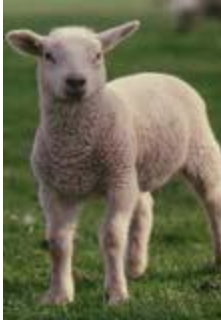


The Treatment of Animals in Christianity

Christianity and animals



Lamb

For most of history Christians largely ignored animal suffering.

Christian thinkers believed that human beings were greatly superior to animals. They taught that human beings could treat animals as badly as they wanted to because people had few (if any) moral obligations towards animals.

Modern Christians generally take a much more pro-animal line. They think that any unnecessary mistreatment of animals is both sinful and morally wrong.

The traditional Christian view

When early theologians looked at "nature red in tooth and claw" they concluded that it was a natural law of the universe that animals should be preyed on and eaten by others. This was reflected in their theology.

Christian thinking downgraded animals for three main reasons:

- God had created animals for the use of human beings and human beings were therefore entitled to use them in any way they want
- Animals were distinctively inferior to human beings and were worth little if any moral consideration, because:
 - humans have souls and animals don't
 - humans have reason and animals don't
- Christian thought was heavily humano-centric and only considered animals in relation to human beings, and not on their own terms

Animals and saints

Not all leading Christians disparaged animals. Some of the saints demonstrated that virtuous Christians treated animals respectfully and kindly:

- St Antony of Padua preached to fishes
- St Francis of Assisi preached to the birds and became the most popular pro-animal Christian figure
- Cows are protected by St Brigit
- St Columba told his monks to care for a crane
- St Brendan was helped in his voyage by sea monsters

Modern and pro-animal thinking

Modern Christian thinking about animals



Modern Christians believe they are 'stewards'

Modern Christian thinking is largely sympathetic to animals and less willing to accept that there is an unbridgeable gap between animals and human beings.

Although most theologians don't accept that animals have rights, they do acknowledge that some animals display sufficient consciousness and self-awareness to deserve moral consideration.

The growth of the environmental movement has also radically changed Christian ideas about the role human beings play in relation to nature.

Few Christians nowadays think that nature exists to serve humanity, and there is a general acceptance that human dominion over nature should be seen as stewardship and partnership rather than domination and exploitation.

This has significantly softened Christian attitudes to animals.

Animal-friendly Christian thoughts

Here are some of the animal-friendly ideas that modern Christians use when thinking about animals:

- The Bible shows that God made his covenant with animals as well as human beings
- Human and non-human animals have the same origin in God
 - St. Francis of Assisi said that animals "had the same source as himself"
- In God's ideal world human beings live in harmony with animals
 - The Garden of Eden, in which human beings lived in peace and harmony with animals, demonstrates God's ideal world, and the state of affairs that human beings should work towards
 - The prophet Isaiah describes the Kingdom of Heaven as a place where animals and human beings live together in peace
- God has the right to have everything he created treated respectfully - wronging animals is wronging God
- God is not indifferent to anything in his creation
- The example of a loving creator God should lead human beings to act lovingly towards animals
 - Inflicting pain on any living creature is incompatible with living in a Christ-like way
- Animals are weak compared to us - Christ tells us to be kind to them
 - Jesus told human beings to be kind to the weak and helpless
 - In comparison to human beings, animals are often weak and helpless
 - Christians should therefore show compassion to animals
- To love those who cannot love you in the same way is a unique way of acting with generous love.
 - "If you love them that love you, what reward have you?"
- It is a great good to take responsibility for the welfare of others, including animals



Saint Francis

Andrew Linzey

Since an animal's natural life is a gift from God, it follows that God's right is violated when the natural life of his creatures is perverted.

The leading modern Christian writer on animal rights is Andrew Linzey.

Linzey believes God's love is intended "not just for human beings but for all creatures."

Linzey teaches that Christians should treat every sentient animal according to its intrinsic God-given worth, and not according to its usefulness to human beings.

Christians who do this will achieve a far greater spiritual appreciation of the worth of creation.

Andrew Linzey derives his theology of animal rights in several ways, but the one most often quoted involves looking at creation from God's point of view rather than humanity's:

- The universe was created for God, not for humanity
 - Creation exists for God, not for humanity
- God loves all creation
- God put himself into creation, and died for it on the Cross
- Since God cares for all creation so much, human beings should care for all creation too
- Human beings should care for animals, because they are part of God's creation
- Doing wrong to an animal is wronging God by violating his right to have the whole of his creation respected.

Churches' views

What the churches say about animals

The Anglican view

This resolution from the 1998 Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church is typical of contemporary Christian thinking about animals:

This conference:

(a) reaffirms the biblical vision of creation according to which: Creation is a web of inter-dependent relationships bound together in the covenant which God the Holy Trinity has established with the whole earth and every living being.

(i) the divine Spirit is sacramentally present in creation, which is therefore to be treated with reverence, respect and gratitude

(ii) human beings are both co-partners with the rest of creation and living bridges between heaven and earth, with responsibility to make personal and corporate sacrifices for the common good of all creation

(iii) the redemptive purpose of God in Jesus Christ extends to the whole of creation.

The Roman Catholic view

The Papal Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* recognises that animals have both an intrinsic value and a place in God's kingdom.

The Roman Catholic Ethic of Life, if fully accepted, would lead Christians to avoid anything that brings unnecessary suffering or death to animals.

The official position of the Church is contained in a number of sections of the Church's official Catechism (the paragraphing within each section is ours).

373

In God's plan man and woman have the vocation of "subduing" the earth as stewards of God.

This sovereignty is not to be an arbitrary and destructive domination. God calls man and woman, made in the image of the Creator "who loves everything that exists", to share in his providence toward other creatures; hence their responsibility for the world God has entrusted to them.

2415

The seventh commandment enjoins respect for the integrity of creation.

Animals, like plants and inanimate beings, are by nature destined for the common good of past, present, and future humanity.

Use of the mineral, vegetable, and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives.

Man's dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbour, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation.

2416

Animals are God's creatures. He surrounds them with his providential care. By their mere existence they bless him and give him glory.

Thus men owe them kindness. We should recall the gentleness with which saints like St. Francis of Assisi or St. Philip Neri treated animals.

2417

God entrusted animals to the stewardship of those whom he created in his own image. Hence it is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing. They may be domesticated to help man in his work and leisure.

Medical and scientific experimentation on animals is a morally acceptable practice if it remains within reasonable limits and contributes to caring for or saving human lives.

2418

It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly.

It is likewise unworthy to spend money on them that should as a priority go to the relief of human misery.

One can love animals; one should not direct to them the affection due only to persons.

Some writers have criticised the statements above for being so firmly centred on human beings. Causing animals to suffer needlessly, for example, is described in 2418 as being contrary to human dignity, rather than as being a wrong towards animals.

Why do animals suffer?

Why does God let animals suffer?



Antony of Padua preached to fish

Animal suffering seems at odds with the Christian idea of a loving and powerful God.

After all, if God was all-powerful he could prevent suffering, and if God was perfectly good he would want to prevent suffering.

But animals do suffer on a colossal scale, and as there doesn't seem to be any logical necessity for them to do so Christians have some explaining to do.

This problem of animal suffering is part of the general problem that Christians face in explaining the existence of evil and suffering in God's world.

Theologians and philosophers have tried to deal with animal suffering - here are some of their attempts.

Animals don't feel pain

- Animals don't feel pain
 - Although animals behave as if they feel pain, this behaviour is not accompanied by unpleasant mental states
- Since animals don't feel pain, they don't suffer
- Therefore animal suffering is only apparent and does not conflict with the idea of a loving God.

This argument hasn't found much support, because of the cumulative effect of points like these:

- animals behave in similar ways to human beings when they are hurt
- higher animals have similar neurological structures to humans

- the same points could, with a little adaptation, be used to argue that human beings (other than ourselves) don't feel pain
 - telling others that we're in pain is just more behaviour - it doesn't prove anything

Animal pain isn't as bad as human pain

- Suffering and pain are not the same thing
- Suffering is completely bad
- Pain without suffering, although bad in itself, has good effects:
 - It informs animals of the need to take some action or other
 - It stimulates animals to move away from the source of the pain
- Animals and humans can both experience pain
- Suffering is a more complex phenomenon than pain
 - Pain only requires the ability to perceive physical sensations
 - Transforming pain into suffering requires the ability to think about oneself and one's experiences as well
- Only human beings possess the necessary mental capacity to transform pain into suffering
- Only human beings suffer because of pain
- Animals don't suffer, even though they feel pain
- Since animals don't suffer, the existence of animal pain does not conflict with the idea of a loving God

This argument has not found much support either, because:

- There's little scientific evidence that animals don't suffer
- The abilities deemed necessary for human beings to suffer also provide human beings with ways of dealing with pain. Animals lack these abilities, so their experience of pain may be worse than the human experience - for example:
 - Animals can't 'be comforted'
 - Animals can't understand their pain or set it in context (e.g. they can't see that the pain of having a tooth out is a small price to pay for getting rid of toothache)
 - Animals can't understand that a particular experience of pain is only temporary
 - Animals can't think about something else
 - Animals can't contemplate heaven as a reward for their present suffering

But the main objection to the argument is that it flies in the face of common-sense, as anyone who has seen the distress of an animal that has lost one of its young will tell you.

Animal pain is a necessary part of being an animal

Some Christians believe this is untrue:

Animal pain is a result of The Fall

- When God created the world, animals did not suffer pain, nor did animals attack or eat one another
- The fall of man corrupted nature and distorted the world
- Animal pain is the result of the corruption of nature

Some theologians have related animal pain to the fall of the angels before the fall of man.

Animals deserve their pain

One ancient theologian regarded animals as beings whose behaviour brought their suffering upon themselves.

Animal pain helps to educate human beings

Animal pain helps human beings understand the bad consequences of certain actions.

Animals will be compensated in the afterlife for pain suffered on earth

Christian theologians have traditionally taught that animals don't have an afterlife, and so will receive no compensation for suffering during their earthly lives.

But modern writers are more compassionate. Keith Ward has written:

If there is any sentient being which suffers pain, that being -- whatever it is and however it is manifested -- must find that pain transfigured by a greater joy

Some writers believe that the compensation of a glorious afterlife is the only thing that can reconcile animal (and human) suffering with the idea of a loving and omnipotent God.

This isn't entirely satisfactory, and it doesn't work for those animals that lack self-awareness and have no memory of what has happened in their lives.

John Hick put it like this:

It is extremely doubtful whether even a zoological paradise, filled with pleasure and devoid of pain, could have any compensatory value in relation to the momentary pangs of creatures who cannot carry their past experience with them in conscious memory

And C.S. Lewis like this:

If the life of a newt is merely a succession of sensations, what should we mean by saying that God may recall to life the newt that died to-day? It would not recognise itself as the same newt.

Historical attitudes



Lion

For most of its history Christianity regarded animals without much compassion.

Early Christians regarded human beings as greatly superior to all other animals. After all, human beings were made in the image of God, and God chose human form for his earthly life. Furthermore, God clearly decreed that human beings should have power over non-human animals.

Augustine

Leading thinkers such as Augustine reinforced ideas of animal inferiority, concluding that animals existed entirely for the benefit of humanity.

- Human beings are rational

- Rational beings are entitled to rule irrational beings
- Human beings can tame animals - animals can't tame human beings
- Animals are not rational
- Animals don't even know that they are alive

Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas was equally unconcerned with the welfare of animals.

Aquinas made the following points:

- Animals were created to be used by human beings
- Animals do not have the ability to reason, and are therefore inferior to human beings
- The status of animals is shown by the fact that the punishment for killing someone else's animal is a punishment for misusing that person's property, not for killing the animal

He taught that the universe was a hierarchy with God at the top. Each layer in the hierarchy existed to serve the layers above it. Humanity came above the animals, so animals existed to serve humankind.

Aquinas also reinforced the view that animals didn't have immortal souls.

Barth

In modern times, Karl Barth, the greatest theologian of the 20th century taught that God's choice of human form for his incarnation showed that human beings are more important than non-human animals.