

Sightings 7/26/07

Religion of the Apes
-- Christian Sheppard

Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo recently hosted a conference on chimpanzee cognition and culture, "The Mind of the Chimpanzee." The most recent research confirms that chimpanzees possess a sense of self, a theory of mind, strong memory, empathy, politics, and culture. One further question to ask is whether our fellow apes also possess religion.

Jane Goodall has posed this question. She observed long ago that, during the rainy season, male chimpanzees display before the storm's thunder, lightning, wind, and rain by beating their chests, pulling down branches, and shaking the limbs and trunks of trees while hooting and screaming. Such displays usually mean to convey strength to rivals. Goodall speculates that this "rain dance" behavior might be an attempt to get the storm to stop. Chimpanzees in different communities exhibit behaviors that are unique to their time and place, for example, fishing for termites with sticks or using stones to break branches. Ethological observations of such cultural behavior have been corroborated by laboratory experiments. The rain dance behavior has since been observed in other, though not all, wild chimpanzee groups, and so is properly considered cultural. Might it also be religious?

For humans, thunderstorms are a traditional inspiration for religion. Giambattista Vico speculated that religion began with our early ancestors' terror at the lightning and thunder of Zeus. In the summer of 1505, Martin Luther, terrified by a lightning storm, cried, "Help, Saint Anna, I will become a monk" and, true to his word, entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt. James Joyce, when asked why he was afraid of thunder when his children weren't, said, "Ah, they have no religion." In this spirit, Lucretius asserted that religion begins in fear.

Goodall, however, offers an alternative beginning: "With a display of strength such as [the rain dance], primitive man himself might have challenged the elements." The chimpanzees' response, courageously facing the fearful unknown of the storm, is exemplary. As Aristotle observed, courage is the first virtue, without which all others are moot. Jane Goodall showed personal courage in facing dangerous apes in the wild as well as in working in an African political climate that was not always safe. Goodall also showed intellectual courage in resisting the biases of her contemporaries, and holding to her own observations and the resulting intuitions that apes possess intelligence and emotion akin to our own. She persevered with groundbreaking work that has found its fruition in the research results and the careers exhibited at the Lincoln Park Zoo conference.

With the kind of courage exhibited by Goodall -- physical, intellectual, and spiritual -- a better kind of religious sensibility may be cultivated. We need a piety that seeks greater understanding of our essential links to nature, a piety that fosters wonder. Wonder, as Plato said, is the beginning of philosophy, and philosophy yet may be the handmaid of religion.

Freud, the second large male in Goodall's group in Gombe, may be our guide. Freud was observed "rain dancing" furiously not in a storm but in front of a powerful waterfall. Afterwards

he sat still for a long time and seemed to contemplate the torrent. Might Freud after his courageous display be in his way wondering at the fall's ceaseless and mighty torrent?

Goodall has eloquently argued that religion and science need not be separate; indeed, they must inform one another. The scientific study of chimpanzees allows us to reflect upon a kind of consciousness akin to our own. When those intelligent and passionate fellow apes look up at a random and violent force and challenge that force with their own strength, we can recognize and ought to respect a better part of ourselves that still has the courage to face the always wonderful but often terrifying unknown in nature.

Evolutionary biology has demonstrated how great a role random violence has played in creating our current nature's order, however beautiful it is. We are a part of this natural world. It is this essential connection to the natural order that makes it intelligible to us. We can come to understand it better if, to our ape brethren, we may be brave enough to say: I will praise thee, for I too am fearfully and wonderfully made.

References:

The website of the Jane Goodall Institute can be accessed here:
http://www.janegoodall.org/chimp_central/chimpanzees/behavior/rain_dance.asp

Jane Goodall's article "Rain Dance" (*Science and Spirit*) can be read at: http://www.science-spirit.org/article_detail.php?article_id=229

Information about the Lincoln Park Zoo's "Mind of the Chimpanzee" conference can be found at: http://www.lpzoo.com/articles/features/Chimp_Mind/CM3.html

Christian Sheppard holds a doctorate in divinity from the University of Chicago, and is working on a book about "King Kong" and religion after Darwin.