

The Case for Deifying the Blue Whale

Eric M. Keen

While we still have the largest, most wondrous being ever to assume earthly form among us, why is it, in our religious pursuits, that we resort to ancient texts and indefensible faiths? With all that we now know about the blue whale, with all that remains unknown, and after all that we've done to her, it is high time someone asks the obvious: Shouldn't we be worshipping this animal? Hear me out:

Truly, this whale is an awesome whale. Consider, for a moment, the mind-blowing scale of this leviathan. She weighs as much as a town of two thousand people. She eats more than a ton of food per day. Her heart, which is the size of a Volkswagen Beetle (that's two tons), pumps sixty gallons of blood per beat. You could swim through her central arteries. The surface of her tongue is sixty-four square feet in area, and alone weighs over two tons. Her tongue!

This is what the blue whale does to the human mind, gets it figuring in tons and towns and automobiles, but all to no avail. Even with such illustrative measurements, little can be done to convey its scale. As with anything ultimate and unfathomable, attempting to describe this whale inevitably amounts to a grave human conceit -- a blasphemy. How dare we presume that her glory can be encapsulated by any dosage of fancy syllables, no matter how deft their arrangement?

In a perverse effort to make up for our verbal shortcomings, we may be tempted to curse, shout, or even speak in tongues. But no, let us accept linguistic defeat, and let our descriptions remain tasteful, mundane, and humbly insufficient. Repetition and italics, perhaps, are the best we can do: blue whales are big. *Big*. They are *SO* big. *Huge!* Such meager words leave the most to implication and imagination, those conceptual realms where the Almighty blue whale reigns supreme. Maybe we just shouldn't say anything at all. As John Muir said of the Grand Canyon, so too of our grandest whale: "The prudent keep silence."

Many religious traditions prohibit speaking their god's formal name. For most, daring to define, label, or constrain "him" is utter insolence. Some capitalize their Lord's name when writing it. Why should we preserve such reverences only for the supernatural? Shouldn't the ineffable ultimacies of the biosphere -- the blue whale first among them -- receive the same stylistic tribute? So let it be written, for the rest of this essay anyways: Not blue whale, but Blue Whale. And never again shall this writer use Her scientific name in vain.

Any exegesis on the Blue Whale must inevitably slip into this kind religious rhetoric. After all, should the premise of a supernatural deity ever lose its charm, no earthly being is more qualified to step in. That may sound far-fetched, but dozens of human groups throughout history have done precisely that. Several still do today. Seeking a meal, they regularly risk life and limb to take down their holy leviathans, often armed only with bamboo spears. Such a relationship understandably fosters intense reverence and fear, which naturally leads to religious levels of regard for the whale. Hunted, yes, but holy.

Chief among such "aboriginal whaling communities" today is Lamalera, deep in the constellation of Indonesia's eastern islands. For Lamalerans, the sperm whale (the species made iconic in Melville's *Moby Dick*) is the basis for their cultural identity, mythology, rituals, and religious calendar -- in addition to their menu. It is both ancestor and prophet, diet and destroyer, deity and dinner.

Such whale-worship is certainly not limited to the indigenous or the remote. New England's 19th century whaling capital, New Bedford, was rapt with the very same religious hysteria over the sperm whale. Sailors filled the pews of the Seaman's Bethel the Sunday before their voyage. A sperm whale's deadly flukes, capable of pulverizing the small whaling dinghies to smithereens, were referred to as "the Hand of God." The slices of blubber flensed to fit into the ships' boiling vats were called "bible leaves," conjuring images of the whale as a holy text.

But even for Lamalerans, the Blue Whale remains the most sacred of all. Because of her feature role in the origin myth of their village (a Blue Whale carried the village's founder, a Lamaleran Aeneas, on Her back to the sanctuary of their half-moon bay), Lamalerans refuse ever to hunt Her. She is untouchable. She is beyond them, beyond all other whales. Certainly much more than mere meat. More, even, than your every-day kind of holiness.

A review of the Blue Whale's qualifications makes her an obvious candidate for deification. These go far beyond the mere fact of Her size. She is equally as ineffable and unfathomable as any god we have ever concocted. She boasts the same essential contradiction of might and mystery, that familiar co-habitation of Creation and Destruction: the former, as its most grandiose and superlative achievement; the latter, in the megadeath of krill She inflicts with each feeding lunge.

Like all whales, the idea of the Blue Whale is saturated with counter-intuition -- at least in the hapless minds of us humans, a species all too easily rapt by paradox and immensity. Consider that whales and dolphins all live in water but never drink from it. They live under the surface but breathe above it, somehow dwelling in both worlds at once, an ethereal, sublime, lonesome existence -- both empty and full, both fancy-free and purgatorial. Their very anatomy has been co-opted by evolution to achieve odd and opposite purposes; they use sound to see and their bodies to hear. Their backs are one large foot. In the case of baleen whales, their teeth are the physiological equivalent of spaghetti strainers.

They are the perfect monsters: grotesquely shaped leviathans of inconceivable might, denizens of a dark and cold world absolutely inhospitable to people, ever elusive and yet, by virtue of their sheer scale, always uncomfortably close. They are senseless, incoherent creatures, as much myth as they are real. Is there any other life form that tickles all of our pressure points for wonder with such versatility and grace?

Many have remarked on the conundrum of the whale. Philip Hoare, in *The Whale*, refers to his subject frankly as "paradoxical animals." Melville called the whale an "overwhelming idea," an "ungraspable phantom of life." Recognizing how essential this nonsense is to their allure, he added, "and this is the key to it all." For Hoare, "whales exist beyond the normal...they are not so much animal as geographical..." Whales as landmasses. The surf battering their flanks, their shores, as they brood at the surface. Aye, there are no pictures of whales; only maps.

Of all whales, of course, the Blue Whale epitomizes their innate paradox. She is the largest whale, yet perhaps the least understood. She is the largest creature in the ocean, but feeds strictly on one of the smallest (*Euphausiid* krill). Even her scientific name, *B. musculus*, which in Latin could mean both "muscle" and "mouse", reflects the essential paradox of this animal. In the ocean's clearest waters, one could never see a Blue Whale in its entirety all at once. So easily lost in Her own magnitude, She is both endless and discontinuous. Indeed, as in the versatile duality of Christianity's Father and Son, the Blue Whale can be as ethereal or as corporeal as we could ever wish for. Yes, there is something religious about this whale.

Accounts of Blue Whale encounters tend to take on the tone of a conversion experience. Those twenty-five-foot high, stately Corinthian columns of vapor, erupting forth endlessly from the Vulcan oblivion of Her blowholes, the almighty repugnance of its apocalyptic breath...It would, like a blinding light on the road to Tarsus, be enough to win over even the most crotchety of apostates.

Even the conservation of this animal is cloaked in contradiction. As Jacques Cousteau put it, "because of their enormous size, they are presumed indestructible." She is the apotheosis of evolution, the crowning achievement of the biosphere -- and yet She is one of the rarest and most endangered animals in the ocean (thanks to us). Envision those old images of blue whales hanging from the tryworks hooks of whaling vessels, their ribcages punctured with flensing hooks: grotesque allusions to the crucifixion.

Consider the modern religious predicament: our estrangement from God and godliness through our idolatrous discipleship of industry and consumerism. Conveniently, should we ever make the switch, the Blue Whale's endangerment provides a ready analog: the Antarctic Blue Whale's population is just 1% of what it was before whaling, and their resumed extermination remains a lingering threat. You can all too easily imagine the leviathanic version of Nietzsche's iconoclastic proclamation: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."

Then there's the trump card. While retaining all the paradox and nonsense we could ever seek in a god, the Blue Whale definitely exists. Mystery, in Her case, is not in the question of her existence, but in her glorious reality. With every towering geyser of Her breath, She reminds us that wonder, not faith, should be the highest criterion of religious ideas, that the "natural" can still be "super", and that there is a critical difference between the Unfathomable and the Unreal, the Ineffable and the Irrelevant.

Her case seems solid enough. But what would the implications be, if we were to turn our religious attention to the largest whales? For starters, instead of searching for god's booming voice in the heavens, we would do so in the oceans. Her song is certainly thunderous and authoritative enough for the job. Instead of looking up, we would have to look down and around us, out to sea; this may do us some good. Also, researchers might have an easier time with funding.

In fact, the switch would solve a lot of the problems that have nagged Western theism for centuries. For example: since female Blue Whales are much larger than males, our god's default pronoun would switch from "Him," a patriarchal and controversial relic, to "Her", with the bonus of having an actual reason for the designation.

One thing is certain: deifying the Blue would undermine the age-old conceit that *Homo sapiens*, or any one group of them, are the "Chosen Ones." The Blue Whale could hardly care less whether or not we exist. In fact, given our history of slaughtering Her, She might prefer that we didn't. Let us hope our new god is not the vengeful type. To have such an indifferent god, one with more interest vested in krill than in humanity, would certainly serve a healthy blow to our collective ego.

Obviously, this little thought experiment won't be winning over any converts. But the question remains, and I hold that it remains valid: doesn't this animal deserve at least a fraction of our most reverent attention?

Perhaps the reason we aren't bowing down *en masse* stems from the same quality that gives her such an edge over the current gods on offer: her trump card, her definite and jaw-dropping "real-

ness". People just don't seem eager to reserve their deepest gratitude, respect or devotion to concepts that are obviously true. Faith, placed as it is these days atop its lofty pedestal, seems the primary and highest virtue of the devout. I suppose if the Blue Whale didn't exist, She would be a more of a contender -- but let's hope that never comes to pass.

So until the day comes that the Blue Whale is finally exalted for its most valuable and untapped resources – wonder, rather than blubber, and awe, rather than oil – rest assured that She will be out there, biding her time, lumbering along in Her worldwide peregrinations, sinfully under-appreciated, blasphemously under-revered, and hedonistically viewed by most as a mere resource. Yes, She will be out there, somewhere, cerulean and ineffable, fishy and unfathomable, ever-brooding, ever-enormous, paradoxical, absurd, Almighty, terrible, spectacular, wondrous, and just plain big.

Thank god for that.

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Biography:

A naturalist and an educator, Eric Keen studied biology and religion at Sewanee: The University of the South, before graduating Phi Beta Kappa and completing a Fulbright grant in Indonesia. He has studied cetaceans in the rivers of Borneo, in the Mediterranean, in the geologic records of New Zealand, and in the fiord-lands of Chile and British Columbia. He has been published in *Earth Times* and the *Ecologist*. Eric is currently at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, pursuing a Ph.D. in the coastal ecology of large whales.