What Kinds Of People Believe Animals Go To Heaven?

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Two new studies reveal what people think about the afterlives of animals.
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A headline in the New York Daily News last year proclaimed, “All Dogs, and Cats, and Pigs, and Goats, and Cockroaches Go to Heaven: So Says Pope Francis.” The article was written by Bruce Friedrich, director of policy for the Farm Sanctuary, an animal protection organization. The article was based on a June 18, 2015 papal encyclical written by Pope Francis. The encyclical is open to interpretation, and there is disagreement among Catholics about whether the Pope really meant to open the Pearly Gates to any non-human species, let alone cockroaches.

However, the question of whether animals have an afterlife has long been on the minds of pet owners who want to know if they will get to play with their favorite dog in heaven as well as individuals concerned with the moral implications of dining on creatures with souls.

While the literal existence of animal afterlife does not fall within the realm of psychology, the question of what people believe happens to animals when they die does. And two studies in the most recent issue of the journal Anthrozoösis address this issue.

Who Believes In Animal Afterlives?

The first study was by researchers from North Carolina State University lead by Kenneth Royal. They were interested in the demographics of Americans who believe in animal afterlife. The researchers solicited participants from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. MTurk “workers” are paid relatively small amounts to take part in various Internet-based research projects. MTurk has become a popular source of subjects for psychological research, and studies have shown data gathered on MTurk is at least as good as from college student subject pools. The researchers obtained a large sample (800 subjects) and used statistical techniques to help ensure that it was similar to the population of the United States in terms of sex, age, and geographic region. The result was a sample composed of equal number of men and women representing a diversity of races, ethnicities, and religious affiliations. Seventy-seven percent of the subjects were pet owners.

The participants were asked a series of questions related to their religious beliefs. These included whether humans and animals experience an afterlife. They were also asked if they thought animals had souls and about their degree of certainty about human and animal afterlife. Finally, the participants indicate the extent to which species ranging from dogs to insects experience life after death.

The Results...

Do Animals Have Souls? The subjects were split on this question: 32% of them said animals definitely or probably did not have souls, 48% felt animals definitely or probably did have souls, and 20% were undecided.
A Lot Of People Believe Animals Go To Heaven. Fifty-nine percent of the participants believed that humans experience an afterlife. And, of these, 75% believed in animal afterlife. Oddly, two individuals who did not believe humans experience an afterlife said that animals did. (I'm not sure what to make of this.)

Men Are Less Likely To Believe In Animal Afterlives. Fifty-one percent of women believed that animals experience an afterlife compared to 36% of the men. Sex differences were found for beliefs in an afterlife for every species, including insects.

Differences Between Religions. As you would expect, large differences existed between religions in beliefs about animal afterlife. For example, 78% of Buddhists were believers compared to 61% of mainstream Protestants and only 23% of individuals who indicated “none” for their religion. This graph shows the percent of believers among the religions with more than 15 participants.

Which Animals Go to Heaven? A couple of years ago, my students and I did our own study of beliefs about animal in heaven. We found that most people who believed dogs go to Heaven also thought snakes and even worms have a place in the Here After. As shown in this graph, the N.C. State researchers obtained the same pattern of results. The differences between species ranging from dog and pig to fish and spiders were generally small.

The Pet Owner Paradox? I anticipated that pet owners would be much more likely to believe in animal heaven than non-pet owners. This was not the case. The researchers concluded that owning a pet had fairly little impact on beliefs about animal afterlives. While 45% of pet owners thought animals went to heaven, so did 38% of non-pet owners.
Study 2: What We Can Learn From Dog Obituaries

The N. C. State researchers did not find much difference between pet owners and non-pet owners in beliefs about animal afterlives. But, as witnessed by the enormous popularity of the poem and website The Rainbow Bridge, many pet owners are consoled by the prospect that they will someday be united with beloved companion animals. And, meeting up with beloved pets in heaven was also explored in the second article in the new issue of Anthrozoös. Researchers Jill MacKay, Janice Moore and Felicity Huntingford analyzed the major themes in 130 dog obituaries posted on-line by their owners at two websites HeavenlyPaws.com and ImmortalPets.com. (Unfortunately, these sites are no longer active.)

The researchers reported the most common theme in the obituaries involved statements related to the afterlives of dogs. Over half (51%) of the obituaries contained key words and terms like “heaven,” “spirit,” or “the rainbow bridge.” Some referred to the great times the dog was going to have in heaven. For example, one bereaved dog owner wrote, “As Buddy transitions, she will once again chase her squirrels and play stick with Titch, who is waiting for her after all these many years.”

The other major themes in the dog obituaries were:

- The dog as part of the family (49% of the obituaries)
- The dog as their owner’s child (46%)
- The “instant connection” the owners felt when they first met their dog (31%)
- Sympathy – the dog’s ability to console and bring their owner comfort (29%)
- Guilt – owner’s feeling of being responsible for the death of their dog (13%)
- Humor and good times with the dog and funny stories (11%)
Descartes' Declining Legacy

The 17th century French philosopher Rene Descartes argued that animals cannot have afterlives because, unlike humans, they are merely biological machines that lack souls. However, over the last three decades, we have witnessed what the pet products industry calls, “the humanization of pets.” And the argument that some animals are “persons” is gaining traction in legal circles. Thus the notion of a heaven populated by animals would seem to be the logical consequence of considering chimpanzees persons and pets as family members.

But I am still wondering, if dogs go to Heaven, do they take along their fleas?