

6. Christian Theology and Animal Rights - Andrew Linzey

The Negative Tradition

‘It is not a sin to beat a dog or leave it to starve to Death.’ These are the reported words of the Archbishop of Udine in eastern Italy from a Christmas sermon in 1988. ‘A clog is not a person, it belongs to man’, argued the Archbishop who went on to regret that ‘the law sends to prison a man who kills a pigeon while the murder of an unborn child in its mother’s womb goes unpunished.’¹ If, even today, few Christians appear to regard animals and their treatment as an important moral issue, the answer has to be sought in the history and development of doctrine. Christian theology has provided some of the best arguments for not taking animal rights seriously. There are four key arguments.

1. Animals have no mind or reason. It was St Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*, inspired in turn by Aristotelian philosophy, who first fully systematised the view that animals were devoid of mental powers:

Dumb animals and plants are devoid of the life of reason whereby to set themselves in motion; they are moved, as it were by another, by a kind of natural impulse, a sign of which is that they are naturally enslaved and accommodated to the uses of others.²

This idea that animals have no mental powers, do not act by conscious will, but by ‘nature’ and ‘instinct’, has been persuasive throughout centuries of Christian theology. Men, according to St Thomas, are uniquely rational, an inherent part of being made in the ‘image of God.’

2. Animals have no immortal souls. St Thomas and his followers distinguished between three kinds of souls: ‘vegetative souls’ of vegetables, ‘sensitive souls’ of animals, and ‘rational souls’ of humans. Only the rational souls of humans were thought to be ‘incorporeal’ (capable of withstanding physical death). The view that only men were fully rational (because men were made in the image of God), led to doubts about both the souls of women (who Aquinas thought were made in the image of God in a secondary way to that of men) and to the complete rejection of animal souls. The view that women were ‘close to the animal state’ — to use Keith Thomas’ words — has persisted throughout the centuries. The Quaker divine, George Fox, for example, apparently met villagers who thought that women had ‘no souls, no more than a goose.’³

3. Animals are not sentient. By ‘sentient’ we mean here the ability to experience pain. From the denial of reason and soulfulness to animals, it was only a short step to the idea that animals had insufficient consciousness to feel pain. The main exponent of this position was Rene Descartes. According to Descartes, animals ‘act naturally and mechanically, like a clock which tells the time better than our own judgement does.’⁴ Animals, in short, are simply machines, without consciousness, rationality or feeling. This view has been implicitly or explicitly accepted by many theologians; in this century even the celebrated biologist, natural theologian and Professor of Divinity, Charles Raven doubted whether animals could feel pain.⁵

4. Animals have no moral status. Catholic moral text-books continue to deny that humans have any direct duties to animals. The Dictionary of Moral Theology explains why:

Zoophilists (animal lovers) often lose sight of the end for which animals, irrational creatures, were created by God, viz., the service and use of man. In fact, Catholic moral doctrine teaches that animals have no rights on the part of man.⁶

Pope Pius IX, in the nineteenth century, forbade the opening of an animal protection office in Rome on the grounds that humans had duties to other humans but none to animals.⁷ To this should be added the bizarre history of animal trials in Europe. There are over 200 written accounts of the criminal prosecution and capital punishment of animals — from the 9th to the 19th centuries. These were predominantly ecclesiastical trials inspired by the view of St Thomas that certain animals are used by the devil for human detriment. Accordingly, animals who were found ‘guilty’ of hurting or inconveniencing humans were deliberately mangled, tortured, hung from their necks, and formally ‘anathematised’ by ecclesiastical judges.⁸

Positive Teaching

This profoundly negative tradition has provided the key elements of vastly influential theology of animals which has held sway for ten centuries or more. And yet there is also a positive tradition which has seldom received adequate attention and acquired, until recently, little influence. We may select four major elements.

1. Animals are God’s creatures. Belief in God as the Creator and sustainer of all life is central to Christian doctrine, and yet its implications for our understanding of animals have never been fully developed. One point, however, appears central: animals belong to God and exist primarily for God. God, in other words, rejoices in the differentiated creation he has made. The traditional scholastic view that animals exist simply to serve human ends, or are wholly means to human ends, is difficult to reconcile with much biblical teaching; for example, in Colossians I: 16 (RSV):

In him *all* things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities — *all* things were created *through* him and *for* him.

Scholastic theology has been so anthropocentric that it has helped obscure this basic doctrinal point: God is the generous Creator of all life and all life exists principally for the glory of God.

2. Animals have intrinsic value. It follows that if animals belong to God they must have some fundamental worth. Slowly but surely this insight is being recognised as a basic implication of doctrine. ‘We need to maintain the value, the preciousness of the human, by affirming the preciousness of the non-human also,’ argued Archbishop Robert Runcie in a recent lecture. He went on:

For our concept of God forbids the idea of a cheap creation, of a throwaway universe in which everything is expendable save human existence. The whole universe is a work of love. And nothing which is made in love is cheap. The value, the worth, of natural things, is not found in Man’s view of himself but in the goodness of God who made all things good and precious in his sight.’⁹

3. Humans have responsibility to animals. For many centuries the standard interpretation of the word ‘dominion’ (*radah*) in Genesis has been nothing less than ‘despotism’. Luther, for example, held that after the fall and the flood, ‘animals are subject to a tyrant who has absolute power over life and death.’¹⁰ But recent scholarship has underlined the point that the power given to humankind is not of an absolute or arbitrary kind, it is authority that must be exercised under God’s moral rule.¹¹ Dominion understood in this sense means not despotism but responsibility or ‘stewardship.’ This view is undoubtedly in accordance with the text itself which gives humans dominion over animals and also commands both man and animals to be vegetarian. (Gen. 1 :31).

The idea that humans have a responsibility to be compassionate beyond the boundaries of their own species came of age in the growth of the humane movement in the nineteenth century. It was an Anglican priest, Arthur Broome, who founded the first ever animal welfare society, the RSPCA, in 1824. It was founded as a Christian Society ‘based on Christian principles.’ One of its principal aims was the encouragement of humane education and, to that end, sponsored sermons on animal welfare in many London churches.¹²

4. Human and animal life is interdependent. Unlike scholastic theology which emphasised differences between animals and humans, there is a great deal of biblical theology which stresses the interdependence, unity, and common condition which exists between all species, especially between animals and humans. For example:

creation (Gen.1:23f); God's covenant relationship extends to Noah and his descendants and also expressly to the living creatures around him (Gen. (9:8f); according to the Psalmist both animals and humans are under God's providential care and all creation praises its Maker (Psalms 147 and 148); indeed animal is similarly enlivened by God's Spirit; in Jeremiah (7:20) both animals and humans share the judgement of the Lord; according to Mark's gospel, Jesus' life and ministry identified with animals at many and various points, not least of all when Jesus was in the wilderness 'with the wild beasts' (Mark 1:13), and Jesus' own teaching emphasises that however more valuable humans may be than animals, not one sparrow is 'forgotten before God'. (Luke 12:6f).

This sense of the unity and interdependence of all life is graphically illustrated in the lives of many saints. One of the earliest of Francis' biographers witnesses to his communion with living creatures:

He rejoiced in all the works of the hands of the Lord and saw behind all things pleasant to behold their life-giving reason and cause. In beautiful things he saw Beauty itself, all things were to him good. 'He who made us is the best' they cried out to him.¹³

St Francis of course is not alone in his concern for 'brother and sister' creatures - as he called them. The lives of more than two thirds of canonised saints —east and west — demonstrate a practical concern for, and befriending of, animals which was often in sharp contrast to the conventional view of their contemporaries.

Despite these — and many other — positive aspects within the Christian tradition, it remains true that theology of this subject is still in its infancy. By and large, Christians continue to look at the world through anthropocentric spectacles. And yet theology can help liberate Christians into a new regard for animals. Here are two major issues.

The Theos-rights of Animals

Catholic scholasticism, as we have seen, utterly rejected the idea that animals have rights. Many Christians today are also reluctant to use the language of rights which they see as irredeemably secular. And yet there is a theological case for animal rights which is frequently overlooked. It begins by taking seriously the idea that God has certain rights in his creation because he is the Creator. This point was grasped by no less a person than Cardinal Heenan, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster:

(animals) have very positive rights because they are God's creatures. If we have to speak with absolute accuracy we must say that God has the right to have all his creatures treated with respect.¹⁴

If this line of reasoning is correct, it is possible to speak of what I have elsewhere called the ‘theos-rights’ (literally God-rights) of animals.¹⁵ The debate about whether animals have rights is not therefore about whether humans should award a particular quality characteristic, or ability to animals but rather whether humans can recognise — and celebrate and champion — what God has already given in the creation he has made. From this perspective the issue of animal rights is about whether humans can give to animals that radical respect which God requires of us.

Making Peace with Creation

The triumph of the negative tradition about animals has led inexorably to the massive devaluing of animal life in western culture. Today we hunt, ride, shoot, fish, eat, wear, trap, cage, course, factory, farm and experiment upon billions of animals every year. Scholastic theology has taught us that animals have the status of ‘things’; the result is unsurprising we have treated animals as ‘things’. To begin to take the positive theology of animals seriously involves making some uncomfortable choices about the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the products we buy, and the life-style we lead. I propose that there is one moral principle which follows ineluctably from the positive theology we have briefly outlined, and it is this: It is wrong to be the cause of avoidable injury. Although it is undoubtedly true that we are all guilty to some degree of infringing the rights of animals, what we all need is a programme of personal disengagement from injury to animals.

The Christian tradition which has assisted in the oppression of animals can also, and should now, provide vision of animal liberation. That vision of a world at peace is fundamental to the Judeo-Christian tradition:

Then the wolf shall live with the sheep, and the
leopard lie down with the kid; the calf and the
young lion shall grow up together, and a little
child shall lead them . . .

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain
for as the waters fill the sea, so shall the land
be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.
(Isaiah 11 : 6-9. NEB).

Notes:

1. Archbishop of Udine, reported in *The Irish Times* (AFP), January 1989.

2. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ET by the English Dominican Fathers (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1918), Part II, Question 64, Article 1.
3. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984) p.43
4. Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method in Philosophical Works of Descartes*, ET by E.S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (London: Cambridge University Press, 1950), Vol. 11, pp.115-118.
5. Charles Raven, *The Creator Spirit* (London: Longmans, 1927) p.120.
6. *Dictionary of Moral Theology*, edited by P. Palazzini compiled by F. Roberti, ET by H.J. Yannone (London: Burns and Oates, 1962) p.73.
7. Cited and discussed in James Gaffney, 'The Relevance of Animal Experimentation to Roman Methodology' in Tom Regan (ed), *Animal Sacrifices: Religious Perspectives on the Use of Animals in Science* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986) pp.149, and 159-160.
8. See E.P. Evans, *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals: The Lost History of Europe's Animal Trials* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987).
9. Robert Runcie, 'Address at the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival'. 11th April, 1988, pp 13-4.
10. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol II, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1958) pp.132—3.
11. See John Austin Baker, 'Old Testament Attitudes to Nature' in Hugh Montefiore (ed), *Man and Nature* (London: Collins, 1975).
12. See the 'Prospectus of the RSPCA, *RSPCA Records* Vol II (1823 - 26), p.198.
13. Il Celano, Chp. CXXXIV, 165, *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, p.494; cited and discussed in A.M. Allchin, *The World is a Wedding: Explorations in Christian Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1978, p.85.
14. Cardinal Heenan, in 'Foreword' to Ambrose Agius, *God's Animals* (London: Catholic Study Circle for Animal Welfare, 1970).

15. See Andrew Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (London: SPCK, 1986), Chapter 5, pp. 68 - 98.

Resources For Teachers

(i) Books

Agius, Ambrose, *God's Animals* (London: Catholic Study Circle for Animal Welfare, 1970)

A useful compendium of Roman Catholic authorities

Linzey Andrew, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (London: SPCK, 1986)

A theological approach useful as a basis for 6th form discussion

Christian Attitudes to Animals (London: Christian Education Movement, 1982). Series editor: Brenda Lealman.

A resource book for lower secondary pupils.

Reagan, Tom, *Compassion for Animals: Readings and Prayers* (London: SPCK, 1987)

Collection of material ideal for assemblies.

Animals and Christianity: A Book of Readings (London: SPCK, 1988).

Historical and contemporary readings in theology and animals, especially appropriate for 6th form discussion.

Song of Creation: An Anthology of Poems in Praise of Animals (London: Marshall Pickering, 1988).

Collection of religious poetry appropriate for various ages.

McDonagh, Sean, *To Care for the Earth: A Call to a New Theology* (Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986)

A strong Catholic case for environmental concern.

Wynne-Tyson, Jon, *The Extended Circle: A Dictionary of Humane Thought* (London: Centaur Press, 1986).

A valuable reference on animal welfare for teachers.

(ii) Films and Tapes

The Rights of Animals: A Comprehensive Guide to the Debate about Animals (1987). 3 x 40 minute audio tapes on religious and philosophical aspects of animal rights, and a study guide for teachers. Produced by Peter Elvy. Ecuvision (10 -12 High Street, Great Wakering, Essex SS3 0EQ).

We Are All Noah (1985). A 40 minute video on Jewish and Christian attitudes towards animals, suitable for 6th Formers. Written and directed by Tom Regan and produced by Kay Reibold. Distributed by Ecuvision (address above).

The Animals Film (1982). The first comprehensive film documentary on animal abuse. Produced and directed by Victor Schonfeld and Myriam Alaux. 136 minutes. Concord films (201 Felixstowe Road, Ipswich, Suffolk IP3 9BJ).

(iii) Religious Organisations

Christian Consultative Council for Animal Welfare. Secretary: Jose Parry. 11 Degmar Road, London N4 4NY.

Christian Ecology Group. Secretary: Judith Pritchard, 58 Quest Hills Road, Malvern, Worcs. WR14 1RW.

Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals. Secretary: Valerie Elliott, 10 Chester Avenue, Hawkenbury, Tunbridge Wells, Kent.

Catholic Study Circle for Animal Welfare. Secretary: May Bocking, 39 Onslow Gardens, South Woodford, London E18.

Quaker Concern for Animal Welfare. Secretary: Angela Howard, Webb's Cottage, Saling, Braintree, Essex. CM7 SDZ.

Animal Christian Concern. Secretary: May Tripp, 46 St Margaret's Road, Horsford, Leeds LS18 5BG.

International Network for Religion and Animals. Secretary: Ginnie Bee, 2913 Woodstock Avenue, Silver Spring, MD, 20910, USA.

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