

**The Rainbow Bridge:
Imagining 'Animal Heaven'**

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In a rapidly changing world of techno-scientific miracles, and erroneous notions that science killed religion (Saad, 2018), the lure of the afterlife has not abated, as many still yearn for an eternity in paradise (Eliade, 1984; Gardiner, 1989; Murphy, 2015). The longevity of Heaven is not just that it is a foundation of several global religions, but also that it remains in a state of flux, continually being reimagined to meet the eschatological needs of different times (McDannell & Lang, 2001). For example, and while Heaven has been the traditional destination for 'good' humans, the increased adoption of pets within countries such as the UK (Statista, 2021) has led to pets receiving greater religious consideration (Lee, 2016). As such, we should not be surprised that troublesome questions have emerged about whether pets have souls, will enter the afterlife, and if they do, what this otherworldly realm might be like for them. Problematically though, and with otherworldly phenomena being immaterial in nature (Gooder, 2011), it exists beyond our five mundane senses, leaving the faithful to traverse the limits of mind and imagine ethereal arenas (Gardiner, 1989), such as the Rainbow Bridge (Magliocco, 2018). Curiously, and while imagining the afterlife is relatively commonplace, there is little empirical understanding about how our imagination functions as an otherworldly sense, or as a means to allow the faithful to experience supernatural realities (Calvin, 1960; Root-Bernstein, 2014). Consequently, this ethnography walks a less worn religious path, asking: how do bereaved religious innovators imagine the Rainbow Bridge? Helping explain this question, the literature review starts by examining 'animal heaven' not only as a distinct pet-centric phenomenon, but in relation to more traditional notions of a utopian afterlife. Following this, attention is paid to mental experiences of the supernatural, in 'imagining the otherworldly.' Next, the ethnographic 'methodology' is detailed, before finally presenting the 'findings' and 'discussion and conclusions,' with the latter highlighting contributions to the literature, alongside areas for future research.

Literature Review

Animal Heaven

As an otherworldly arena, Heaven has classically been examined through an anthropomorphic lens (Gardiner, 1989), privileging humanity's eschatological end over that of animals. While this has left much to understand about what future awaits animals, we should note that Heaven itself remains poorly theorised, with much disagreement about where Heaven is, what it is like, who can go there, and whether anything can be known about it during this mortal lifetime (McGrath, 2010; Walls, 1997). Exploring these issues, we quickly come to see that Heaven is embedded within a myriad of contradictory beliefs, typically being depicted as (1) the garden, (2) the house, (3) the city, (4) the kingdom, and (5) a new Earth (McGrath, 2010; Colwell, 2001). Critically though, and amongst this confusion, Walls (1997, p. 7) argued that Heaven is paradise, at least for humans:

[...] the emphasis is upon being reunited with family and friends. In its most fully developed version, heaven is essentially like this life, without, of course, the evil and suffering that mar our present happiness. Heaven thus construed would include poetry, pianos, puppies, poppies, and sex, all at their best.

Looking beyond what Heaven is like, to where it is located, advancements in astronomy have led most to reject the historic stance that Heaven exists within this universe (Gooder, 2011), meaning that we cannot use space probes, telescopes, or even our mundane senses to explore this otherworldly arena (Alston, 1989; Gardiner, 1989). Commenting on this, Mullen (1996, p. 332) said: 'language about heaven has moved from spatial to spiritual reality. Heaven is now perceived to exist only in a spiritual realm and no longer in a physical realm.' Subsequently, the mind has become the main way to experience Heaven (Davidson, 2005; Halevi, 2009), with the faithful typically scaffolding imaginary views through personal preferences, religious teachings, and popular cultural norms, while at times, attempting to induce supernatural revelation (McDannell & Lang, 2001).

With the perceived nature of Heaven continually changing over time, eschatological conflicts between personal beliefs and orthodox doctrinal teachings tend to be common (Alexander & Rosner, 2000), with one of the current contentious issues being whether animals, and in particular pets, have a place in the afterlife. For pet-centrists—as we will see throughout this study—an afterlife in Heaven without pets would be Hell. At the heart

of this matter is the West's increasing tendency to reject older notions of animals as machine-like beasts of burden, and to reposition them as conscious family members, deserving higher levels of moral and religious respect (Zinner, 2016). As such, eschatological debates about pets are increasingly common, particularly as pet loss tends to induce intense bereavement (Becker *et al.*, 2007; Hays & Hendrix, 2008; Testoni, De Cataldo, Ronconi & Zamperini, 2017; Wright, 2018), and frequently leaves grieving individuals longing to be reunited with their pets (Carmark & Packman, 2011). When we consider that major Western religions such as Christianity rarely promise pets an eternity in paradise (Linzey & Yamamoto, 1998), we should not be surprised that the religiously inclined are keen to embrace eschatological innovation and reimagine a pet afterlife outside of orthodoxy. While little is known about the inception of the Rainbow Bridge, it seems to have emerged from the literary works of Dahm (1998) and Britton (1994), where dead pets wait to be reunited with their humans within a quasi-Christian animal paradise, i.e. the Rainbow Bridge, before travelling to the real Heaven (Magliocco, 2018). How imagination might allow the perception of this supernatural realm is explored in the following section.

Imagining the Otherworldly

As humans, we experience the physical world through mundane sensory perception (Stewart, Gapenne & Di Paolo, 2014), while mentally exploring the limits of reality via imagination (Byrne, 2007; Leslie, 1987). Importantly, and even though the human mind can imagine entire lands, peoples, and cultures, modern secular-materialist science contends that such immersive reveries—and imagination in general—are nothing more than personalised fictions (Akkach, 2001; Cohen & MacKeith, 1991; Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 2006). This is unfortunate, as not only is imagination ‘one of the last uncharted domains of the mind’ (Byrne, 2007, p. xi), but historically, it has been the means to explore otherworldly arenas such as Heaven (Gardiner, 1989), as McGrath (2010, p. 5) argued:

To speak of “imagining heaven” does not imply or entail that heaven is a *fictional* notion, constructed by deliberately disregarding the harsher realities of the everyday world. It is to affirm the critical role of the God-given human capacity to construct and enter into mental pictures of divine reality [...]

Through this theological lens, it is possible to view mental constructions as religious forms of revelation, allowing the faithful to have experiences of otherworldly beings and

lands (Polkinghorne, 1994). Assuming that it is possible to really imagine Heaven, the challenge is to accurately imagine what is there, rather than simply playing with fictions of mind, which in the case of the latter, would certainly fail the test of genuine knowledge. Troublingly though, our minds are hardly blank slates, nor do we live in a social vacuum bereft of discussions about otherworldly realms. As such, all individuals engaged in mental perception must negotiate memories, personal preferences, and social norms for what is considered real (Conway & Loveday, 2015; Kearney, 1998). While we may wonder how imagination moves beyond personal fantasy, it has been argued that embracing love and having the right faith (Calvin, 1960; Helm, 1998) will allow the mind's eye to open (Halevi, 2009) and imagination to accurately sense the otherworldly (Barrett, 2021; Mezei, Murphy & Oakes, 2021; Plantinga & Tooley, 2008). Even though faith is commonly derided as 'believing what you know ain't true' (Twain, 2011), Plantinga and Tooley (2008) suggest that faith is knowledge, arrived at through a correctly functioning mind, facilitated by a commitment to loving the divine. Conversely, that sin corrupts the mind, distorting imaginative perception, and creating false experiences of the otherworldly (Augustine, 1972). As we might expect though, imaginary experiences are not without epistemological issue, as such claims tend to sit outside of shared perceptual experience, which can undermine how they are viewed throughout society. Having said this, the purpose of this study is not to validate the truth of the Rainbow Bridge, or imagination as an otherworldly sense, but instead, to provide a robust account of participant experiences relating to this emerging pet eschatology. Drawing this literature review to a close, the following methodology section details how the research question was answered.

Methodology

This hybrid ethnography (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) arose from my interactions with nine pet communities, where it was apparent that pet bereavement was catalysing the adoption of a new eschatology known as the Rainbow Bridge. Seeking to better understand this eschatological innovation, I worked to become a trusted and seasoned insider (Layton, 1988; McCracken, 1998), using snowballing to construct a sample of one hundred and seventy-nine participants (Bryman & Bell, 2011), to answer the question: how do bereaved religious innovators imagine the Rainbow Bridge? Inclusion criteria mandated that all participants were (1) exploring religious beliefs about a pet afterlife via the Rainbow Bridge, and (2) actively imagining this otherworldly arena. Incoherent, unsystematised, and incomplete beliefs were not a barrier to participant inclusion, as what mattered was a participant attempting to imagine the otherworldly, rather than being able to perceive a fully functioning ethereal land. Table 1 shows the purposeful,

pragmatic, and anonymised sample of participants that this study was built around (Wengraf, 2004):

Participant characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender:</i>		
Male	25	14
Female	154	86
<i>Age (years):</i>		
18-30	11	6
31-40	38	21
41-50	45	25
51-60	31	17
61-70	27	15
71-80	21	12
Over 80	6	3
<i>Education</i>		
School	63	35
Bachelor's degree	77	43
Masters and above	39	22
<i>Religion</i>		
Atheist	0	0
Agnostic	0	0
Christian	127	71
Pagan	52	29
<i>Cultural Christian</i>		
No	0	0
Yes	179	100
<i>Suffered pet bereavement</i>		
No	0	0
Yes	179	100
<i>Years imagining the Rainbow Bridge</i>		
0-3	94	53
3-6	47	26
Over 6	38	21

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Overviewing table 1, we see a nearly all female sample, not only fitting with women tending to have a greater emotional attachment to animals (Kellert & Berry, 1980; Driscoll, 1992), but also being more likely to be religious (Beit-Hallahmi, 2015). With just over half of the participants being Christian and all others having been practicing Christians, this sample was considered culturally Christian, potentially using such religious beliefs to scaffold views about this world and the next (Moffat & Yoo, 2019). Importantly though, all participants argued that their previous religious experiences had initially left them with much ambiguity about pets in the afterlife, which was coupled with a strong desire to

embrace religious innovation and reimagine an otherworldly paradise (Gardiner, 1989; Royal, Kedrowicz, & Snyder, 2016) better suited to their pets.

Fieldwork and Data Collection

After pulling this sample together, I spent just over four years developing in-depth relationships with these participants (Gould, 2006; Hamilton, Dunnett & Downey, 2012), in person and through VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technologies, such as Skype, WhatsApp, e-mail, and phone (Fetterman, 2010; Iacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016). All ethnographic data was collected using participant observation, including conversations, interviews, surveys, storytelling, diaries, alongside my own autoethnographic experiences (Schouten & McAlexander & Koenig, 2007). Consequently, over two thousand pages of transcripts were produced, alongside five hundred and fifty pages of fieldnotes, and three hundred and ninety-seven diary pages. Collating this data, each participant produced a mean number of eleven and a half thousand words. Where relevant I also recorded body language and shifts in intonations in relation to what was being discussed.

Working the Data

After all data was collected, it was transcribed, and read several times to create a greater awareness of emerging themes (Arnould, 1993; Lindlof, 1995). Initial analysis was undertaken within one day of data collection, with subsequent analyses taking place after three and six months (Spiggle, 1994). To help understand the data, content analysis highlighted the frequency of themes, which were contextualised against my emic understanding, and etic consideration of the literature (Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006; Kottak, 2006). Ongoing attention was given to how the participants depicted different views of reality (Foucault, 1974), with 'reflexive pragmatism' (Alvesson, 2003, p. 14) and vignettes being used to explore multiple interpretations (Humphreys, 2005). To aid robustness, within method triangulation compared findings between participants and methods (Denzin, 1970). Finally, and to centre the participants within the research process, summary reports were prepared, with peer debriefing being used to discuss project findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

This section answers the research question: how do bereaved religious innovators imagine the Rainbow Bridge? As a starting point, consideration is made of the changing

nature of human-pet relationships, and how pet bereavement can leave individuals 'yearning for a pet afterlife.' Following this, the process of 'imagining the Rainbow Bridge' is drawn out, highlighting how different forms of imagination are believed to allow veridical otherworldly experiences. Finally, 'the nature of the Rainbow Bridge' is explored, detailing the content of this ethereal arena.

Yearning for a Pet Afterlife

While humans and animals have forged a myriad of relationships over many millennia, it seems fair to say that there has been a paradigm shift in recent decades, resulting from the increased integration of pets into everyday family life. As we will come to see though, breaking down traditional species barriers has not only raised acute eschatological concerns about pets, but has also opened the door for religious innovators to reconsider the place of pets within the afterlife. Starting to explain these changes, Lucy (F, 62) said:

I'd grown up with pets. Nothing too exotic, just cats and dogs. Things have changed though. I mean when I was a girl, my cats chased rats, and lived outdoors. They were workers more than anything else, and yes, we loved them in a way, but they had a job to do. It was an arm's length relationship. Losing an animal wasn't such a big deal. Of course, we were all sad when it happened, but it wasn't like today, where cats live with rats in the lap of luxury. Honestly, they live better than me [laughs]. For example, my friend got married, and her dog was her bridesmaid. [Pause]. Looking back, it seems unbelievable how fast pets became family members, taking part in everything we do. Even though I have a human family and children, my cats are my real babies. I talk to them, and they talk to me. I Play with them. Dress them. Some people think cats are dumb, but cats are smart. Have personalities. Much smarter than you and me. If you want to see pure love and devotion, get a pet. They comfort us, offer a shoulder to cry on, and love us for all our faults. The reality is that pets are pure, like angels. And I've lost a lot of friends for putting pets above humans.

Such comments were common throughout this sample, showing how pets are being reimagined as conscious, spiritual beings, and a source of continued emotional support for humans. Taking this view, we can start to see why the participants were keen to reject more historic notions of animals as mindless subordinates and were embracing their pets as key family members. Fundamental to this reconceptualisation was the juxtaposition of morally 'perfect' pets and sinful humans, most noticeable through the participants overtly

preferring the company of pets to 'tainted' humans. As we might expect though, proselytising religious beliefs that humans are fallen beings created ongoing tensions with friends, family, and colleagues, often resulting in the participants being relegated to the periphery of social life. Having said this, and as Mia (F, 41) explained, these participants had not abandoned human relationships altogether, but were instead thriving in pet-centric communities, typically working to create rich new cultures:

There are so many people wanting to spend time with like-minded folk, who think the same about pets as them. I did, which is why I joined a few Facebook groups mad about dogs. And a few local doggy groups in my town. You often meet the same people in these groups. Birds of a feather flock together and all that. When someone says something new, everyone hears it. These groups are a hotbed of new thinking. Smashing old ideas and rapidly sharing new ones. It was a bit crazy, as we were always sharing pictures, inventing games, and telling silly stories about our dogs. I remember one of my friends saying how her human daughter wouldn't get married. So, she had an online wedding ceremony for her dog instead. Her human daughter let her down, but her real daughter [...] her dog didn't. [Pause]. Spending time like this helped us all feel more confident about making our pets proper family members. I have to say, what started as just good fun, quickly became more serious. Hmm, I remember the first time that one of our fur babies died. A cute little dog called Snowy. No warning. [Pause]. One day his mum woke up and he was dead. As his adopted aunts and uncles, it hit us pretty bad. [Pause]. I didn't organise this, but we held an online funeral, and prayed for Snowy. Even those without faith were suddenly very religious. It was my first time dealing with the animal afterlife. The Rainbow Bridge. [Pause]. Sort of like animal heaven from what I can tell. I don't think anyone is quite sure where the idea came from. There are some old books and poems or something. A lot of chatter online about this. I wasn't even sure whether people believed in this, or just told tall tales to make themselves feel better. The only thing I knew was that we all loved these stories of pets waiting in paradise for us. Not many religions offer the chance to be with our pets forever.

Operating outside of a wider social gaze, these supportive groups acted as safe innovative spaces, allowing the participants to cultivate and share preferred imaginary views of their pets, while facilitating group bonding with 'like-minded folk.' Intriguingly though, and by embracing fantastical pet-based play, imagination was frequently mixed with the mundane to explore new social realities, where pets could fill perceived gaps in

their owner's lives, such as a participant's dog being fictionally married instead of her human daughter. Problematically though, and with pet lives tending to be relatively short, mortality often became a critical issue, increasing the drive to adopt new eschatologies better able to cope with bereavement. While grief reduction strategies typically followed anthropomorphic socio-religious rituals, such as funerals and prayers, the most noticeable eschatological innovation was adopting the Rainbow Bridge as an otherworldly pet paradise. The popularity of this pet eschatology appears to be its simplicity, i.e. offering all pets a place in paradise, and welcoming humans of all faiths to embrace this otherworldly arena. Yet, and being relatively new, the participants were initially left trying to negotiate whether the Rainbow Bridge was real or just a 'tall tale' to alleviate suffering, as Amy (F, 28) argued:

I'd been a religious faker most my life, never taking the afterlife that seriously. Why would I? I was fit and healthy, and so was Sheba [her cat]. [Pause]. That changed overnight when Sheba died. It broke my heart, and I couldn't forget her. Couldn't eat. Couldn't sleep. [Pause]. I'd heard people saying that animals go to the Rainbow Bridge when they die, but never taken it that seriously. [Pause]. I was in a state of panic and needed her back in my life. [Pause]. I found myself reading everything I could about what happens to animals when they die. The only thing I found was the Rainbow Bridge. [Pause]. I liked that it said our pets were waiting for us and I really wanted to believe this. I just needed faith and to see her in my mind. [Pause]. Desperation makes us grab whatever we can. I was drowning in pain, and I was hoping the Rainbow Bridge would be my life raft. [Pause]. The possibility of knowing Sheba was ok blew my mind. So, I joined some Rainbow Bridge groups on Facebook and started my journey to meet her again.

Being experiential in nature, the Rainbow Bridge moves beyond the promise of a future yet to come, as being accessible through the mind, it is simply waiting for individuals to imagine their deceased pets. Within itself, this is a relatively unique eschatological proposition, and not surprisingly, potentially highly attractive for those navigating intense grief. Problematically though, learning about the intricacies of the Rainbow Bridge was no small task, but was aided by the participants joining groups committed to imagining this ethereal land, as detailed in the following section.

Imagining the Rainbow Bridge

Even though there was a strong desire amongst the participants to meaningfully engage with the Rainbow Bridge, there was also much uncertainty about how to look beyond the mundane, and just as importantly, how to differentiate supernatural fact from fiction. Explaining the challenge of attempting to explore the supernatural, Danielle (F, 45) said:

I knew that I wanted to learn more about the Rainbow Bridge and find a way to bring my babies back into my life. I just didn't know how to do it. I mean, I'd joined a load of online Rainbow Bridge groups. [Pause]. They were all new though. [Pause]. The Rainbow Bridge is only starting to get attention, meaning that we were all figuring stuff out back in the day. We still have huge gaps in our understanding now. So much to discover and explain. Pet death has been an undiscovered country for such a long time, and we are committed to mapping it. [Pause]. I do know that you can't just pick up the phone to the afterlife. You can't use your normal senses to communicate with the dead. I know this from being a child in a Christian church, as I was told that Heaven is ghostly. If our normal senses could see spirits, we'd see them every day. [Pause]. So, yes, in the beginning, all we had was hope. And looking for answers, we talked within our pet communities, searching for guidance and a way to see the Rainbow Bridge.

Reminding ourselves that the Rainbow Bridge is a relatively recent innovation within pet communities and has only started to gain traction over the past few years, it is not surprising that there was still much to elucidate about this 'undiscovered country.' Where possible though, the participants were keen to fill doctrinal gaps by drawing on their cultural and religious experiences and expectations, such as positioning the otherworldly as immaterial, and beyond our mundane senses. Critically however, and in taking this ontological stance, all participants rejected the use of their physical senses as a vehicle to perceive the Rainbow Bridge, and instead rapidly adopted imagination as a supernatural sense. Commenting on the operationalisation of the mind in this way, Gary (M, 30), said:

There was an idea floating around our group that you can see the Rainbow Bridge in your mind. In your dreams. When you are lost in thought. In fact, it popped up in several other Rainbow Bridge groups at about the same time. It kind of made sense when you consider that ghosts aren't physical. [Pause]. In a way, I think that some of this idea came from having been Christians and hearing church stories

about looking for the supernatural within ourselves. But also, our storytelling and earlier imaginary game playing with our pets. Let me explain. [Pause]. For a few years, I'd been making up stories about my dog Benny. Playful creative stuff and all that. Mmm, then Benny died. But we continued telling stories about him in the Rainbow Bridge. We knew what he loved doing in this life and extended our stories about him into the afterlife. Soon we were all telling stories about what our dead pets were doing there. To help our creativity, we painted pictures, wrote poems, and told even bigger stories. Might sound odd, but I really believe that all those who truly love their pets can know what their pets are doing in the afterlife. [Pause]. So, I told myself stories and sometimes tried to visualise them. I didn't always see much but could always tell a story. Thing was that I always knew what Benny was doing as I felt it in my heart. I never lost my connection to him and never will. I tried seeing the Rainbow Bridge within meditation and without. All that mattered was the stories I told. Sometimes pictures appeared, and sometimes they didn't. Either way, I was building a magical land in my head. It doesn't matter if people can't see pictures. All that matters is that people can imagine it and tell their pet's story.

It seems that learning to imagine the Rainbow Bridge is an iterative act, typically starting with simple storytelling, but where possible, slowly shifting into higher levels of immersive imagery that has the potential to be considered revelation. From a functional perspective, allowing each form of imagination to hold an equal epistemological weight empowered all group members to tell stories about the afterlife, regardless of their ability to produce visual mental content. Within itself, this facilitated spiritual freedom to explore otherworldly innovation, as new Rainbow Bridge stories were rapidly told, disseminated, and collectively reworked each day. Of course, whether these imaginary stories were regarded as fictional tales, or truthful accounts of pet paradise was a critical issue, as Mitzie (F, 29) discussed:

I know what you are thinking. Is any of this real? [Pause]. Yes, it is all real. Why? Because we want it to be. We have all suffered so much after losing our pets, and we need harmony here. We accept all positive views of the Rainbow Bridge. As long as our pets are safe, waiting for us in paradise, then the rest is not an issue. Harmony lets us build faith. Follow our hearts. We are all true believers here. Building more faith every day. Our pets would never leave us. They watch us every day. Guide us back to them. All we need do is open our hearts to them, and we will see them in the Rainbow Bridge. Once you've seen your pet or told a story about them in animal heaven you will always believe it. It grabs your heart forever. I have

to say that those who hurt their pets will never see the truth of any world. Love your pet. Cleanse your soul and see pet paradise. It awaits us all.

Belief was thus driven by an overwhelming desire for any positive Rainbow Bridge experiences to be true, irrespective of whether imagination was coherent, or showed visual content. Fundamental to this approach was the belief that love for a pet orientates the mind towards perceiving the Rainbow Bridge, whereas sinful behaviour corrupts any form of (im)material imagination. While all participants argued that their belief was built on faith, few were concerned that this epistemological foundation was flawed, as the emotional responses generated from imagining their deceased pets created an overwhelming desire for these experiences to be true. Examining these imaginative experiences, the next section explores how the participants commonly described the Rainbow Bridge.

The Nature of the Rainbow Bridge

As this sample increasingly claimed mental experiences of the Rainbow Bridge, it became possible to elucidate the features prevalent throughout this otherworldly arena. If for example, and as the participants contended, their experiences were true, it would make sense that broadly similar accounts would emerge, not only for the nature of this land, but how deceased pets exist there. Helping us understand these aspects, and how variability within imagined experiences was negotiated, Mark (M, 56) said:

I don't have all the answers right now as I'm still piecing it together. [Pause]. From what I've seen, the Rainbow Bridge is as everyone says, pet paradise. Not physical. But otherworldly and beautiful. The perfect place for our animal babies to wait for us. Not the real Heaven of course, but close to it. It has everything pets want and need. What would make your pet happiest? Well sir, the Rainbow Bridge has it by the barrel load. It is a magical land of meadows, beaches, sunny days, beautiful nights, and all the toys any pet could ever want. The best food, lots of treats, and millions of beds. Y'know, these food bowls remain full of tuna and every other food a pet would want. Beds are always clean. Don't know how it works myself. Magic or something. [Pause]. The best part is that no pet is afraid, or alone. It is the perfect version of Earth. Like the Garden of Eden, before we screwed it all up. No buildings, no motorways, and everything geared towards making pets happy. [Pause]. They all play together having a wonderful time each day. It warms my heart to think of it. The relief I got from knowing my cat is there is incredible.

Every day I know he is safe and happy, stuffing himself with food. Sunbathing, and doing everything he loved in this life with his new friends. [Pause]. I talk about this everyday with my online friends. We are really trying to understand this place and work it out together based on what makes our pets happiest.

The Rainbow Bridge can thus be considered a co-authored pet paradise, akin to a lower Heaven or the Garden of Eden, albeit immaterial in nature. Being idyllic, it was not surprising that the Rainbow Bridge was devoid of larger scale techno-scientific structures such as buildings, roads, and commerce. Yet, this utopian pet playground was not without all modern conveniences, as it was replete with beds, toys, and food. In depicting the Rainbow Bridge this way, we see the participants following a well-trodden eschatological path, to imagine the afterlife with all the best things from this mortal life, even when paradoxical, such as pets eating meat. While moral and metaphysical inconsistencies were common throughout the Rainbow Bridge, this lack of systematisation was generally 'resolved' by the participants asserting that this (1) otherworldly reality is just this way, (2) requires more faith to understand it, or (3) there is a deeper magical process at play that is not presently understood. Importantly, what seemed to matter most to the participants was not getting bogged down with metaphysical minutiae but continuing to imagine preferred stories about their pets within this pleasant ethereal land, and where possible maintaining group cohesion. This was particularly noticeable when listening to the participants detailing the transformatory nature of the Rainbow Bridge, as Ella (F, 68) explained:

Everyone here agrees life can be Hell on Earth for pets. The Rainbow Bridge fixes that. It purifies pet souls and prepares them for the real Heaven. No matter what cruelty they experienced during their lives on Earth, their soul bodies are restored. I've seen it. I've watched new pets arrive. The lame walk, the blind see, and youth is restored to all. It is a miracle I tell you. My rabbit Daisy became blind in her later years. I nursed her daily and she was happy. We were happy. [Pause]. It broke my heart to think of her stumbling around the Rainbow Bridge without me to help her. I couldn't cope with that. She had to be restored to full health. Otherwise, it wouldn't be paradise for either of us. [Pause]. But the Rainbow Bridge does a lot more than just fixing pets. It heals their souls. [Pause]. This world corrupts. Even animals are tainted. So, being in the Rainbow Bridge purifies them. All pets become perfect again. But when our pets die, they are released from the bondage of flesh, and can return to their true selves. Death is a return to innocence. They become true spiritual beings again. Angels, with halos and wings. Working to help pets who

recently died settle in and enjoy all the afterlife can offer. [Pause]. Everyone wants to think of their pet like this, so nobody disagrees. [Pause]. If we all believe the Rainbow Bridge is a better version of this life, why disagree? It hurts all of us all if we fight, so we ignore bits that we disagree with. Most is irrelevant stuff anyway.

While the notion of physical bodies constraining and corrupting the purity of the soul is an old religious theme, there was little to suggest that any participant had wanted their pets freed from the confines of flesh, even when their pet had suffered severe ill health. Having said this, all participants argued that death was a form of liberation, releasing pet spirits from the 'bondage of flesh,' in turn allowing them to achieve an angelic state with halos and wings, beyond disease and suffering. From a practical perspective, depicting pets as archetypal angels often allowed group members to simply discern the living from the dead, and adjust their storytelling accordingly, which was an increasingly important issue as more pets died. Critically though, and as Lilly (F, 61) mentioned, all participants agreed that the Rainbow Bridge was only a temporary residence for each pet:

As you've heard many times, the Rainbow Bridge isn't the real Heaven. Everyone here knows that our pets only stay there until we die. [Pause]. And when we do, those who loved their babies join them at the Rainbow Bridge. Then we journey to Heaven together, where we can spend all eternity. If anyone abused their pet, they go to Hell. They'll be tortured forever. To sin against your pet is unforgivable. This is all part of a cosmic test, and we pass it by loving our pets. [Pause]. I've seen those who loved their pets walking with them towards Heaven. So, when you think about it, the Rainbow Bridge is about humanity's final judgement as well.

Finally, we see human and pet eschatologies intertwining within the Rainbow Bridge, where eternal salvation and damnation are reduced to the moral and spiritual treatment of pets. Through this lens, mortal life is a 'cosmic test' for all humanity, passed through loving a pet, in turn allowing the pure of heart to re-embrace their deceased pets at the Rainbow Bridge, and jointly spend an eternity in Heaven. Of course, we might wonder how individuals without pets would fare salvifically? But, and like many other areas of the Rainbow Bridge, this issue was poorly explored, and was potentially waiting further imagination.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although humans have formed relationships with animals for over a hundred thousand years (Braje, 2011), it seems fair to say that we are in a time of great eschatological upheaval, as our societies increasingly adopt animals as pets (Statista, 2021), and reflect on whether they have a place in the afterlife (Lee, 2016; Zinner, 2016). At the heart of this issue is the conscious desire within pet-centric communities to elevate pets above the 'pejorative' classification of animal, and in so doing, overturn humanity's historic moral and religious privileges (Gardiner, 1989). While many in our societies remain unconvinced that pets are anything but animals, these participants routinely reimagined pets as quasi-perfect 'children,' capable of succeeding in familial and social roles where humans had 'failed.' Problematically though, and as we saw, blurring traditional species boundaries can easily leave individuals experiencing acute bereavement (Becker *et al.*, 2007; Hays & Hendrix, 2008; Testoni, De Cataldo, Ronconi & Zamperini, 2017; Wright, 2018), and yearning to be reunited with their deceased pets (Carmark & Packman, 2011).

When we consider that mainstream Western religions such as Christianity tend to pay little attention to animals in the afterlife (Linzey & Yamamoto, 1998), perhaps we should not be surprised that pet-centric communities are seeking to meet the eschatological needs of their times (McDannell & Lang, 2001) by imagining the Rainbow Bridge (Magliocco, 2018). For the bereaved, the appeal of the Rainbow Bridge is the simplicity of its eschatological premise, i.e. all pets are welcome, and all humans are invited to have faith, irrespective of their extant religious proclivities. Although, we might well wonder whether this will remain true as the Rainbow Bridge increases its doctrinal complexity and starts to mandate and proscribe behaviours. At present though, simplicity and poor theorisation have created a high degree of eschatological freedom for the faithful to reimagine and reshape the nature of the Rainbow Bridge. While this had the potential to enmesh individuals within ethereal uncertainty, this was rarely the case, as all individuals had a rudimentary cultural understanding of what paradise 'should' be like, allowing them to scaffold otherworldly views from previous religious teachings, common-sense views of the afterlife, and personal preferences (Davidson, 2005; Halevi, 2009). This was particularly noticeable through all participants framing the Rainbow Bridge as an immaterial paradise beyond our mundane sensory perception (Gardiner, 1989; Gooder, 2011).

Even though the religiously inclined have long argued that imagination is a vehicle to experience immaterial realities (Calvin, 1960), it is fair to say that there is still a poverty of understanding about how this mental sense is operationalised, and just as importantly,

how supernatural fact might be differentiated from fiction. Problematically, secular-materialist cultures have increasingly complicated this issue by positioning imagination as nothing more than a fictional endeavour, leaving imagination as a disliked way of knowing the (im)material (Akkach, 2001; Cohen & MacKeith, 1991). Reflecting on why the participants drew on imagination as an otherworldly sense, it seems that many had been sensitised to this mental potential as cultural Christians (Moffat & Yoo, 2019). However, and irrespective of previous religious teachings, all participants had developed in-depth imaginary skills within their pet communities, which were well suited to exploring the Rainbow Bridge. Curiously though, these imaginative capabilities rarely extended to directly perceiving immersive Rainbow Bridge landscapes, suggesting that proficiency in this ethereal mental act requires ongoing practice (Root-Bernstein, 2014) or divine intervention (Calvin, 1960). This however rarely seemed to trouble the participants, who were more concerned about using their imaginations to disseminate pet stories at the Rainbow Bridge, and psychologically supporting those suffering from pet loss. As such, it was not surprising that Rainbow Bridge stories often focused on deceased pets becoming angels, stripped of all earthly suffering, and spending their days in pleasurable pursuits, while waiting to be reunited with their loving humans. Within itself, it often seemed that these joyous depictions helped individuals move through mourning and back into their everyday lives, committed to the belief that they will be reunited with their pets at the Rainbow Bridge, and eventually spend an eternity together in the real Heaven.

Finally, with the Rainbow Bridge still being imagined each day, it is worth speculating on the extent that that more complex eschatological and religious themes will be negotiated at a personal, community, and social level. For example, will the Rainbow Bridge remain a simple 'add on' to other religions? Promising pets a future in the afterlife, but little more? Or will it shift to a larger pet-based religion? Allowing the exploration of classical religious themes such as creation, forgiveness, redemption, damnation, as well as the role of deities, demons, and so on. With little currently known about the trajectory of the Rainbow Bridge, the following section explores the potential for future work to track such aspects.

Future Work

As this study continued, it became increasingly clear that the participants were keen to develop a deeper understanding of their Rainbow Bridge experiences, which opened the door to investigate the remaining salient research gaps. Consequently, the first area to be examined is the extent to which the Rainbow Bridge is moving beyond a 'simple' eschatology and is being developed into a fuller religion. Attention will be paid towards

how discursive practices are deployed within these communities to either support or undermine emerging otherworldly views (Bochner & Ellis, 1995; Herrmann, 2015; Purchase et al., 2018), particularly where metaphysical inconsistencies, beliefs, and rituals are being negotiated.

The second area to be considered is the degree to which the Rainbow Bridge is an ethereal paradise exclusively for pets or might also be a temporary residence for animals more broadly. When we consider that mistreating a pet is typically regarded as an unforgivable sin within the current doctrine, there is much to understand about how the faithful demarcate what constitutes a pet and an animal, especially as a greater number of animals are imagined as pets each year. Just as importantly, we should consider how adopting beliefs in the Rainbow Bridge influences mundane attitudes towards animals and pets.

The third and last area to be explored is how this emerging doctrine is marketed to the wider public, and whether the Rainbow Bridge is gaining traction outside of those suffering from pet bereavement. Of much interest is the extent to which extant socio-cultural and religious beliefs lead individuals to adopt or reject beliefs in the Rainbow Bridge (Rogers, 2003). Finally, how discursive tactics, imagery, and storytelling impact new religious membership (Author, 2019).

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