subject of the

immortality of dogs and animals in general. Drewermann argues that dogs and other animals not only have souls—"animal souls"—but that they are immortal. Drewermann bases his case for animal immortality on pantheistic, evolutionary, and even ancient Egyptian beliefs and reasoning, something that no orthodox Christian could accept.

Montgomery refers to Christians like C. S. Lewis in his commentary. Lewis uses wonderful and inspiring animal imagery in, for instance, his *Chronicles of Narnia*. And then there is J. R. R. Tolkien, who does the same in *The Lord of the Rings*. Lewis says, more than once in reference to the animal kingdom, that "no good thing is forever lost." But Lewis was not speaking as a theologian, nor was he basing his opinion on any kind of pantheistic "world spirit," or evolutionary theory, or any such non-traditional ideas. And, to be sure, he was not attempting to formulate doctrine. As Montgomery points out, a standard theological text treating the matter, Florian Dalham's *De ratione recte cogitandi . . .* (Venice, 1770, II, 482), simply states: "The condition of the souls of animals after death is unknown."

Montgomery's brief piece raises a number of fascinating questions. Most Christian theologians will agree that animals have "souls" of a certain kind, understood as a life-giving essence, personality, mode of existence, that distinguish them. But Holy Scriptures do not enter a definitive verdict one way or the other as to the immortality of these animal souls.

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I might summarize the views of those Christians who argue against animal soul immortality this way: souls of animals, not being human and not enjoying the salvific promises of Our Savior, expire when the physical body itself expires. Our Lord came *specifically* to save human kind who have fallen from Divine favor through the grievous Original Sin of disobedience, that is, Christ died on the Cross *only* for human beings, to pay the price of Original sin, and to offer sufficient graces for all humans who accept Him and His Church (although not all men accept those graces, which only become efficient and effective when freely accepted). This argument continues: animals have a type of "soul" but it is unlike the human soul that can be and is redeemed by the blood of Our Savior on Calvary. Our Lord has promised the Beatific Vision and Glorification not to animals, but only to redeemed Man. Thus, animals are not included in these promises and cannot, as it were, inherit the promises of Our Lord.

But the arguments in favor are also strong:

First, it is admitted by most who write on the topic that dogs, cats, etc. do have "souls," but not in the same sense or order that human beings have souls.

Second, while human beings "fell" from God's favor grievously through Original Sin, the penalty for which only the ultimate sacrifice of the Second Person of the Godhead could satisfy, lower animals were and are created to act according to their God-given nature.

Third, orthodox Christian teaching is that God created Creation *ex nihilo*—out of nothing—as “good” (viz., Genesis I: 21-25, “And God made the beasts of the earth . . . and God saw that it was good”), that is, that which functions and operates according to its nature operates as God so intended and must be therefore considered “good.”

Fourth, animals act according to their God-given nature—thus, a dog that mauls and kills a rabbit for food (or even for sport), acts according to its God-given nature. There is no question of “sin” here—the dog is simply doing what God programmed it to do.

Fifth, the wages of spiritual sin for man are spiritual death, that is, a man who rejects God’s graces, also rejects the promises of Salvation; but animals are incapable of sin, as opposed to their nature; animals act as God so decreed, imprinted in and on their nature.

Sixth, God, being All-good and All-perfect, does not punish goodness, understood as the proper functioning of things as they were created to be and to act.

Seventh, man is promised the Beatific Vision of Heaven if he accepts God’s salvific Graces and His Church, which is the “mystical body of Christ.”

Eighth, although no one can state with absolute certainty a

description of Heaven (some of the saints of history have given us visionary bits and inklings perhaps), would it not seem fitting that redeemed man, in his glorified state beholding and forever enjoying the divine Presence, would also be surrounded by the glorified spirits (or presences) of those sin-less creatures, created by God, who have followed their God-given natures and served and accompanied (and comforted) man, per God's instructions written upon their souls?

To the response that the Beatific Vision is solely and uniquely sufficient for man in Heaven—Indeed, it certainly is; but that is not my point. Rather, the existence or presence of the spirit of a beloved pet in no way detracts from or adds to the absolute sufficiency of the Beatific Vision *for man*. Rather, the presence of such glorified creatures could only enhance a universal completeness of adoration, as in the Biblical injunction, “Let all Heaven and earth adore him”—the key words here being “all” and “earth,” nothing and no one excepted.

I would add that the orthodox theology of Creation, *per se*, teaches its natural, essential, and God-created goodness. While animal souls are certainly *different* from human ones, and while redemption is tendered to man *alone*, it is, after all, only man who *needs* saving and redeeming. “Let all Creation adore Him,” and thus, from these arguments I think we could infer that in God's infinite mercy and love for man and His love for His creation, that in a real, if unknown to us, spiritual sense our pets and animals will join us, *on a different level*, in their own type of Adoration of the Godhead for eternity. This, it seems to me, to be *fitting* and entirely consistent with traditional teaching and theology, and does not in any way denigrate teaching on the uniqueness of man and the salvific nature of God's sacrifice at Calvary.

Timothy Stanley: I'm mostly convinced. But obviously not convinced in the sense of being empirically certain, but I'm at least happy to know that the idea that there is a place for animals in heaven can be entertained by rational, orthodox Christians. The strength and weakness of the argument is that it rests on what is "not" said rather than what is, i.e., that we might assume animals do not need redemption as they have not sinned. We might assume that they are in a kind of constant "state of grace." They fulfill their God given intentions and thus cannot err in the same way we do.

I sense there are a couple of counterarguments. I suppose that one might argue that our unique relationship with God and our claim to immortality is based upon: 1) being made in his image, and 2) being given the capacity to choose between good and evil, i.e., sentient, rational beings. Animals are neither, but I don't sense that this rules out immortality. Again, what is not said seems as important as what is.

Boyd Cathey: The most significant objection to my initial argument may be found in St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* (I, q. 65, q.75, and q 118). Additionally, in checking some other sources and commentaries—for instance, Msgr. Hallett's *Catholic Dictionary*, published some seventy years ago, and the 1910-1914 edition of *The Catholic Encyclopedia*—I find additional material which should be examined. The Church Fathers and St. Thomas, following Aristotle and the ancients, identified three types of souls: vegetative, sensate (or sensitive), and rational (or intellectual). Plants enjoy the first type; all animals enjoy the first two types, and humankind enjoy all three. It is in the latter that an essential difference between lower animals and man—both of the

same genus—can be found: men possess rationality, intellect, and have the capacity to choose, to elect, and thus they can elect to choose “evil,” while other animals, says St. Thomas, do not possess this capacity (he develops this in *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 65 and 75). Moreover, the animal “man” was created in “Imago Dei” (Genesis I: 25 et seq.), that is, man enjoys a special dispensation to which other animals are not privy, and he is, accordingly, given *domination* over all other life here below.

A crucial point that St Thomas develops has to do with the relationship between the soul and the physical corpus with which it is coterminous. For St. Thomas and most of the Scholastics, the intellectual soul, although united with the body, is not dependent upon it and enjoys immortality; whereas, with lower animals, without an intellectual or rational soul capable of meditating on and exercising choice, the sensate or sensible soul would expire with the expiration of the body.

I don't think this point negates what I have suggested: first, while the argument given by St. Thomas appears persuasive, as man, alone, is indeed created in God's image, can rationally choose, and is given dominion over all the earth, that does not automatically imply that other creatures are complete slaves to all human desires and wishes, or that they lack some varying elements of pure intellect imprinted upon their natures. Both scripture and traditional theologians, alike, enjoin the faithful to respect and treat animals well, even if they may be used for burden and for food, and even for research purposes. In a real sense, both the New and Old Testaments accord lower animals a degree of dignity, and the great 18th century Dominican Cardinal Billuart (viz. *De Justicia*) is precise in analogizing man's fulfillment of his

duties to and love for God with concomitant duties to respect and value animals (and thus, God's creation).

Secondly, while I would not dispute St. Thomas in his analyses, just as he posits that souls are created by God independently and then ensouled in creatures directly—as opposed to St. Augustine's view, that souls are generated through the act of procreation itself—God as remote Creator, Aquinas's view is certainly not the last word in the matter. Christian doctrine today teaches *that the soul is present from the moment of conception* (St. Thomas implies that ensoulment could come slightly later). So, even though the Angelic Doctor should be revered for his formulations of the faith, in every element he is not without fallibility, especially in those areas where the Church has not formally spoken.

Thirdly, I do think that even in the animal genus, that some lower animals (that is, non-human ones) enjoy higher forms of natural intelligence than others. Thus, a Labrador retriever or Border collie or a dolphin possess, I would argue, a broader, a different *natural* intelligence than, say, an ant or Japanese beetle. Obviously, the beetle and the ant comply with and fulfill their narrower respective natures, and do it superbly. But such natural intelligence is much more developed in the retriever and collie or dolphin. While not the same as in man, such natural intelligence certainly at times approaches a level that can only be said to be magnificent. But, do such animals have the capacity to elect or to choose, that is, can they at all reflect and reason? Certainly not in the sense that St. Thomas discusses. But his standard is a high bar indeed. Is there not a gradation that would permit some rudimentary "reasoning" on the part of animals, consistent with their natures, but still quite *unlike* the special gift or capacity imprinted upon the intellectual soul

of man by God, that distinguishes him from all other animals?

Paul Gottfried: I'm wondering how far the theologian would carry the idea of "fitting" in arguing for the spiritual aspect of animal life. What about mice or cockroaches? Would we have to ascribe to them something like a soul because of their teleological fitness, that is, because they perform a function that conforms to a divine plan for the universe? In the matter of those neo-pagans who believe they can reach across the Christian centuries to reclaim a pagan religious legacy, the entire enterprise seems to have arisen from science fiction. There is no way one can remove a religious consciousness that was formed over the last two thousand years and substitute for it what came before. Even the multicultural totalitarians have not succeeded in getting rid of Christianity entirely. They have simply denatured it, while hiding what they have done.

Boyd Cathey: I mentioned that there could be some qualitative differences between the soul of a Japanese beetle and that of a Labrador Retriever, for instance. It is completely within an Aristotelian and Thomist framework to say that *both* creatures, as sensate animals, within their particular genus fulfill their inscribed nature, programmed, as it were, by God with a certain degree of specificity and a destiny or object. And thus the levels of intelligence that we observe in canines or porpoises, for instance, would be different than, say, that of the beetle or the cockroach.

I did not say "superior" or "inferior," since each animal operates according to its own proper nature as created by God. As the cockroach complies with that nature it can be said to operate properly and naturally, and its animal "soul" fulfills

God's intentions for it.

Nevertheless, as we humans observe animals fulfilling their respective natures, we observe—at least at our most perceptive—that dogs in fulfilling their nature do so in a manner that we find much more intelligent and agreeable according to our human standards, that they seem to possess emotions and form particular attachments, that they exhibit traits of nobility and a kind of rudimentary rationality. And, so, accordingly, we have taken in dogs to our homes and our hearts, and they form an integral, if ancillary, part of human society. They are in their actions and reactions to us fulfilling that nature that God inscribed on their souls, just as the cockroach does, but in a different manner. The difference for us is that the vast majority of humankind don't have cockroaches as loving members of their households, at least, not by choice. As the inscribed nature of canines is so much closer to our own, since they respond to human nature so well, and as they are able to express in some form their love and emotions towards us, we judge them differently and naturally place them on a much higher plane than cockroaches. Yet, the lowly cockroach also fulfills its nature; it's just that the animal soul of the cockroach is programmed to comply with its nature on a different level.

To be consistent, I must admit that when the cockroach is snuffed out by a spray of Raid that it indeed ends up in some mysterious way Glorifying the Godhead for all eternity. I'm not as aesthetically convinced of that as I am theologically persuaded.

Certainly, what I have just said suggests that while God inscribes in animals' unique natures and that all comply with

that nature as creatures of the Almighty, He also enables us, through our human faculty of judgment and reason to believe that certain animals are in our estimation "superior" and others "inferior," *in regards to how they interact with us* and complement our existence here on earth.

It seems to me that the key here, then, is the specific kind of rationality (or lack of) that animals may possess. I said earlier that we might distinguish the soul of a dog or a dolphin from that, say, of a beetle or ant. St. Thomas implies that lower animals (that is, non-human ones) lack reflective rationality, the ability to reason, certainly as humans do (or should do). Even if we accept that division, I would still argue that there is a form of "thinking" and rough-hewn "rationality"—on a different level than that of humans, certainly—among canines and in gradations among other animals. While both the ant and the dog act according to their respective natures, I would suggest that what I might call the "pre-" or "praeter-" rational souls of dogs are of a much higher quality than that of the ant.

They possess emotions, show a form of guilt, show love, sadness, and happiness and loyalty, attempt to communicate in various forms, and so on. [I always give the example of my canine, who, if he makes a mistake on my carpet, goes and hides behind my den futon for a few minutes. He knows instinctively that he's erred; and he formed this routine before I ever began scolding him.]

Paul Gottfried: The best way to answer the question about the spiritual rankings of different life forms may be, as you suggest, from an Aristotelian teleological perspective, namely to what extent animals serve (*huperetountes*) and approximate

(*eikozantes*) human beings. Obviously cockroaches are less like us and our divine source than our canine pets, with whom we identify because they are actually our companions, and not simply something that pollutes our kitchens. The ontological hierarchy takes into account qualities other than sensateness, although that may be a starting point for rating life forms as opposed to inanimate objects.

Daniel Joyce: I do not strongly object to the case for the immortality of the lower beasts' souls made by Boyd. Most of the anticipated objections I would make have been answered, but I will raise a question. I fully accept that God created all the animals and *made them good*, so in that they perfectly fulfill their God-ordained function, they do not *merit* any punishment, as the termination of their existence may be deemed (death entered the world with sin), nor are they in need of redemption for, as irrational beings, they cannot choose right or wrong. Man chose, Man fell, Man needs redemption (though the effects of the Fall did extend to [not just human-] nature). I also believe, with Cardinal Bourne, that God's *Fatherhood* extends to all created things, as Creator, for, after all, "Of Him, all paternity in heaven and earth is named" (Eph. 3:15), and that animals do not exist *solely* for man's use, but have rights inasmuch as they participate in the rights of the Creator, *ratio Creatoris*, i.e. man's dominion over them is limited, and mistreatment of them would infringe upon the rights of the Creator and His order in nature, *ratione ordinis creatae*.

Thus, Man being made in God's image, being endowed with reason, and freely choosing his redemption, does not necessitate the termination of souls not made in His image, upon their natural death, though the association of everlasting life with these principles is undeniable; but is it necessary? As I said above, I think Boyd has anticipated and addressed the pertinent objections (and I agree with the

analysis of St. Thomas Aquinas on ensoulment, by the way), but I wonder, and this is a question, not considered a rebuttal: If it is in the Church's condemnation of Metempsychosis [transmigration of the soul at death] that one may find the evidence one needs to conclude to the contrary of Boyd's thesis, is there anything in the condemnation of the transmigration of souls (from animal to animal, or animal to man) that makes explicit the conclusion that the animal's soul ceases to exist upon its natural death?

I once heard a traditional theologian say something to the effect that a worm is superior to a nuclear power station, because it is animate (i.e. has a soul), if that helps? (Whilst I mention this with a smile, it is not a facetious point, for behind that assertion lies an obvious and clear truth. But could that worm be in Heaven?)

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Boyd Cathey: Daniel is quite right about metempsychosis and the Church's rejection of it and any form of reincarnation or transmigration of souls. The decrees of the Council of Vienne (1311-12) which define "the rational or intellectual soul [as] . . . the form of the human body itself," implicitly condemn reincarnation, as do, explicitly, St. Ambrose (*Belief in the Resurrection*, Pts. 65-66 [A.D. 380]), St. John Chrysostom (*Homilies on John* 2:3, 6 [A.D. 391]), and St. Basil the Great (*The Six Days' Work*, 8:2 [A.D.393]), and other orthodox Church

Fathers, writers and popes.

Much of the earlier, medieval discussion was in reaction to various strains of Hellenism and Neo-Platonism and later, the Gnostic Cathares. These debates permitted the Church to define more clearly its teachings in the area.

Nevertheless, I can find nothing, no formalized teaching that animal souls would cease to exist after death or that explicitly excludes animals, that is, the sentient souls of animals, from adoring God eternally in some form. Certainly, they would not do so as do the Elect for whom Our Lord came specifically and for whom He died upon the Cross. And, they would not enjoy the special creation with equal rational and reflective powers as humans.

But they do fulfill their God-created natures, are not infected with Original Sin, and thus would not incur the penalty for sin. Certainly Our Lord did not die and rise from the grave *for them*. But, then, He had no need to.

The essential differentiation, I believe, comes in the unique Divine Love of God for man, for men who are chosen to be sons of God, and for whom Our Lord was crucified, thus granting to us special graces to repair our fallen and sinful natures, and the Beatific Vision of Him in Heaven.

While animals do not enjoy these promises, fulfilling their natures they fulfill God's role for them, just as they glorify Him. As such, I think it defensible to maintain that their

(sentient and praeter-rational) souls continue to adore and praise their Maker after physical death on a different level than humans. After all, God creates them out of love, for both Man and for His creation.



I thank you all for your contributions to this discussion, which spans thousands of miles and an ocean. Although we may not have settled anything, I do believe this conversation does demonstrate that amongst thoughtful individuals such topics can be discussed respectfully and rationally. Again, I refer to the classic text of Florian Dalham, *De rationi recte cogitandi* (Venice, 1770), who wrote 250 years ago: “The condition of the souls of animals after death is unknown.” In a very real sense, perhaps the answer to our question will only be answered once we, ourselves, face the King of Heaven.

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