Power Feels Before It Thinks

Affect Theory and Critical Animal Studies in Religious Affects by Donovan O. Schaefer

Eleonora Adorni

Independent Researcher

eleonora.adorni@gmail.com

Donovan O. Schaefer. 2015. *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power*. Durham: Duke University Press Books. 304 pp. $ 24.95. ISBN 978-0-8223-5990-6.

According to Aristotle, man is *zóon logòn échon,* the animal for whom language is the main etiological and constitutive element. From the Greek philosopher to our age, the primacy of language has affected all field of human knowledge, from philosophy to cognitive science, marking the border between what is rational – and therefore worthy of being studied – and what belongs to instinct, irrationality, primitivity. Donovan O. Schaefer wants to show the fallacy of this perspective, and opens his ambitious *Religious Affects* with a famous ethological anecdote: the famous "waterfall dance" recognized by primatologist Jane Goodall as the proof of religious beliefs also among non-human animals, typically considered devoid of language.

The chimpanzees of Gombe (Tanzania) observed by the scholar since the sixties have shown a series of behaviors (rituals, responses to death, social interactions) very similar to those that in human terms are considered forms "religion". "For ten minutes or more they may perform this magnificent 'dance'. Why? Is it not possible that the chimpanzees are responding to some feeling like awe? A feeling generated by the mystery of the water" (Goodall 1999, 189). *Religious Affects* starts from here to show that bodiliness, and not language, is the common ground on which one should rethink religion: one should focus on the body as a prelinguistic element, which Michel Foucault already proved to be the vehicle of any power dynamic. Initially taken as a private phenomenon, a kind of exclusively human "intimate psychologism" – think of the definition of "sacred" given by Mircea Eliade, that of "structure of consciousness" – with the Darwinian revolution, the phenomenological and post-structuralist reflection, affect theory, postcolonial studies, queer and feminist thinking, religion has become a

form of power like any other, made possible and unfolding through the relationship between the body and the world. But let's have a closer look at the theoretical proposal made in *Religious Affect*.

The book aims to deconstruct religion, both as a cognitive expression of a self and as a merely intra-human (epi)phenomenon, through affect theory, which "sees body moving through worlds under the pressure of a complex welter of affects, with language weaving between and reshaping those pressures only sometimes – and even then only hintingly and unevenly" (9). The body conceived as materiality and as embodied expression of the phylogenetic history that generated it "before language, before cosmology, even before 'thought' understood as away of converting a situation into an explanation, […] interacts with the world, and produces a field of sensations through that interaction" (9). Affect theory It allows the author to bypass the linguistic fallacy, showing that language is also a form of power (Foucault *docet*), and to note the flows that affect the bodies of animals "that register and transmit power through a wide spectrum of shifting channels, a subtle, a sub-rosa matrix of interactions that happens between bodies and worlds" (207). This is what Derrida defined a "heterogeneous multiplicity of animal bodies": a jumble of flesh and organs, personalities and emotions, minds, actions and relationships, each with their prerogatives and priorities.

As for the structure of the book, it is divided into three main parts: *intransigence*, *compulsion*, and *accident*. Each section presents a theoretical proposal followed by a case study; the final chapter explores the implications of affect theory in the study of religion, bringing the latter in the same field as critical studies – especially those dealing with non-human animals. Let's go through the different parts of the book. In "intransigence", Schaefer shows that the humanities do not have an adequate vocabulary to think of the animality of the body, "whether our own or those of their of other animals" (57); instead, they emphasise the dividing line that sees the bodies of non-human animals as deficient in history. The chapter then connects affect theory and evolutionary biology, which since Darwin has related man to other animals. In the famous *Expression of the Emotion in Man and Animals* (1890), British naturalist had supported the biological basis of a common emotional basis between humans and non-human animals: a common ground that, as demonstrated by the psychologist Silvan Tomkins, allows individuals to "develop multiple channels of sensitivity defining a pluriform set of relationship with their world" (46). Therefore, affect theory – in the light of the developments of biology and evolutionary theory – allows one to rethink the traditional phenomenological approach to the study of religion – from Otto to James, to Durkheim – highlight-

ing its historical and biological dynamics; ultimately, «basic emotions have histories, bus these histories move at a time scale that vastly exceeds human experience, let alone human history. The varieties of animal affect fall into this category of semistable form emerging out of shapeshifting embodied histories" (47).

In "compulsion" the author starts from a very simple question, namely, why is confinement in total solitude considered torture? A completely isolated body for a long period of time is not only a mere object positioned in a place but a subject under forces that originate from its own biological history and from the outside world. The example of isolation, in this sense, recalls what Derrida calls "auto-affection", that is, a living being's illusion of ownership of their own emotions, to the point that a prisoner in this condition cannot last long before going crazy. We are social beings, our bodies are primarily social bodies and isolation, apart from death, is the most cruel torture that we can undergo.

Derrida (2008) has also noted that what he calls "carno-fallogocentric" discourse is what denies any animal dimension to the body; this rhetoric outlines Man as and angelic creature that only sporadically leaves his heavenly abide to deal with earthly matters. Schaefer shows that, rather than being aware of their actions, bodies are subject to fields of forces which move them in different directions: "bodies are desire in motion. Animals are moved by subtly rich and urgently necessary landscape of emotions" (100). Not coincidentally, the well-known ethologist Frans de Wall described human beings as "obligatorily gregarious", to the point of making up "origin stories that neglect this deep connection by presenting human as loners who grudgingly come together are ignorant of primate evolution" (De Waal 2006, 219). At this point – the author suggests – it would make more sense to wonder "where do bodies go?" rather than "what do bodies believe?" (106).

In the chapter entitled "accident", in the light of the affective turn, the author emphasizes the need to redefine the way we think about the "rationality" within animal behavior, including religion. The first target of Schaefer's criticism is the Marxists-social approach that sees religion as the "opium of the people" according to Marx's definition: that is, the tool used by the ruling class to hide their economic and political interests from the lower classes. The second target is the evolutionary approach, which considers religion the expression of an adaptive function within a cost-benefit dialectic. According to the author, both perspectives are inherently reductionist in that they reduce the complexity of embodied life to a single level when in fact "animal bodies – and animal religions – are simply much queerer than that" (177).

In conclusion, *Religious Affect* does not aim to "produce a static catalog of forms of animal religion" (206) but to change the borders of what is usually considered "religion". This wider outlook allows to also include the "religious bodies" of animals, so as to better understand not only other animals but also our own religious dimension, starting from the bodily dimension. This is the goal of the book: to see religion as an interspecific common trait of living beings, where human and non-human animals are not (just) subjects but also fields of forces that allow one to understand how religion operates through the bodies – "Where do bodies go?" – and, ultimately, how power works. "Animal religion overturns the sentence of solitary confinement imposed on human bodies by our own anthropocentric presuppositions, returning us to other bodies n and in the earth" (211).

References

Darwin, Charles. 1890. *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals*. London: J. Murray.

Derrida, Jacques. 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. New York: Fordham University Press.

De Waal, Frans. 2006. *Our Inner Ape: a Leading Primatologist Explains Why We Are Who We Are*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Goodall, Jane. 1999. *A Reason For Hope: a Spiritual Journey*. New York: Warner Books.