

THE SEVERN FORUM

Notes of the talk

*Justice for Animals:
what does Christianity mean
for the animals we eat?*

by

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NOTE: **the visual presentation** to accompany the lecture is available online at:

https://prezi.com/m5jyyfe_w66p/what-does-christianity-mean-for-the-animals-we-eat/

Introduction

I'm a Christian ethicist, which means I want in this lecture to change your life! I'd like to persuade you that Christians have faith-based reasons to avoid consuming meat, dairy, and eggs from animals that have not been allowed to flourish as fellow creatures of God, which given modern intensive farming methods, is nearly all of them. I'm hoping by the end of the evening you'll have decided you agree with me, or that you've made clear your reasons for disagreeing in the discussion that will follow the lecture.

- Some people seem to think that Christianity teaches that God gives us the right to use animals in whatever way we want.
- That's a bad misunderstanding of the way most Christians have thought about other animals. In fact, Christians were at the forefront of the most important campaigns against animal cruelty.

Some have thought Christians have reasons not to think about the rights and wrongs of what they eat...

- In this lecture, I hope to give you a sense of what led Christians in the past to care about animals, and what Christian faith means for how we should treat animals today.

1. What do Christians believe about animals?

- God made all creatures, declared them good, and cares for them. (This was and is a controversial claim.) Ps. 145.16: "You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing."
- Only after the fall do humans and other animals begin to prey on one another.
- Jesus Christ became flesh, the stuff common to humans and other animals, and the earliest Christologies in Ephesians and Colossians picture him as making peace between all things in heaven and earth.
- Old Testament prophets, and Paul in Romans 8, look forward to a time when creation will be released from its bondage to decay and creatures will live in peace.

- Story of St Macarius and the hyena:

One day as Macarius was sitting in his cell he heard a knocking at his door. Thinking a fellow monk had come to see him, he opened the door and was astonished to find that a hyena had been knocking on the door with her head. She held her puppy in her mouth, and offered the puppy to him, weeping. Macarius took the puppy in his hands and looked to see what was the matter. He saw that the puppy was blind in both eyes. He took the puppy, groaned, spat on the puppy's face and signed it on the eyes with his finger. Immediately, the puppy could see, ran to his mother, suckled from her, and followed her away.

The next day the hyena returned and knocked on the hermit's door again. This time when he opened it he saw she had a sheepskin in her mouth. He asked her where she had got the sheepskin, if she had not eaten a sheep, and told her that he would not take the sheepskin if it had come of violence. The hyena struck her head on the ground, bent her paws, and prayed on her knees for him to take it. He said he would not take it unless she promised not to harm the poor by eating their sheep, and she nodded her head as if she were promising him. Then he told her he would not take it unless she promised not to kill another creature, and said if she was hungry she should come to him and he would give her bread. The hyena bent, nodded, and looked him in the eye as if she were promising him.

So Macarius offered praises to God for giving understanding to the animals and letting Macarius come to understand God's ways. He took the sheepskin from the hyena and she went away. From time to time she would come to Macarius for food, and he would give her bread. He slept on the sheepskin until he died.

(From Waddell, H. (1995) *Beasts and saints*. Darton, Longman & Todd, London.)

1. What does that mean for how we treat them?

- The Bible instructs Israel to care for animals. They are not permitted to hunt or eat wild animals, and they must look after their domestic animals, including giving them Sabbath rest, like every other member of Israel.
- Jesus drew attention to the need to care for animals in need, even on the Sabbath, and held up birds and lilies as examples of discipleship.
- Some theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas argued that because non-human animals aren't rational, we don't have any moral duties to them, but stories of the saints, like Macarius, consistently emphasize compassion towards animals as a sign of holiness, and this early English text from 1405 is representative of a consensus view from 15th-19th centuries, that humans have permission to use other animals for food and clothing, but must not treat them cruelly.

2. **How do we treat them now?**

- Unhappily, we do now treat animals cruelly.
- Our treatment of farmed animals outweighs numerically all other uses of animals: 77 billion chickens, pigs, cows, sheep and other animals were killed for food globally in 2013, and around 6 trillion fish.
- Broiler hens are raised in huge windowless sheds, having been bred to reach slaughter weight in as little as 35 days, with dire consequences for their health. They have their beaks trimmed to prevent them pecking in the crowded conditions. At slaughter they are strung up by the legs and often not stunned effectively before having their throats cut.
- Male chicks from laying strains are killed after hatching, often by maceration, while the female chicks are usually confined in small barren cages until they are culled at around 18 months.
- Most pigs are raised intensively indoors in crowded sheds, often having their tails docked to prevent the tail-biting that such intensive conditions provoke. Sows are usually confined in crates that don't even allow them to turn around.
- Dairy calves in intensive facilities are often removed from their mothers at birth and grow up in sheds without ever having the opportunity to graze grass, before being culled for beef after 3-4 lactations when their milk yield drops.
- Lambs have it better. They are usually raised outdoors, with access to their mothers. But they are castrated without anaesthetic soon after birth, and are sent for slaughter at 3-6 months. Calves in beef herds are also raised outdoors, and have a longer life than lambs, but still undergo painful procedures such as castration without anaesthetic.
- This way of treating animals is bad news for people, too. Those employed in meat processing plants experience some of the worst working conditions of any workers. We currently devote 70% of agricultural land to raising animals, and feed 1/3 of global cereal output to livestock, which is a reckless waste when food is in short supply, and much more food could be produced if we ate less meat and grew more crops. The same goes for the water required to raise animals on this scale. Farmed animals contribute more to GHG emissions than transport, and their effluent creates local pollution problems. In the US 50% of antibiotics are fed to farmed animals to reduce infection in the intensive conditions, causing problems for antibiotic resistance. And study after study shows that we'd be more healthy if we ate less meat. All this means we don't have to choose between human and animal interests: consuming less meat, dairy, and eggs would be better all round.

4. Does something need to change?

- There's a clear and obvious mismatch between Christian belief in the God who made all creatures, declared them good, and cares for them, and the cruel ways we're treating animals in factory farming.
- If you agree, how could you take the first steps towards a change?
 - Talk with other Christians about the connection between animals and Christian faith.
 - Consider a meat-free meal, as a one-off, or regularly.
 - Consider a meat-free day each week. Christians used to avoid meat on Fridays.
 - Try giving up meat for Lent next year.
 - Buy a vegetarian recipe book, or explore vegetarian recipes online.
 - Avoid eating meat, dairy, or eggs if you don't know about how the animals were treated to produce them.
 - Connect with CreatureKind for help and suggestions, consider inviting a Creature-Kind speaker to your church, or running a CreatureKind course. Find out more at <http://bcreaturekind.org> or find us on Facebook or Twitter.
 - Make sure you offer vegetarian/vegan options at every church meal. Consider making some meals entirely vegetarian.

Further reading

Clough, D. (2012) *On Animals: Vol. I. Systematic Theology*. T & T Clark/Continuum, London.

Clough, D. (forthcoming 2017) *On Animals: Vol. II. Theological Ethics*. T & T Clark/Bloomsbury, London.