

# **Consuming Creatures: The Christian Ethics of Farmed Animal Welfare**

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## **Animal ethics in Christianity**

There is a widely accepted narrative that states that the Christian tradition has been inattentive to the welfare of animals. We can find representative statements of this position in Feuerbach's statement that nature has no interest for Christians, and more recently in Lynn White's often-repeated judgement that Christianity is the most anthropocentric of all religious traditions, and Peter Singer's identification of Christianity as the foremost advocate of an ideology justifying the exploitation of non-human animals.<sup>1</sup> I believe that this narrative is badly wrong and in need of strong refutation, so that, first, Christians stop believing that their faith has nothing to do with other animals and as a result start behaving better towards them and, second, so that people stop turning away from Christianity on the basis of its failure to recognize animal welfare as significant concern for its members.

I can't provide a full refutation here, but as a gesture in that direction let's note that Christianity inherited from Judaism — or we might say from earlier forms of Judaism — the profound recognition of creation created good by a good God, and of other animal creatures as fellow recipients of God's grace. Jesus taught his disciples to look at birds of the air and lilies of the field as models for their discipleship, and the first New Testament Christologies in Ephesians and Colossians picture Christ as a figure effecting the redemption not only of human beings but of all things in heaven and earth, nothing short of cosmic in its scale. Vegetarianism was an issue

<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), 287–8; Lynn Jr. White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 155:3767 (1967); Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (London: Pimlico, 2nd ed. 1995), 191–2.

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debated by Christians in the New Testament period, with early traditions identifying the apostle James and even Jesus as vegetarian. Early Christian theologians defended the goodness of creation against gnostic opponents. Christian monastic communities mostly avoided the consumption of meat, and hagiographical traditions identified profound concern for animals and harmony with them as characteristic of saintly holiness, as recalled recently in Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si*.<sup>2</sup> It should therefore be no surprise that both Roman Catholic and evangelical Christians in Britain and Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, alongside at least one prominent Jew, recognized new cruelties towards animals in the early industrial age as a faith concern, and that they were instrumental in the first anti-cruelty legislation in the early nineteenth century, nor that Christians were the leading voices in the anti-vivisection movement in Britain in the late nineteenth century, notably opposing Darwinian scientists and doctors who thought non-human animals should be sacrificed without restraint to the idol of the pursuit of scientific knowledge. We should not forget that it was atheistic philosophies that discounted the interests of other animals in this period, and Christians who recognized faith-based reasons to champion concern for them.

Lynn White and Peter Singer are not without excuse, however, because since the late nineteenth century animals have largely disappeared as an object of Christian concern, so that when the environment generally and non-human animals in particular became objects of secular concern in the 1960s and 1970s, it became plausible to claim that Christianity was a hindrance rather than an ally in addressing the challenges. So the late 20th century became a reversal of the late 19th century situation, with atheistic philosophers taking up the cause of animals and Christian theologians either failing to do so, or finding Christian reasons to reject the claims made for animal rights. Singer is right to note that the Christian tradition can be mined for positions that support ideologies that are antipathetic: early Christian theologians drew on Stoic

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City State: Vatican Press, 2015).

and neo-Platonic philosophical positions that identified rationality as a unique human possession closely related to divinity, and therefore a prime candidate to provide content for the biblically underdetermined concept of humanity as the image of God, and consequently pictured humans as uniquely bridging the material and spiritual realms within a Great Chain of Being. Augustine ruled out non-human animals from protection under the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' on the basis that they have no society with humans in reason, and Aquinas judged that neither justice nor charity were applicable to non-human animals. In my work I advance what I judge to be decisive arguments for setting aside these conclusions for good theological reasons, and are unrepresentative of wider traditions of thought and practice such as those I have noted above, but it seems that Christians have instead largely been prepared to accept the Singer version of Christianity and animals and concur in his claim that Christian faith and concern for other animals are incompatible. (I should clarify that I'm speaking of Peter Singer pre-circa 2012: I'm cautiously optimistic that conversation with Charlie Camosy and me since then has helped to persuade him at least that there are good utilitarian reasons to stop telling Christians that they need to give up their faith before they can entertain animal welfare as an ethical concern, but time will tell.)

There were two important Christian contributions to reflection on animal ethics that were contemporaneous with Singer's *Animal Liberation* in the late 1970s: Stephen R. L. Clarke's Christian philosophical approach to the topic, starting in *The Moral Status of Animals*, and Andrew Linzey's work, which began with *Animal Theology*.<sup>3</sup> Both authors continued to make significant contributions to the field in the decades that followed, but neither was successful in convincing Christian theologians or ethicists that non-human animals was a significant topic of concern. When I began researching the topic ten years ago, I wasn't aware of any other academics working in the area. That was part of what motivated me to work on the issue: the

<sup>3</sup> Singer, *Animal Liberation*; Stephen R. L. Clark, *The Moral Status of Animals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994).

link between Christian theology and concern for other animals seemed an obvious one to me, but was apparently not obvious to most fellow theologians or fellow Christians, the reasons for which seemed worth exploring.

## **The Christian ethics of consuming other animals**

All ethics starts from some shared presuppositions, which is why you should never try to have a moral argument with a nihilist. My work is in theological ethics: working with the shared presuppositions of Christian traditions of thought. My monograph *On Animals* examines the place of animals in Christian doctrine and ethics.<sup>4</sup> Volume I considered the place of animals — human and other-than-human — in Christian doctrine, reflecting on their place in relation to God's great acts of creation, reconciliation and redemption. Volume II, which I'm currently completing, explores the implications for this account of the place of non-human animals in Christian doctrine for ethics. The second chapter treats the Christian ethics of using other animals for food. So my project here is to summarize my Christian ethical analysis of the ethics of using non-human animals for food.

To understand my theological framework for animal this, however, it is important to summarize the way *On Animals* vol. I placed animals — human and other-than-human — in Christian doctrine, reflecting on their place in relation to God's great acts of creation, reconciliation and redemption. Part I argued that creation is best understood as God's gracious bestowal of being on all creatures, both for their own sake and so that they may glorify God in their participation in the triune life of God. All creatures are declared good by their creator in their own right; all creatures exist in utter dependence on God and mutual dependence on one another; no creature can be comprehended merely as the means to the flourishing of another. God's animal creatures have particular attributes in common: they are fleshy creatures with the

<sup>4</sup> David Clough, *On Animals: I. Systematic Theology* (London: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2012).

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breath of life, especially dependent on other organisms for their survival, often the common subjects of God's blessing and judgement, capable of response to God in a distinctive mode. Part II treated the doctrine of reconciliation, arguing that God's other animal creatures cannot be neglected in accounts of the incarnation or atonement. Instead, Christians celebrate the New Testament confession of a God who took on creaturely flesh in order to reconcile all things in heaven and on earth, and we should understand not only human beings, but all creation, to be made elect by God's grace in Jesus Christ. Part III argued that what God has created and reconciled, God has reason to redeem, exploring the majestic Pauline vision of the whole of creation liberated from its bondage, and the new patterns of peaceable creaturely living this new creation might require.

Turning to the ethics of the human use of other animals for food, my global survey of our current practice concludes that the vast majority of terrestrial and aquatic farmed animals raised for food are raised in intensive ways that subject them to monotonous modes of life, provide very little opportunity for their preferred behaviours, cause significant suffering to them, and usually make their lives very short. Even wild-caught fish suffer significantly in the capture process, which also causes substantial damage to other non-target species. The alternative of raising fish in aquaculture contexts both requires large quantities of wild-caught fish for food, and imposes crowded and uniform environments on the fish, with significant stress as they are handled and killed. Extensively reared sheep, goats, and cattle enjoy significant freedom, but undergo painful procedures such as castration, branding, dehorning, and tail-docking, are often transported long distances, are often confined in feedlots for fattening, and, in the case of sheep and goats are often slaughtered at a very young age. Dairy cattle have been reshaped by selective breeding to produce unprecedented volumes of milk, but suffer from lameness, mastitis, and infertility as a consequence, resulting in suffering and short lives before being culled for beef. Pigs, rabbits, and poultry are the most intensively raised, usually confined in vast sheds, with no access to the outdoors, or often even sunlight, the end products of selective breeding

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programmes that have made them ever more efficient in gaining weight rapidly, or as laying hens producing eggs at rapid rates with the accompanying necessity of culling all male chicks. Using other animals for production at the current unprecedented levels requires a third of global cereal output and a significant proportion of global water resources, is a major cause of greenhouse gas emissions and pollution, and presents significant risks to human health.

In my view it would be a moral falsity to follow this account our current practice in using other animals for food, including its abundance evidence of the systematic abuse of non-human animals in the service of human ends, with a calm and measured ethical analysis. Instead, I begin the task of a theological assessment of how we are using other animals for food by considering what kind of theological scheme might legitimate our current practice. The radical instrumentalization of non-human animals evident in intensive patterns of farming demands a conveniently anthropocentric god, who brought the non-human creation into being merely to provide for human needs. Such a god would give Christians permission to exploit other animals without restraint for any reason whatever. This is the theological account that would be required to legitimize the broiler sheds, the culling of day-old chicks, the caging of laying hens, the mass slow and stressful deaths inflicted on fish pulled out of the sea in hundred mile long nets, the reshaping of the dairy cow being integrated ever more fully with the computerized mechanism that extracts her milk, the confining of pigs in monotonous environments, and the castrating, dehorning, tail-docking and branding of animals without anaesthetic — though even in such a theological scheme, the unnecessary cruelty and suffering visited upon other animals in these ways might give one pause. This, I submit, is the anti-theological account that is operative in and readable from our current practices towards other animals in our use of them for food. We should note that there are versions of atheistic humanism that privilege human interests to the total exclusion of non-human in similar ways.

Viewing other animals as fellow beneficiaries of God's grace in creation, reconciliation, and redemption, the position for which Volume I argued, is incompatible with the wholesale failure

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to see them as morally considerable that is evident in the patterns of using them for food surveyed in the first part of this chapter. The disregard of the lives of animals caught up in these processes is shocking. Instead of imaging such a creator's tender care for her creatures such an ethic models the despotic rule of a tyrant, interested in others only as they serve our greedy ends, making Christians co-worshippers in a ritual denial that there is a good creator who made and sustains these fellow animal creatures. In sum, current practices of using other animals for food treats them as if they were not the good creatures of the God Christians worship.

The Christian obligation to reject the practices of intensive farming as incompatible with a theological understanding of other animals, for which I have just argued, could be stated positively as follows. For a Christian to consider the use of other animals to produce human food in a context where such use is not necessary for human survival, it must be the case, at a minimum, that the lives of the animals so used can be recognized as good lives in which they can flourish. This is because a theological understanding of their lives recognizes that they are with us fellow animal creatures of God, with a vocation to glorify God in their flourishing. Under pressure of necessity, many humans in the past and some humans today could not feed themselves without using other animals for food, and could not always ensure that other animals used in these ways were well treated. The vast majority of modern humans, however, are not subject to this necessity, and could secure adequate nutrition without recourse to other animals, and with additional accompanying benefits, as noted above. Given that we have the choice whether or not to make use of animal creatures to feed ourselves, a choice to use them must, at least, not contradict our theological understanding of the life they are called upon to live, not prevent them from flourishing in the way their creator and redeemer intends. It seems clear, then, that this is a necessary condition for a Christian judgement that it is appropriate to make use of other animals for food where alternative sources of nutrition exist. The dietary option of consuming products derived from other animals only when one is confident that the animals concerned have been given a good life has been termed 'conscientious omnivorism'. My

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argument here is that, at a minimum, Christians have an obligation to be conscientious omnivores.

But the question then arises of whether a Christian view of animals imposes stronger demands. Is it legitimate for humans to kill other animals at all? Much of the theological discussion takes place in the tension between Genesis 1, which envisages a plant diet for all animal creatures, including humans, and Genesis 9, where after the Flood explicit permission is given to humans to kill other animals for food. Many theologians identify such killing as a necessity that falls short of the the peaceable relations between creatures God originally intended. But most modern humans have no such necessity: indeed, it would be better for them, for other humans, for other animals, and for the planet, if they did not. Beyond the argument of the previous section, that Christians have a clear obligation to avoid the products of the intensive farming of other animals, we therefore need to reckon seriously with the possibility that Christians should avoid participating in the practice of killing other animals for food at all, even when we have done our best to assure them of a good life before slaughter. Given the interconnection between dairy and beef production, and the culling of male chicks in all modern commercial raising of laying hens, avoiding systems that require the slaughter of animals leads to a Christian ethic of veganism.

It does not seem possible to me for Christians properly to have conscientious disagreement about whether the intensive farming of other animals is compatible with their faith: the yawning crevasse between a theological understanding of animal life and the conditions inflicted on farmed animals in these systems is too great. It does seem to me, however, that Christians could conscientiously disagree about whether it was appropriate to give farmed animals a good life and also use them to provide eggs or milk, or kill them for food. At the end of the previous chapter, I noted the analogy of disagreements between Christians who believe that their faith requires pacifism, and those who believe that under appropriate constraints warfare can be justified. The disagreement between Christians who see a vegan diet as a faith requirement, and those who are



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conscientious omnivores, believing it legitimate to use for food non-human animals who have been given a good life, seems to me to be of similar status, and with many overlapping arguments: both Christian pacifists and Christian vegans are inspired by a vision of the peaceable kingdom inaugurated in Jesus Christ; both Christians advocating for the just war tradition and Christian conscientious omnivores are likely to point to particular reasons why the world in which we live cannot be immediately conformed to this in-breaking peaceable reign of God. The positions are also parallel in often requiring identical behaviour: just as pacifists and those belonging to the just war tradition should be strongly in favour of peace-building and peace-making initiatives, so Christian vegan and Christian conscientious omnivores are both likely to consume fewer products derived from other animals and will frequently find themselves eating the same thing because the supply of animal products that are derived from animals who are given a good life is currently so limited.

I hope what I have written is sufficient to provide a brief indication of the current understanding of animal ethics in Christian thought and my own proposal for rethinking the Christian ethics of using other animals for food. I look forward to hearing how it differs and overlaps with the approaches of other contributors to the Workshop, and to the ensuing conversation.

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