

**Daily Meditation 10/03/2022**

## **Animals as Spiritual Teachers in Christianity**

Good morning.

In today's meditation, we consider the role of animals as spiritual companions in the Christian tradition.

A couple of days ago, we treated some examples from the Jewish tradition. And of course, I bring up Hildegard of Bingen and Meister Eckhart in today's meditation.

But an obvious example, very popular in the West, is Francis of Assisi. I leave it to Franciscans to translate Francis's genius for the rest of us in so many ways. But I'll jump in a little bit.

I like very much this book called *St. Francis: Nature Mystic. The Derivation and Significance of the Nature Stories in the Franciscan Legend*, put together by Edward Armstrong. And his main thesis is that Francis is very, very much influenced by the Celtic tradition.

And of course, the Celts settled all the way down the Rhine, which profoundly influenced Hildegard of Bingen whose monastery was on the Rhine; and Meister Eckhart who lived in both Strasbourg and Cologne, both of which are on the Rhine; and Nicholas of Cusa, Kues is on the Rhine. But also, Francis, because the Celts settled into Northern Italy as well.

But, a few teachings from this book:

First is, really, a conclusion of the book--that Francis was deeply influenced by the Celtic tradition. And of course, the Celtic tradition is ripe with stories of saints communicating with animals of all kinds. And, you know, there are famous stories of Francis and the animals.

Now, just to give you a hint of the Table of Contents here, it tells you where he's going.

So, Chapter 3: St. Francis and the Birds. There are many stories of Francis and the birds.

Chapter 4: St. Francis and the Animals of Household and Farm.

Chapter 5: The Small Deer of St. Francis.

Chapter 6: Fish, Reptiles and Dragon.

Chapter 7: The Furred Beasts of St. Francis, including mice and foxes, and bears, as well.

So, you can tell, to treat Francis you have to have whole chapters of books when it comes to the topic of nature, because he interacts so frequently and so openly. And many stories are left behind about him and the animals.

But another story that we have is the idea of the Christmas crib, the nativity scene. And of course, that practice, which is still very employed in our Christmas season up to our 21st century, in the 21st century. So he's credited, Francis, with kind of inventing the idea of the Christmas scene and the crib, which of course, is a story taken from the Gospels, about Jesus being born in a manger among the animals--among the oxen, and with shepherds and sheep nearby.

And, of course, much of that comes from Isaiah 1, that the ox and the cattle have known me, but the chosen ones have not, at times. So there's a whole lesson in that one sentence about the nearness of animals to divinity. So the whole idea of the Christ child being born in a manger is very much underscored by the practice of the crib at Christmas time, which is accredited to St. Francis.

But another dimension to the Christian tradition and animals is found in the Eastern traditions, the Orthodox Christians. So here is one teaching from Isaac the Syrian:

"A kindling of the heart for all creation--for mankind, the birds, the animals, the demons, the whole of creation. Whenever one thinks of them or contemplates them, tears pour from one's eyes because of the strong sympathy which possess his heart."

So this is a mystical treatise by Isaac of Nineveh, about Isaac the Syrian. So, these Eastern Christians were very much into the spiritual dimension of our relationship with animals. And, as this author Armstrong suggests, of the East, the influence of the Eastern Christian mystical tradition was very strong and implicit. Now, the Celtic tradition drew more from the Eastern tradition than it did from St. Augustine and so forth, from the West.

So this is one more arena in which the world of the animals became integral to the spirituality of our Western Christianity.

Thank you. We'll see you tomorrow.