

Christian Attitudes to Animals

Valuable resources can be found in Christian tradition to support improving treatment of farm animals by humans. These challenge the idea that animals are objects freely available for human use and exploitation. Forming part of British, European and global cultural history, these resources are relevant to Christians and the whole of society.

1. The Status of Animals

a. Animals in relationship with humans

In many stories, Christian saints have gained animal companions that they have cared for or healed. Gerasimus removed a large reed from the paw of a lion, which then carried water for his monastery and, following the abbot's death, lay down on his grave and died. Macarius healed a hyena whelp of blindness, and slept for the rest of his life on the sheepskin that its mother carried to him in thanks. Malo brought a dead sow back to life, and Werburga a dead goose. A wild boar, fox, badger, wolf and deer became disciplines of Ciaran. A fox returned to St Moling the hen it had stolen. A blackbird laid an egg in Kevin's hand, which the saint held open until the egg hatched. Such stories testify to close bonds between humans and animals based on relationship and mutual understanding.

Other accounts describe animals exercising agency of a kind normally associated with humans. Lions dug a grave in the desert for Paul the Hermit, and guarded the donkey that fetched wood for Jerome's monastery. A grasshopper accompanied Saint Francis while he prayed his midnight office. Pachomius and Helenus were ferried across a river by crocodiles. A wild ass carried the supplies of Helenus. As Cuthbert prayed on the beach before dawn, otters warmed his feet with their pantings and dried them with their fur. Godric's cow lowed to him from outside church to be milked as he ended his prayers. A stag held Cainnic's book between its antlers for him to read. A mouse kept Colman awake during his night prayers by gnawing at his clothing or nibbling his ear. In these narratives, animals perform invaluable functions for humans, displaying intuition and care. They become moral exemplars for humans, showing the care they should give to each other.

b. Animals as moral and purposeful subjects

Early Christian writings associate different moral qualities with different kinds of animal. In the Epistle of Barnabas, for example, fish with fins or scales signify endurance and self-control, whereas unclean fish lack these and are swept away by the current. Reptiles wriggling along on their belly represent people who are motivated by greedy desires and passions, whereas creeping things able to leap serve as an allegory for successful moral effort. Pigs recognize their owner only when hungry, and so represent people who remember the Lord only when in need. Birds of prey signify people who sit idly by waiting to seize on the flesh of others rather than obtaining their food by work and toil. The hare is considered unclean owing to its association with fertility.

This methodology is developed in detail in later medieval bestiaries. The turtledove has only one mate, and so signifies faithfulness. The pelican, who feeds her young on her own blood, represents sacrifice. Partridges steal and hatch the eggs of other birds, and therefore symbolize deceit. Some of these characterizations might appear fanciful. They nevertheless persist today, such as in the association of foxes with cunning, lions with power, dogs with faithfulness and beavers with industry. Some animals are presented positively and others negatively, but in either case are recognized as possessing natures that humans should allow them freedom to fulfil and from which humans can learn, whether by imitation or avoidance.

c. Animals in the New Testament

Several of Jesus' apostles were fishermen and the image of catching fish is used to represent Christian mission. Jesus said that the birds of the air are fed by God. On Palm Sunday, a donkey carried him into Jerusalem—an event re-enacted in some churches today with a real donkey. Jesus

is represented as a slain lamb, and after his resurrection cooked and ate fish with his disciples to prove his bodily existence. In the vision of Revelation, white horses carry truth and judgement.

Christian folk traditions, expanding on biblical texts, present certain animals playing a positive role in biblical stories. Farm animals were present in the stable at Jesus' birth, and a donkey carried him with Mary and Joseph into Egypt to keep him safe from King Herod. The conger eel plugged a hole in Noah's ark. John Dory and skate bear the imprint of Jesus' hand or the instruments of his Passion, or of Mary's face. Biblical references and traditions show that animals play important, positive roles in Jesus' life and in subsequent Christian understandings of that life.

Moreover, the four Gospels are sometimes identified with different living beings. The lion, representing Mark, signifies the voice of John the Baptist crying in the wilderness. The ox is associated with Luke because it is a sacrificial animal. The eagle soars and was believed to be the only animal able to gaze directly into the sun, and so represents John who contemplates the truth of Christ. Alongside these animals a human being symbolizes Matthew, who lists Christ's human ancestors.

2. Animals, Humans and the Natural Order

a. Sourcing local produce

Monasteries and convents maintained a simple way of life so that their monks and nuns could live free from distractions and so be devoted to God. Their diet was very simple, with arrangements for eating and permissible foods laid down in writing. In his rule composed around 350, Basil of Caesarea instructed:

We ought to choose for our own use whatever is more easily and cheaply obtained in each locality and available for common use and bring in from a distance only those things which are more necessary for life, such as oil and the like or if something is appropriate for the necessary relief of the sick—yet even this only if it can be obtained without fuss and disturbance and distraction.

By commending local produce wherever possible, Basil took steps to ensure that monasteries and convents did not take advantage of their size and status in order to obtain foods not available to ordinary people. Monks and nuns thus lived in solidarity with their local and regional communities.

b. Restricting meat and dairy consumption and production

The Christian calendar developed in Europe in harmony with the seasons. Lurches between scarcity and abundance were part of daily life, and the evolving pattern of church feasts and fasts reflected this. During fasts, meat-eating was not allowed. The principal fasting season was Lent, preceding Easter. This lasted more than six weeks, and no red meat, poultry or dairy products could be eaten through the whole period. The other important fasting season was Advent, the period of about a month leading up to Christmas. Meat and poultry were also banned on other fasts. Abstinence was also required on every Wednesday (the day when Judas Iscariot agreed to betray Jesus), every Friday (the day when Jesus was crucified), and every Saturday (the day Jesus lay in the tomb), unless a feast fell on one of these days. Fasting was also required on the eves of about 15 feasts. This meant that meat could not be eaten on well over half the days of the year. By placing regular strict limits on diet, Christian fasts helped to preserve food stocks and discouraged overeating.

The major feasts were Eastertide (lasting 50 days) and Christmastide (lasting 12 days). These were probably the only times of the year when many ordinary people would have eaten meat. During periods of feasting, people ate very different food from normal. They enjoyed the special provisions that God had provided for them, celebrating with family, friends and their wider community.

The harmony between Christian fasting and the natural seasonal cycle is especially clear with Lent. In Europe, a period of scarcity occurs naturally during late winter and early spring. Abstinence from red meat, poultry and dairy products in this period became a function of practical reality sanctified by the Church, and a formal and structured recognition by both Church and society of practical realities. Moreover, it was in the interest of peasant farmers not to slaughter their last remaining animals, because this would have depleted future stocks as well as animals needed for ploughing, transport and dairy production. Lenten fasting was thus a sanctified acceptance by humans of the natural rhythms of the earth and the wisdom of nature.

c. Law and the natural order

In medieval and Reformation England, people did not fast voluntarily. Regulating food consumption (and thereby production) was a key public policy objective, and attempts were made to limit the dining of the populace. In 1336, legislation was passed restricting meals to two courses, or three on festivals. In 1363, grooms and servants were limited to one meat or fish dish per day.

Regulating food consumption became even more important in the reign of King Henry VIII, as part of his attempts to build a strong nation state. In 1536, as the Reformation was in full progress, he promulgated an injunction instructing that 'no person shall from henceforth alter or change the order and manner of any fasting-day that is commanded and indicted by the Church ... until such time as the same shall be so ordered and transposed by the King's Highness' authority'. Fasting was not regarded simply as a matter of personal piety, but performed important political and economic functions. The serious consequences of breaking a fast were stated by Edward VI in 1547, who warned: 'Whosoever shall, upon any day heretofore wont to be fasted from flesh, and not by the king's highness or his predecessor's abrogate and taken away, eat flesh contrary to this proclamation, shall incur the king's high indignation, and shall suffer imprisonment and be otherwise grievously punished at his majesty's will and pleasure.'

In 1538, Henry VIII had repealed the Lenten ban on the consumption of dairy products, including milk, butter, eggs and cheese, in order to relieve pressure on fish stocks during the season and probably also to appease his subjects by making the fast a little easier. Yet after the Reformation, abstinence from red meat and poultry continued to be enforced strictly. In 1548, Saturday was added as a second meatless day by Act of Parliament on grounds of historic precedent, and in 1563 Wednesday was also added. Penalties for infringing the fasts were laid down in 1551: a fine of ten shillings for the first offence, along with ten days in prison. Similar regulations existed in other parts of Europe, with constables patrolling the streets to check for smells of meat being cooked.

d. Cleanliness and hygiene

The idea that food consumption should be regulated finds strong support in the Old Testament. In Genesis, only humans are given permission to eat meat (Gen. 9.3). Moreover, predatory animals that consume the flesh of other animals are deemed unclean and therefore inedible. To be classed as clean, a land animal needed to have a divided hoof and chew the cud. This meant that most domesticated farm animals were regarded as clean, whereas rarer wild animals were often unclean.

These rules protected people from the health hazards associated with meat. Greater awareness of them would do the same today. It is too little realized that Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) would probably not have devastated cattle stocks if these rules had been observed. The disease spread among cattle in Britain during the 1980s because normally herbivorous animals were fed the remains of other animals in the form of rendered meat and bone meal. This contravened the rule that only humans should eat meat. Moreover, the disease spread to humans who had consumed infected beef in the form of (new) variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD). This amounted to the consumption by humans of an animal that was unclean because it had eaten another animal.

Cleanliness rules sometimes have unexpected consequences. Pigs are recognized in several cultures to be indiscriminate scavengers and therefore effective waste-disposal systems. For reasons

such as these, Jews and Muslims regard them as unclean. Christians have not retained this taboo, however. Indeed in Cairo, the Zabbaleen community of Coptic Christians, who have for the past century been mainly responsible for refuse disposal and recycling, have used and bred pigs for precisely this purpose. Yet in response to the 2009 global swine flu pandemic, the Egyptian government ordered a nationwide pig cull. This threatened seriously to undermine the livelihood of certain Coptic Christians.

3. The Welfare of Animals

a. Animal sacrifice

Rituals of animal sacrifice have been far more common in Christianity than is generally recognized. When missionaries arrived in Britain around the year 600, sacrifice was so deeply engrained in culture that the Pope allowed it to continue provided that the animals were offered to the Christian God and no other. In more recent centuries, these rituals have been mainly confined to Eastern Orthodox churches. An ancient sacrificial liturgy known as the *matal*, meaning 'something tender', has persisted in the Armenian Church to the present day.

A key requirement of animals offered for sacrifice is that they must be unblemished, ensuring that they have been well-fed, comfortably accommodated and free from disease. In the Armenian *matal*, at least three factors minimize the suffering caused to the animal during slaughter: rules must be observed, attentiveness shown by the slaughterer, and reverence displayed at all times. In some accounts of sacrifice, the animal is presented as so contented that it co-operates in its own sacrifice. Paulinus describes such an instance at the shrine of Felix of Nola in southern Italy, in which a heifer designated for sacrifice guided her owners to the shrine to present herself with them.

The visibility of animal slaughter to eaters of meat is deeply countercultural. In Britain and other European countries, nineteenth-century hygiene legislation forced slaughter off the streets and into abattoirs located in suburbs. Although this migration provided the possibility of higher welfare standards, its more significant impact was to make animal slaughter an anonymous, invisible and clandestine activity shielded from the view of the general populace. Yet the visibility of historic sacrificial rituals to ordinary people has been key to ensuring that the rules governing humane farming and slaughter are observed.

b. A modern Christian theology of slaughter as sacrifice

The twentieth-century German Protestant theologian Karl Barth argues that, from a Christian viewpoint, slaughter can be understood *only* as sacrifice, in which the life of an animal is substituted as a sign for the life that humans have forfeited by their sin and disobedience. In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth states: 'The slaying of animals is really possible only as an appeal to God's reconciling grace, as its representation and proclamation.' For a human being to presume to kill an animal on his or her own authority would, Barth contends, be murder. The only authority on which animals may be killed legitimately is God's, which means that moral and spiritual submission to God are required of humans engaged in slaughter. Barth asserts:

The killing of animals in obedience is possible only as a deeply reverential act of repentance, gratitude and praise on the part of the forgiven sinner in face of the One who is the Creator and Lord of man and beast. The killing of animals, when performed with the permission of God and by His command, is a priestly act of eschatological character.

The theological implications of this understanding of slaughter as sacrifice extend to the eating that follows. Barth affirms: 'A meal which includes meat is a sacrificial meal. It signifies a participation in the reconciling effect of the animal sacrifice commanded and accepted by God as a sign.' In such a meal, the animal's life becomes a substitutionary sign signifying human participation in God's reconciling action.

c. Reforming the slaughterhouse

Through sacrifice, the gifted character of animal life is acknowledged as originating from God and being offered back to God. Sacrificial rituals remind humans that animal life is not their personal possession to take whenever or however they wish. Historically, prominent Christian writers like Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton and Alexander Pope argued that the sacrificial practices described in the Old Testament were less cruel than the alternatives then available such as strangulation or hammer blows to the head. But is the same true today?

It is often argued that modern electronic stunning subjects an animal being slaughtered to less pain than traditional religious methods of slaughter. This may be true, but the wider slaughterhouse environment frequently exacerbates suffering by, for example, insensitive lighting, bright or rapidly moving machinery and the channelling of animals in ways they would not naturally move or gather. A more respectful approach to slaughter would ameliorate these conditions, by attending to spatial dynamics and assigning responsibility for slaughter to a specific individual. Inside most slaughterhouses where large numbers of factory farmed animals are killed, the basic organizational principle is the splitting up of the act of killing into a 'process' for which no-one is directly responsible. Yet acceptance of direct agency in the act of killing by a single, free, identifiable person is crucial to ensuring that it is carried out as attentively and painlessly as possible in a context of clear moral responsibility and accountability.

Temple Grandin, a designer and operator of equipment used to kill animals in slaughter plants who is based in Colorado, has sought to reorganize some of their processes according to ritual concepts. Almost one-half of all cattle slaughtered in the United States have been moved through handling facilities that she has designed. Grandin has described how respectful ideas can foster in workers an understanding of slaughter as part of a process that places controls on killing, resensitizing workers and increasing their awareness of death as a sacred moment. Measures she has introduced include the configuration and adornment of factory space, the naming of pieces of machinery, rotating workers around tasks to discourage routinization, and reducing line speed.

d. Meat, factory farming and idolatry

In Old and New Testament societies, regular warnings were issued against worshipping false gods. Animals were killed frequently and their meat offered to idols. These activities sustained powerful vested interests in farming and religion. In some of Paul's letters, meat-eaters are warned to avoid meat that is a by-product of these sacrifices to images.

Factory farming and mass animal slaughter are unnecessary, being based on inflated estimates of the amount of meat needed in a healthy human diet. They sustain large and powerful business interests in both pastoral and arable farming. They desensitize society to real human needs and suffering. They are thoughtless continuations of inherited practices that should be ended and replaced with methods that better reflect present-day ethical aspirations.

Conclusion

The Bible and subsequent Christian tradition rightly acknowledge that meat is the most problematic human food. They suggest a need to respond flexibly and wisely to the shifting social, political and ecological contexts in which meat is produced and consumed. Although the world is presented by God to humans as a gift for their consumption, it is a gift with structure, boundaries and rules. These rules do not fit neatly with a modern consumerist 'logic' that everything in the world is comprehensively or completely available for consumption. They are more complex, being unfolded in Christian scripture, ethics and theology. Christians and all human beings are called to acknowledge that the natural world of which they are part exhibits this structure. Ethically responsible consumer choices and government legislation will be needed if our shared food resources are to be produced and consumed responsibly and handed on to future generations.

Further Reading

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