

Animals and Religion

Different religions have different views of animals and their place in our lives. For some we are equals and equally deserve to live our lives free from suffering inflicted on us by others. Other religions have traditionally seen animals as being 'beneath' humans and of lesser importance. But is this really true or does it all depend on how scriptures and other sacred texts have been interpreted?

Christianity

Many Christians see humans as being at the top of a hierarchical tree, just below God, and with animals somewhere beneath them. But not all Christians think that way: The Reverend Andrew Linzey said: "Animals are God's creatures, not human property, nor utilities, nor resources, nor commodities, but precious beings in God's sight. ... Christians whose eyes are fixed on the awfulness of crucifixion are in a special position to understand the awfulness of innocent suffering. The Cross of Christ is God's absolute identification with the weak, the powerless, and the vulnerable, but most of all with unprotected, undefended, innocent suffering."

And John Austin Baker, Bishop of Salisbury said: "In the very first chapter of the Bible it is said that in the beginning, when things were as God meant them to be, animals were not created to be food for humans. The animals were to eat grass, foliage and cereals; human beings, fruit and nuts. Only later were animals granted to humankind for food, with the sinister words: 'The fear of you and the dread of you shall fall upon all wild animals and birds and fish; they are given into your hands.'" The phrase "The fear of you and the dread of you" is military terminology. The phrase "Into your hand they are delivered" implies that man has the power of life and death over animals.

Judaism

Many Jews see no anomaly in using animals as they wish and that includes eating them. But there are many more who strongly oppose cruelty to animals and say that this view has a strong basis in Jewish teachings.

The Jewish concept of *tza'ar ba'alei chaim* is the obligation not to cause pain to animals. The Code of Jewish Law states, "It is forbidden, according to the law of the Torah, to inflict pain upon any living creature. On the contrary, it is our duty to relieve pain of any creature, even if it is ownerless or belongs to a non-

Jew."

Richard H. Schwartz, Ph.D. and Dovid Sears say: "The first misunderstanding is that the biblical teaching that humans are granted dominion over animals gives us a warrant to treat them in whatever way we may wish. However, Jewish tradition interprets "dominion" as guardianship, or stewardship: we are called upon to be co-workers with God in improving the world. This biblical mandate does not mean that people have the right to wantonly exploit animals, and it certainly does not permit us to breed animals and then treat them as machines designed solely to meet human needs."

Islam

The Islamic religion has always viewed animals as a special part of God's creation. The Qur'an, the Hadith, and the history of Islamic civilization offer many examples of kindness, mercy, and compassion for animals. For example the Qur'an says, "There is not an animal on Earth, nor a bird that flies on its wings - but they are communities like you."

And: "The Holy Prophet (S) narrated a vision in which he saw a woman being chastised after death because she had confined a cat during her life on earth without feeding and watering it, or even letting it free so it could feed itself."

According to scholars, the Prophet Mohammed, although not vegetarian, did prefer to eat vegetarian foods and had a great love and compassion for animals. His favourite foods consisted of yogurt with butter or nuts, cucumbers with dates, pomegranates, grapes and figs. He was known to have quoted: "Where there is an abundance of vegetables, a host of angels will descend on that place."

Hinduism

Ahimsa, the law of non-injury and non-harming, is the Hindu's first duty in fulfilling religious obligations to God and God's creation as defined by Vedic scripture. And this means that animals are cared for and respected in the same way as humans are.

Quotes from the Vedas show the Hindu commitment to caring for and respecting animal life:

"You must not use your God-given body for killing God's creatures, whether they

are human, animal or whatever." (Yajur Veda, 12.32)

"By not killing any living being, one becomes fit for salvation." (Manusmriti, 6.60)

"The purchaser of flesh performs himsa (violence) by his wealth; he who eats flesh does so by enjoying its taste; the killer does himsa by actually tying and killing the animal. Thus, there are three forms of killing. He who brings flesh or sends for it, he who cuts off the limbs of an animal, and he who purchases, sells, or cooks flesh and eats it - all of these are to be considered meat-eaters." (Mahabharata, Anu. 115:40)

Not surprisingly, many Hindus are vegetarian or vegan.

Sikhism

Sikhism developed 500 years ago out of the Hindu faith and shares some of the same principles but also differs from Hinduism in some ways. The religion is based on the teachings of ten holy men, the seventh of whom was Sri Guru Har Rai Ji (1630-1661). He was particularly known for his love toward animals, setting up animal hospitals to care for them.

The present spiritual head of Namdhari Sikhs, Satguruji, believed that "after sampling human blood once, the wild beast craves only for more. Similarly, when a man considers it too easy to butcher the animal kingdom, his unlimited desires overcome him. Consequently, one day he becomes a murderer or wishes to dominate the world hence war manners are adopted by him. If all the human race adopts the golden rule of non-violence and if all the fatal weapons are abolished, then world peace may be a reality within a short period."

Sikhs who are initiated into the Khalsa Brotherhood eat no meat, eggs or fish and there is no acceptable practice of killing animals. Sikhs who do not practice the Code of Conduct of Sikhs/Khalsa may eat meat.

Buddhism

A central tenet of Buddhism is to abstain from harming any living being, be they large or small, and this compassion lies at the very root of the religion. Buddhism acknowledges that all living beings suffer and that it is our suffering that links us together. It is therefore important that at a deep, fundamental level, we desire the happiness of others and are moved by their suffering.

This loving-kindness is known as *metta* and is a quality singular to Buddhism. *Metta* is more than a thought-process; it is about expressing loving-kindness in active ways. For many Buddhists these precepts lead them to a choosing a vegetarian way of life. But Buddha himself was not a vegetarian and indeed was said to have died from food poisoning after eating contaminated pork. But he advised that meat should only be eaten when it was not seen, heard or suspected that the animal had been specifically killed for the monk's consumption. Meat in the modern supermarket comes from animals who were killed specifically for human consumption but not specifically for a single person which is why some Buddhists do still eat meat.

Whatever interpretation Buddhists make of the teachings, living in harmony with nature and causing no harm to living beings are a central part of their beliefs.

Jainism

There was no single founder of the Jain religion, but instead the truth has been revealed by different Tirthankaras at different times. Tirthankaras are teachers who have accomplished the highest spiritual goals and in the "present age" there have been 24 Tirthankaras with the last one being Mahavira. He taught: "there is no quality of soul more subtle than non-violence and no virtue of spirit greater than reverence for life."

Ahimsa - non-harming - is the central doctrine of Jainism and Jains remain absolutely loyal to this belief. Jains practise non-violence in thought, action and deed at both the individual and social level.

Jains believe that animals and plants and human beings all contain living souls. Each of these souls, whatever species it may be in, is considered of equal value and should be treated with respect and compassion.

The Jain view of the world is based on compassion and consideration and that extends to humans, animals and the wider environment. Not surprisingly, vegetarianism is a way of life for Jains and while they recognise that eating plants does cause harm to them it is regarded as a means of survival which involves the bare minimum amount of violence towards living beings.

"Do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture or kill any creature or living being." *Jain scripture*