Dogs: God’s Worst Enemies?

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In a broad survey of negative and hostile attitudes toward canines in pagan, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, the author posits that warm ties between humans and canines have been seen as a threat to the authority of the clergy and indeed, of God. Exploring ancient myth, Biblical and Rabbinical literature, and early and medieval Christianity and Islam, she explores images and prohibitions concerning dogs in the texts of institutionalized, monotheistic religions, and offers possible explanations for these attitudes, including concern over disease.

For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie. (Revelations, 22:15)

He who breeds a wild dog in his house keeps loving kindness away from his house....Rabbi Nahman ben Isaac said: He also casts off the fear of Heaven from himself, as it is said, “and he forsaketh the fear of the Almighty. (Job, 6:14) [Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath, 63a-b]

Pet-keeping, particularly dog-keeping, is commonplace in Western society, to the extent that few question the practice. Still, as the above quotations from the New Testament and The Talmud hint, there is clear opposition to dogs on the part of institutionalized religions. Monotheistic doctrines, in particular, evince hostility toward canines, placing a strong emphasis on their negative aspects. This antagonism to dogs from organized religion is astonishing, since it lacks a clear textual justification such as that found in Genesis concerning the snake. Further, it challenges both the widespread custom of pet-keeping and the classical traditions that elevated dogs to the epicenter of harmonious relationship between the animal world and humankind.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, attributing the vices and virtues of human beings to dogs bestows an important projection role on them (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1984; Ronecker, 1994). Perin has argued that the ambivalence of Western society towards the dog arises from the animal’s peculiar symbolic role as an archetypal
attachment figure, an idealized provider of love who reanimates reminiscences of maternal love. The tension in humans’ relationships with dogs indicates the re-emergence of the unresolved love-hate tensions of infancy associated with the process of separation and individuation from the basic family unit (Perin, 1981). In this regard, Serpell (1995) makes an important claim:

In symbolic terms, the domestic dog exists precariously in the no-man’s land between the human and non-human worlds. It is an interstitial creature, neither person nor beast, forever oscillating uncomfortably between the roles of high-status animal and low-status person. As a consequence, the dog is rarely accepted and appreciated purely for what it is: a uniquely varied, carnivorous mammal adapted to a huge range of mutualistic associations with people. Instead, it has become a creature of metaphor, simultaneously embodying or representing a strange mixture of admirable and despicable traits. As a beast that voluntarily allies itself to humans, the dog often seems to lose its right to be regarded as a true animal....Elsewhere, the dog’s ambiguous or intermediate status has endowed it with supernatural powers, and the ability to travel as a spiritual messenger or psychopomp between this world and the next. (p. 254)

This study focuses on the hostile attitudes toward the canine species as expressed in the pagan, Jewish, Christian, and Moslem cultures. The project confronts us with a broad scenario ranging over time and space, a condition justifying a selective, non-chronological approach. It should be noted that the author’s use of the term, “pet-keeping” for both foraging and modern societies implies a similarity of intent that may not exist, since similar patterns of behavior may mask underlying difference of attitude and treatment (Fox, 1981). The selection of dogs for a case-study is based on the fact that dogs were the first domesticated animals and, as such, have the longest partnership with humankind (Cuvier, 1854; Dembeck, 1965). There is pictorial evidence that the Babylonians, the Egyptians, and the Romans developed definitive breeds of dogs (Clutton-Brock, 1981; Brackert & van Kleffens, 1991).

Our findings suggest that the hatred of dogs that characterizes monotheistic religions and, to a lesser degree, pagan tenets, is not fortuitous. The attitude suggests, rather, a deliberate effort to weaken the strong vinculum of human beings to dogs. Some social anthropologists argue that the dog’s liminality, its closeness to the border between human and non-human, is sufficient reason in itself for regarding the species as potentially unclean or polluting (Douglas, 1966). It is our
thesis that, historically, the hostility to dogs resulted, rather, from the clergy's apprehension that human attachment to dogs— which bestows a sense of complete mastery and, in consequence, may bring about higher self-esteem—had detrimental consequences for the submission of the faithful to God. No less important, the emotional link between person and dog might weaken the former’s dependence on the clergy, God’s earthly representatives.

On the other hand, popular belief ascribed therapeutic powers to dogs, which enhanced their quality of mystery and their peculiar status between the natural and the supernatural worlds. Moreover, the clergy’s reluctance to sanction the alliance between humankind and canines—the object of the present study—hardly succeeded in actual practice. One can discern a long story of affection and friendship from the ancient period, through the middle ages, up to our own days (Menache, forthcoming).

**Dogs in the Ancient World: The Pagan Tradition**

Referring to the image of dogs in ancient Greek society, Mainoldi (1984) emphasizes the ambivalent attitudes toward canines who were considered both loyal and treacherous, intelligent and stupid, vigilant and negligent. This ambivalent approach goes beyond the fantasy of fable and suggests opposing attitudes to be found both in literature and daily practice. Simplifying the origins of women, Phocylides saw female termagants as the offspring of bitches. In contrast, noble, beautiful women were said to descend from horses, and industrious housewives from bees (Lewinsohn, 1954). Aelian was even more derogatory toward canines, as he found a basic deficiency in the most essential virtue ascribed to them: their loyalty. He took care to convey his distrust of all the “objective” justifications for a historical phenomenon:

Dogs are less useful at keeping watch than geese, as the Romans discovered. At any rate, the Celts were at war with them, and had thrust them back with overwhelming force, and were in the city itself. Indeed they had captured Rome, except for the hill of the Capitol, for that was not easy for them to scale. For all the spots which seemed open to assault by stratagem had been prepared for defense. But when the Celts observed that the place was inaccessible to them on every side, they decided to wait for the dead of night and then fall upon the Romans when fast asleep; and they hoped to scale the rock where it was unguarded and unprotected, since the Romans were confident that the Gauls would not attack from that quarter.
And as a result Manlius himself and the Citadel of Jupiter would have been captured with the utmost ignominy, had not some geese chanced to be there. For dogs fall silent when food is thrown to them, but it is a peculiarity of geese to cackle and make a din when things are thrown to them to eat. And so with their cries they roused Manlius and the guards sleeping around him. This is the reason why up to the present day dogs at Rome annually pay the penalty of death in memory of their ancient treachery, but on stated days a goose is honored by being borne along on a litter in great state. (De natura animalium, XII: 33, cited by Burris, 1935)

In mythological memory, dogs thus shamefully betrayed confidence by falling asleep during the Celts’ attack on Rome in 390 B.C. Antagonism toward canines went beyond the world of myth and affected behavioral norms as well. In Spartan society, the analogy between dogs and the most infamous creatures, the helots, hints at the reprehensible nature attributed to canines (David, 1993). Dogs were perceived as bloodthirsty and cruel. It was accepted in “Homeric” society to throw people to them as a form of execution (Iliad, XV: 579) or to give them the corpses of persons unworthy of funerary honors (Sophocles, Antigone, 206; Euripides, Hecuba, 1077). Thucydides, however, reports that during times of plague dogs refrained from touching the corpses (History, II, 30). The very word for dog, κύων, became an insult covering human vices such as cowardice, immodesty, and arrogance, all presumed blots of the canine species (Aesop, Fables). Accordingly, the related appellation of Cynics (κυνικοί), given to the followers of Diogenes of Sinope, suggests their distinctive traits: rejection of all conventions, attempt to live on nothing, and shamelessness (Bonilla, 1967).

Beyond the symbolic level, there was some awareness of the injuries and impairments that dogs may cause. In the case of bodily harm, Solon (Plutarch’s Lives, Solon, 24), Plato (Leges, XI, 14, 936), and the Twelve Tables (545) recognize the dual obligation of the dogs’ owners to compensate the wounded and to transfer the guilty animal to them for proper punishment. A awareness of the potential danger of dogs brought about the obligatory use of clear warnings of their presence. “Cave canem” was a common exhortation, perpetuated in archeological and literary documentation (Petronius, Satura, 29; Varro, Eumenides apud Nonium s.v. Praebitio s. Albicatur). Still, the most dangerous affliction that dogs could cause human society, rabies – both its manifestations and ways of transmission – was apparently little known. In “Homeric” society, the word “rabies” was used in its metaphorical form to designate fury or uncontrollable wrath, but it did not connote a specific disease of dogs (Iliad IX: 239, 305, VIII: 299). Though Aristotle was the first author
to depict the symptoms and effects of rabies, he did not believe it could be transmitted to human beings (Historia animalium VIII: 22).

In parallel with the lack of favor accorded to dogs in real life, there was a tendency in myth to consign them to the realm of Hades, far from the world of the living. Belief in the existence of this netherworld abode for dogs – to which they were said to accompany their owners – became common among Indo-European civilizations. In German myths, the goddess Holle or Holla escorts the dead to the other world as her dog-like wolf nips at the flesh of the corpses. There is a notable similarity among the Greek dog Cerberus, which welcomes the dead souls at the entrance of Hades (Vergilius, Aeneid VI: 400, 395, 471; Seneca, De ira, III: 37); the Germanic hell-hound, Garmr; the Vedic sons of Sarama, the dog-messengers of death; and Odin’s two wolves, which later become dogs.

Dogs were also sacrificed in acts of purification of the family and the house (De natura animalium XII: 34); indeed, they were among the most prominent sacrificial victims associated with funerary rites (Plutarch, Quaestiones Romanae, 290). In the Spartan agoge, the ferocious fight between two bands of youths was preceded by the sacrifice of two puppies to Enyalius (presumably the Laconian name of Ares) (David, 1993). Dogs howled at the approach of Hecate, a nightmarish lunar goddess of the infernal regions and of witchcraft, their howling also being conceived as an augur of death. Hounds were also companions of Hecate and were sacrificed to her. Like their mistress, they were overseers of cyclical time, guardians of life and the awakening of vegetation (Gimbutas, 1989). On the other hand, their link with the world of death made dogs unclean; allowing them to enter the temples of Delos or the Athenian Acropolis was forbidden (Delort, 1983). The Romans, too, believed that neither dogs nor flies entered the Temple of Hercules in the Forum Boarium.

As an additional facet of their mysterious character, therapeutic virtues were seen as an integral attribute of canines. Dogs became part of the ancient Greeks’ menu, and curative effects were attributed to their meat. Puppies were used as scape-animals against intestinal and stomach disorders (Burris, 1935). From the long list of therapeutic qualities credited to dogs, Pliny the Elder mentions the effectiveness of their blood as an antidote for poison (Naturalis historiae, XXIX: 58) and as a remedy for itching (XXX: 121). Canine blood, if placed under the threshold, was believed to keep away evil spirits, especially those of the dead thought to haunt the location and bring harm to the living members of the family (XXX: 82). The flesh of a suckling puppy eaten with wine and myrrh was considered an expedient against epilepsy (XXX: 27). The ashes of a dog’s head when mixed with wine and honey were thought to ward off jaundice (XXX: 28);
the ashes alone, to cure burns and chilblains (XXX: 35; XXX: 9). Bitches had special curative powers: their menstrual blood was used against mad dog bites (XXIX: 98), and their milk was thought to prevent hair growth (XX: 46) (Gourevitch, 1968).

Despite the hostile attitudes and assignment of mysterious, metaphysical powers to dogs in the classical era, there is also testament toward everyday attachment to them in both Greek and Roman cultures (Menache, forthcoming). Still, the above sources suggest a clear tendency to isolate dogs from the world of the living while ascribing to them a magical nature. This disposition, in turn, was linked with the awesome fate believed to face every human being: the afterlife. These attitudes developed further characteristics within the framework of monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

**Monotheistic Approaches to Animals**

The point of departure of all monotheistic religions, the supremacy of humankind as established by an almighty God, created the basis for the perception of dogs as integral to the animal world and, as such, submissive to human rule:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (Genesis I: 27-28).

*Genesis* also sanctioned the active participation of the first man at God's side, complementing creation: "Whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof" (*Genesis* 2: 19). Acknowledgment of man's domination "over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" gradually favored an instrumental approach to animals, their very existence justified by their serving of the needs of human beings (Delort, 1984). Consensus on the dominance of humankind did not in itself impose specific attitudes toward individual animals, however, and differences were considerable in this regard.

**Canines in the Bible**

The Bible mentions dogs 32 times, mostly negatively (*I Sam.* 17: 43; 24: 14. *II Sam.* 3: 8; 9: 8; 16:9). When God adopted the children of Israel to become His chosen people, for example, and regulated their diet, He commanded, "And ye shall be holy
men unto me: neither shall ye eat any flesh that is torn of beasts in the field; ye shall cast it to the dogs” (Exodus, 22:31). Notwithstanding, medieval homilies explain this command as a reward for dogs’ good behavior during the Exodus. By refraining from barking, dogs are said to have facilitated the flight of the Hebrews to the Promised Land (Exodus 11: 7). Still, their connection with carrion and carcasses makes dogs despicable. According to Jeremiah, their essential impurity will burden dogs with carrying the dead on Doomsday (Jeremiah 15:3). The Book of Proverbs adds this: “As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly” (Prov. 26: 11; II Peter 2: 21-22). The Bible also uses dogs as a metaphor to hint at the poor status of men (II Kings 8: 13; Job 30: 1) or at such lowly elements of society as the enemy (Psalms 22: 16, 20), traitors (Psalms 59: 6, 14), and false prophets (Isaih 56: 10-11). No wonder, therefore, that Deuteronomy proscribes the admittance of dogs and whores into the House of the Lord (23: 18), a peculiar association that is also suggested in the Book of Kings (I Kings, 22: 38). The apocryphal Book of Enoch utilizes canine symbolism in describing the Philistines, Ammonites, and Edomites, all of whom posed a danger to the chosen people (LXXXIX).

The negative approach of Biblical narrative to dogs is problematic in light of the prevailing attachment to them in agrarian and nomadic societies, in which they fulfilled guard functions and – at least from this instrumental angle – were highly esteemed. One explanation lies in the Bible’s opposition to remnants of polytheism, especially Egyptian cults and rites. Anubis, the god of death, had a dog’s head, and Isis, the goddess of the netherworld, was represented as riding on a dog (Allen Woods, 1954). Still, other animals such as falcons, scarabs, cows, hawks, crocodiles, jackals, lionesses and hippopotami were incorporated into the Egyptian pantheon without generating the negative imagery surrounding dogs in the Bible. On the doctrinal level, then, the reasons for the Biblical animosity to dogs remains open to analysis. From an ecological perspective, however, the existence of savage dogs, with the accompanying problem of rabies, might provide a suitable answer, one that is corroborated by later Moslem tenets.

Canines in Rabbinical Literature

Rabbinical literature provides a framework for the development of Biblical canons and some explanation of their enigmatic nature as far as canines are concerned. Rabbinical literature differentiates between “evil” and “good” dogs, for example, thus recognizing the possibility of alternatives. Still, the basic rejection found in the Bible is corroborated by the rabbis’ admonition to use a cautious attitude toward “good dogs”: even these had to be securely chained during the day, and could be
freed only at night when only suspicious people walked the streets. On the other hand, the ownership of an "evil" dog – that is, one that bites and barks – was completely forbidden, since it could endanger others and cause its owner to violate the Biblical prohibition, "Do not place blood in your home" (Deut. 22:8). A discussion in this regard appears in the Babylonian Talmud:

Our rabbis taught: No man should breed a dog unless it is kept on a chain. He may, however, breed it in a town adjoining the frontier where he should keep it chained during the daytime and loose it only at night. It was taught: R. Eliezer the Great says that he who breeds dogs is like him who breeds swine. What is the practical bearing of this comparison? That he [who breeds a dog] be declared cursed....R. Dostai of Bira expounded: "And when it rested, he said, Return O Lord unto the tens of thousands [and] the thousands of Israel" (Num. 10: 36) This [he said] teaches that the Shechinah [the divine presence] does not rest upon Israel if they are less than two thousand plus two tens of thousands. Were therefore the Israelites [to be twenty-two thousand] less one, and there was there among them a pregnant woman thus capable of completing the number, but a dog barked at her and she miscarried, the [dog] would in this case cause the Shechinah to depart from Israel. (Baba Kamah, 83a, 79b; Slay, 1986)

The presence of a single dog could thus jeopardize the chances of redemption for the entire Jewish community through its rough barking. Although the implications of this warning against pet-keeping were universal, a more peremptory taboo existed for specific social groups. Widows, for example, were urged to avoid keeping dogs so as to exclude any possibility of bestiality (Baba Metzia, 71a), an injunction much later incorporated into the medieval code of Jewish Law, the Shulhan Aruch (Even Haezer, 22: 18). A number of authorities disapproved of keeping dogs for hunting purposes like "the abhorrent behavior of the uncircumcised" (Nahmanides in Slay, 1986). In a similar vein, Rabbi Yaakov Emden permitted the owning of a dog only if the animal served economic or protective purposes, but he strongly condemned pet-keeping as a waste of time and "precisely the [abhorrent] behavior of the uncircumcised" (Sheilot u-Teshuvot Yaavetz, 17).

The equation gradually became clear: a Jew had to avoid dog-keeping since this practice was identified with "the reprehensible behavior" of the gentiles. No wonder, therefore, that dogs were used to symbolize the pandemonium predicted to precede the coming of the Messiah, (Sanhedrin, 97a) and were placed in the unpleasant company of whores, witches, and schismatics (Pesahim, 113b). Simi-
larly, among the three "objects" that a wise Jew was to avoid, dogs were named together with women and snakes as suspects for sorcery and malevolence (Pesahim. 111a). Interestingly, the Talmud quotes Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish:

He who breeds a wild dog in his house keeps loving kindness away from his house, as it is said, "To him that is ready to faint [lamos] kindness should be shewed from his friend" (Job 6:14) and in Greek a dog is called lamos. Rabbi Nahman ben Isaac said: He also casts off the fear of Heaven from himself, as it is said, "and he forsaketh the fear of the Almighty" (Job, 6:14) (Shabbath, 63a-b).

Although the above quotation refers to "wild" dogs, the rabbis of the Talmud pronounced a curse upon all who owned dogs, apparently including any dog (Baba Kama, 79b; Jachter, 1992). Dog-owning was seen to have undesirable consequences on both the social and religious levels, whether from a personal or a collective perspective. The presence of dogs was said to frighten the poor, who would not approach houses for alms. Dog-owners would not be able to show affection for the poor, or worse still, might withhold love from a neighbor. The inevitable conclusion, therefore, was that owning a dog alienates Jews from the love of God, an absolute verdict that left no room for further considerations (Slay, 1986).

**Canines in Early Christianity**

The rabbinical emphasis on dog-keeping as an integral component of "the abhorrent behavior of the uncircumcised" seemingly hints that it was a common practice in Christendom. Yet the prevailing attitude toward animals in the New Testament and early Christian theology was heavily influenced by the hostile approach of the Bible (Batany, 1984; Davidson, 1980; Biese, 1905).

In fact, Christian doctrine brought the Biblical tenets to their "logical" conclusion. Theologians like Tertullian (Liber de Resurrectione Carnis, 864-5), Origen (Contra Celsum, IV), Saint Augustine (Confessiones, XIII, 23), Bede (Vita Sancti Cuthberti, I, 21; Hexaemeron, 91), and Petrus Comestor (Historia Scholastica, VIII) maintained the total mastery of human beings over animals, since the former were said to have been created in God's image and therefore the beneficiaries of His wisdom. If such were true of ordinary humans, then saints, with their greater commitment to God, were bestowed with a special precedence over animals similar to that which Adam enjoyed in paradise. For example, it was said of the Abbess of
Aries that she was obeyed by birds and mammals (*Vita rusticulae sive Marciae abbatissae Arelatensis*, 342). The recognition of human mastery was strengthened by the principle of “*nomina res essentiant,*” i.e., the names Adam gave the animals not only suggested their character but also influenced their role and destination on earth (Dronke, 1983; Muratova, 1977).

The patronizing tone toward animals in general did not advance the status of dogs or their image in the Apostolic age. In his eschatological vision, St. John perpetuated the Biblical connection of dogs to whores (*Rev.*, 22: 15). Together with the most despicable strata of human society, the only representatives of the animal kingdom so singled out, dogs were excluded from heavenly Jerusalem. Jesus further corroborated their dishonorable status, decreeing: “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you” (*Matthew* 7: 6). Both Matthew (15: 26) and Mark (7: 27) testified that Jesus requested of the Greek woman: “Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it unto the dogs.” On the other hand, an old legend seemingly ascribes a more benign approach by Jesus: After witnessing a crowd voicing repugnance toward the carcass of a dog, He supposedly said: “How white its teeth are!” Of course, this story illustrates admirable qualities of Jesus rather than high estimation of a dead dog (Payson Evans, 1896). No wonder, therefore, that St. Paul advised the Philippians: “Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision” (*Phil.*, 3: 2).

**Canines in Medieval Christendom**

The attitude of most saints runs from overt aversion to latent contempt, especially in the Early Middle Ages. Compared to other animals like horses, donkeys, lambs, or birds, and especially pigeons (Boglioni, 1983), dogs seem to have played not only a marginal role at the side of early medieval saints but also a very negative one. This rejecting attitude was perhaps influenced by the widespread belief in the existence of cynocephalic creatures, whose canine aspect testified to their iniquitous, debased behavior. The mythical story of St. Andrew and St. Bartholomew among the Parthians presents the case of “Abominable,” the citizen of the “city of cannibals...whose face was like unto that of a dog.” After receiving baptism, however, he was released from his doggish aspect (White, 1991). Quite similar was the portrait of St. Christopher, a giant of a cynocephalic species in the land of the Channaneans (the “canines” of the *New Testament*) who ate human flesh and barked. Eventually, Christopher met the Christ child, regretted his former behavior, and received baptism. He, too, was rewarded with a human appearance, whereupon he
devoted his life to Christian service and became an *athleta Dei*, finally suffering martyrdom in Lycia (Walter of Speyer, *Vita et passio sancti Christopher martyris*, 75).

Belief in the existence of cynocephalic creatures permeated medieval literature. Augustine, Isidore of Seville, Paul the Deacon, and Adam of Bremen were among the ecclesiastical authorities who reported their existence and described their customs. Quoting St. Jerome, Thomas of Cantimpré corroborated the existence of Cynocephalos (*Liber de Monstruosis Hominibus Orientis*, xiv). Vincent of Beauvais acquainted St. Louis with "an animal with the head of the dog but with all other members of human appearance....Though he behaves like a man...and, when peaceful, he is tender like a man, when furious, he becomes cruel and retaliates on humankind" (*Speculum naturale*, 31: 126; Ray, 1975; Wittkower, 1942). The equation begged to be made, thus perpetuating the notion of a clear antagonism between the Christian faith – and ethics in general – and dogs.

Besides their monster-like appearance, dogs were used to symbolize the more repulsive instincts of people. Irenaeus of Lyons compares the life of ardent, quick-tempered men to that of dogs – i.e., irrational animals (*Adversus omnes haereses*, 72-75), – a resemblance later sanctioned by Roger Bacon (*Opus Majus*, 128). Rabanus Maurus even denies any merit to the dogs' purported skill as guardians by attributing their reputed loyalty to greed: "The dog, a most voracious and bothersome animal, is wont to guard with his barking those houses in which he knows he can satisfy his gluttony with a morsel of bread" (*De Universo*, VIII: 1 ). Late medieval popular literature – such as the *Speculum laicorum*, the *Tabula exemplorum*, and the *Speculum morale* – identifies dogs with such human sins as envy, sloth, gluttony, and lechery (Bloomfield, 1952). When dogs were eventually dissociated from their demoniac image and allowed to assume their role as simple animals on earth, saints like Martin of Tours and Albert of Sienna interceded to protect defenseless creatures – such as rabbits and pigs – against their rabid attack (Rambures, 1903).

Similar to the tendency found in pagan tradition to associate dogs with death, Christian homilies often present dogs as tools of divine punishment or as messengers from the after-life. Besides the well-known Biblical Jezebel (*I Kings*, 21: 23, *II Kings*, 9: 30-36), there is a story of the burial of an adulterous woman whose tomb is surrounded by dogs, all attempts to drive them away failing (Etienne de Bourbon, *Anecdotes*, 263-64). Accordingly, persons blessed with sacred sagacity avoided any contact with this genus. When a dog appeared before St. Romuald, the founder of the Camaldolese Order, he cried: "revert, revert dirty dog" (*Vita beati Romualdi*,
Romuald’s wrath hints at his belief that the dog actually incarnated the devil, a widespread tradition in the Middle Ages upon which numerous legends were based.

The motif of the devil in dog form survived into the early modern era (Allen Woods, 1959), and in 16th century prayers, the same code served contra witchcraft, the devil, and mad dogs. Against such demons, one typical formula advised that holy bread or water be taken for nine days, together with the recitation of three Paternosters and three Aves in honor of the Trinity and St. Hubert, the patron of huntsmen (Keith, 1973). Still, satanic as they were, dogs were not immune to Christian symbols. When savage dogs were sent to tear St. Romanus into pieces, the saint made the sign of the cross and they immediately stopped their furious attack (Delehaye, 1932).

Canines in Medieval Islam

The hostile attitudes toward canines found in Christian and Jewish traditions were further compounded in the sociocultural and economic climate of Moslem civilization. There was a widespread belief that dogs, especially black ones, were demonic emanations of evil spirits (al-Djahiz Kitab l-Hayawan, 18-24, 291; Taton, 1957). Faced with a plague of stray dogs, Mohammed at first took an uncompromising decision to exterminate “all dogs.” Afterwards, he mitigated his decree by reasoning that the canine genus was created by Allah and people need certain species of dogs. The Prophet thus decided to exterminate only the black-coated strays, particularly those with light patches, said to be the indisputable mark of the devil. Kamal al-Din al-Damiri reports: “The Prophet said: ‘The black dog is the devil’...and this was the reason that made him say: ‘Kill every one of them which is black of this single color’ (Kitab Hayat al-Hayawan al-Kubra, 430). According to Hamdullah al-Mustaufi al-Qazwini, “Any place in which the eye of a black dog is buried will fall into ruins” (The Zoological Section, 34).

Though useful dogs were socially tolerated, they remained unclean (nadjas) with respect to religious practice, an attitude also common to blood, carcass, pigs, and donkeys, though there are some divergences in this regard among Moslem authorities. According to al-Damiri, for example, “the Prophet said: The prayer is interrupted by a woman, a donkey...and a black dog” (Kitab Hayat al-Hayawan, 430). Everything a dog touched or licked was rendered impure, and the place where it had lain had to be purified with water, following the practice of the Prophet on one occasion. Abu Huraira reports that “Allah’s Apostle, peace be upon him said. If a dog drinks from the utensil of anyone of you, it is imperative to wash it seven times” (Sahih Al-Bukhari, 120). The collections of hadith (traditions concerning
the Prophet, his deeds, declarations, and thoughts) and their commentaries further state that a dog prowling close to a believer in prayer invalidates the salat (prayer), and its presence prevents angels from visiting a house (Kitab Hayat al-Hayawan, 271). Ultimately, any believer who keeps a useless and vicious dog decreases his final reward (Kitab Hayat al-Hayawan, 294), a categorical conclusion very similar to that reached in the Babylonian Talmud.

No wonder, therefore, that in Arabic the word “dog,” kalb, is a biting insult and appears pejoratively in numerous proverbial sayings, such as those mentioned by Ibn Qutayba:

“More greedy than a dog after a bone.”
“Starve thy dog, it will follow thee.”
“The well-being of the dog is in the misfortune of its owners.”
“Fatten your dog, it will eat you.”
“Greedier than a dog for the excrement of a young child.”
“Hungrier than Hanmal’s bitch.”
“Pissing more often than a dog.”
“Such a one is kept aloof like a dog.”
“(Setting) the dogs on the cows.”
“The folk liked best by the dog are those wandering from place to place.”
“He is as obnoxious as a dog: it does not allow the beasts to feed although not feeding itself” (Ibn Qutayba, 56-57.)

Antagonism to dogs in medieval Islam, however, did not result from superstition alone. Rapidly increasing packs of pariah dogs overran cities and villages throughout the Empire and created serious security and sanitary problems. They were called maroons, from the Spanish cimarron, or dogs reverted to the wild state. Public edicts to exterminate these pernicious creatures were common. But Tankiz, the powerful ruler of Syria in the reign of Al-Nasir Mohammed, went one stage further and ordered all dogs in Damascus to be killed (various sources point to the years 1325, 1328, or 1333). The adduced cause of this policy – that Tankiz was troubled by a dog during a procession – attests to the lowly status of dogs in medieval Moslem society and their susceptibility to abuse. Contemporary chronicles also differ regarding the public’s response, which runs from compassion to apathy to savagery toward the defenseless animals (Al-Nahj al-sudid, 34; Dhuyul al-‘Ibar, 159; ‘Iqd al-juman, 385a; Kitab Hayat al-Hayawan, 293). The readiness to carry out such massacres was unquestionably connected with the diabolic image of dogs and, no less important, the danger of rabies.
In contrast to the indifference that characterized medieval Christendom, Islamic scholars developed a remarkable awareness of the disease, its symptoms, and dangerous consequences. Still, for a long time, a person smitten with rabies, *kalab*, was considered possessed by *djunun* (madness) and treated by exorcism rather than therapy. Drinking the blood of a king was held to be the supreme remedy against rabies, as it was against insanity and possession, a linkage that indicated, again, the devilish nature of dogs and of the disease they transmitted. On the other hand, more effective means against rabies were also elaborated. Ibn Qutayba quotes al-Khalil Ibn Ahmad, one of the foremost early philologists, who claimed that “remedies for the bite of a rabid dog are Spanish flies, lentils and a beverage called *sharab ‘atik* (old drink), which is artificially prepared (Uyun al-akhbar, 54). Ibn Qutayba adds that “if a rabid dog bites a human being, it happens that it changes him into a ‘barker’ like itself, renders him pregnant, and impregnates him with little whoelps that you see as coagulated blood in the shape of dogs” (Uyun al-akhbar, 55).

Al-Djahiz, whose *Kitab Hayat al-hayawan* furnishes the richest documentation on dogs, reflects a more moderate view. He affirms that, in principle, no dog will attack a person who has not previously harmed it (*Kitab Hayat al-Hayawan*, 375). Perhaps to weaken prevailing fears, he reports the story of a boy who, one month after having been bitten by a dog, did not bark or ask to drink water. Since his urine was completely normal, he was pronounced completely healthy (*Kitab Hayat al-Hayawan*, 12-14, 223). Still, according to al-Qazwini, a “mad dog” is one of the “five scoundrels” and ought to be killed. Everyone it bit was in danger of death for 40 days, after which the person was deemed safe. If, before the forty days had passed, an animal came forth from the private parts of the sick person, it should also be taken as a sign that the danger was over. Conversely, to become afraid of water was an unquestionable sign of rabies and of approaching death (*Nuzhatu-l-Qulub*, 34).

Another disease to be considered, particularly in relation to pastoral cultures such as those of Western Asia, is hydatidosis. This is a parasitic worm infection which dogs acquire from eating sheep and other carcasses, but which can be transmitted to humans merely by handling or touching dogs. Infected persons may develop huge and often fatal cysts. The parasite is killed by cooking, so humans cannot get the disease from eating cooked meat.

Though dogs were considered forbidden food in Islam, and medieval chroniclers report the severe punishment of butchers who dared to sell dog meat, al-Djahiz mentions that the flesh of plump pups was considered succulent, similar to that of pigeons (*Kitab Hayat al-Hayawan*, 169). Al-Qazwini further recognizes the
medicinal properties of dogs against eye diseases, tuberculosis, and epilepsy. Moreover, “one who keeps the tongue of a black dog in his boot will be safe against any thing that bites” (Nuzhatu-l-Qulub, 34). Al-Djahiz makes claims for the therapeutic qualities of dog excrement against angina and diphtheria when placed over a person’s tongue (Kitab Hayat al-Hayawan, 245).

Conclusion

These testimonies suggest an aversion expressed through ancient and medieval religious teachings toward man’s “best friend,” an attitude that has received scant scholarly attention. The hostile approach to the canine species is peculiar given the framework of the agrarian societies from which both pagan and monotheistic religions emerged and whose needs and expectations they reflected. That dogs fulfilled security roles and, as such, were an integral component of the economy did not bestow religious favor on them. Conversely, all religions regarded dogs as embodiments of the impure and the profane, whether in the framework of this world, the afterlife, or the devil’s domain. These concepts embraced the many fears harbored of the Umwelt of Jewish, Christian, and Moslem cultures as they developed from ancient times.

A plausible explanation for the widespread religious antagonism toward canines lies in the spread of rabies in ancient and medieval societies, especially in the Middle East. Focusing on 19th century England and France, Ritvo and Kete claim that fear of rabies was really “about” the apprehension of losing one’s humanity and becoming beastlike (Ritvo, 1987; Kete, 1994). Whether or not these fears were connected with rabies in earlier periods, medieval records, especially the Moslem ones, express great concern about the disease, its effects, and ways of transmission.

Though the role of rabies in shaping negative attitudes toward the canine species calls for further research, it may be said to have fostered the tendency to connect pet-keeping with the development of urban-capitalistic culture, and the new needs it created. In this regard, Phineas represents a prevailing view when he makes the following claim:

The disappearance of the extended household unit created the need for additional family members, but these must be docile, not demanding, if the nuclear family was to fulfill its function as a haven from the stresses of the industrial city. Pets were the answer....The final step was the limitation of births in the middle-class household. Pets served as surrogate, and less
expensive, children....For the worker, the pet was long a symbol of a
different sort, the free spirit strong enough to live on his own. The pet was
also valued as a marauder and a defender of property and long after overt
violence declined, the working-class pet served as a veiled tool of class
warfare. (Phineas, 1974, p. 340)

Phineas thus accounts for the widespread practice of pet-keeping in modern
society, when dogs no longer fulfilled an economic function and were left with the
"sole" role of companionship. But he fails to provide an explanation for the former
hostile attitude of monotheistic religions to the canine species. A likely explanation
of "modern" pet-keeping against the ancient and medieval religious hate of dogs
lies in the process of secularization, through which the emergence of civil society
limited the hegemony formerly allowed to God's representatives on earth (Strayer,
1940).

This process is most evident in Western Christendom. Making dogs the
repository of the many vices and virtues of human beings (Beit Hallahmi, 1989),
the canine image as it emerged from Apostolic times reflected the Pauline concept
of contemptus mundi, the Christian scorn for this world of sin. This belief
permeated the Christian message, thereby emphasizing the inherent contradiction
between the spiritual and material spheres. As the essence of the material sphere,
this world was regarded as a "dark road," a "house in ruins," a "mass of sin," an
"ephemeral pilgrimage" through which the faithful were to devote themselves to
the search for heavenly Jerusalem. The denial of earthly existence, explicit in the
Church's message, thus dictated a hostile approach to nature in general and to the
canine species in particular, since dogs were believed to represent the most close
allies and, as such, the most faithful reflection of a sinful humankind.

The Christian contempt for this world of sin was critically undermined toward
the 13th century (Strayer, 1940). The political insecurity and economic shortages
that characterized the early Middle Ages were replaced by the "commercial
revolution" which brought extensive areas of Europe into an era of prosperity. The
new historical constellation put to the test the former concept of contemptus mundi.
It fostered a desire to enjoy this world, of which dogs were an integral part and, as
such, an integral part of a more harmonious perception of the vinculum between
humankind and nature. Moreover, the welcome that received dogs now accorded
into Christendom should be seen as a manifestation of St. Francis' creed. This
abandoned the belief in the militant Christendom which gave humankind a
complete mastery over nature in favor of a more harmonious perception of the
universe. In St. Francis' vision, not only dogs but the whole animal kingdom together with humankind fulfill the secret designs of a pitying God (Menache, forthcoming).

Dogs thus gradually lost their negative religious essence, while their symbolic image as "man's best friend" grew in accordance with the new approach to earthly reality (Ullmann, 1975). When Western society freed itself of the protective bounds of ecclesiastical repression, the canine species was liberated from its religious image and the negative connotations inferred thereby. Though pet-keeping per se is hardly an original innovation of modern society – being a common practice in ancient times and throughout the Middle Ages – it did acquire psychological and sociological justification. This was a result not only of socio-economic factors but of a new secular approach to reality as a whole, the roots of which are clearly discernible in the 13th century, when Western culture began its long journey toward humanism and a more harmonious perception of the universe.

Notes

1. Correspondence should be sent to Sophia Menache, Department of History, University of Haifa, Haifa 31905, Israel.
2. The approach to animals as responsible for their acts was not peculiar either to dogs or to ancient society. As time went by, this practice brought about the trials of animals in the Middle Ages, a subject still deserving of research (Cohen, 1986).
3. According to Biblical precepts, pure mammals (i.e., those that are kosher) are only those that chew their cud and have split hooves. Marvin Harris, (1977) claims that the taboo against dog meat resulted from economic considerations, which gave an “advantage” to bovines.
4. A Jew who chooses to own a dog should therefore be certain not only that the dog does not bite, but also that it does not frighten people with its bark. Many authorities mention the case of a pregnant woman who lost her baby after being frightened by a barking dog, though she did not suffer any external physical damage. (The Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 63a-b).
5. The hagiographical approach to animals was influenced by time and space. Besides, animals were more manifest in the Celtic tradition. From the eleventh century onwards, animals played a more positive role in the saints' life and were rewarded with their love (Graus, 1965).
6. Dogs were mentioned in the biographies of Benedict d'Aniani, Lebuino of Deventer, Gerald of Aurillac, and Norbert of Xanten. (Vita Benedicti abbatis Anianensis et Iudensis, 25; Vita Lebuini antiqua, 5; De vita Sancti Geraldi Auriliacensis comitis, 10; Vita Sancti Norberti, 66).
7. In Goethe’s narrative, after Faust abandoned the idea of suicide, Mephisto was introduced in the form of a black poodle that accompanied Faust and Wagner on their way home (Schmidt, 1887).

8. There are many examples of dogs perpetrating a sacrilege on dead bodies; (Ibn Iyas, *Bada'i*, 104, 111; al-Maqrizi, *Suluk*, 828); or being used for purposes of torture (Ibn Abi al-Fada'il, *Mufaddal al-Nahj al-Sadid wa-l-durr al-farid fima ba'da ta'rikh Ibn al-'Amid*, 111). Al-Djahiz too, was aware of the dogs’ attraction for corpses, either human or animal (*Kitab l-Hayawan*, 222-27).

9. Hanmal was a Bedouin woman who starved her bitch until it ate its own tail.

10. Sits in a place whereto one had punished a dog.

11. This is said of one who provokes people against one another without any scruples, the meaning being, you suffer no damage, so leave them alone.

12. Pejorative proverbs using dog symbolism are common in Western languages as well (Morawski, 1925) (Rolland, 1967); for English phrases and colloquialism see Brewer (1963).

13. This assertion seems particularly important against al-Damiri’s claim that “when this disease has prevailed upon a person and he sits down to discharge urine, something of the shape of little dogs comes forth from his body.” He further states that a rabid dog will not take food and, when thirsty, will not drink (*Kitab Hayat al-Hayawan*, s.v. *kalb*).

14. I would like to thank James Serpell for bringing this information to my attention.

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