

4. Religion

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Introduction

Religion is all about beliefs - beliefs about creation, purpose, destiny, life, and love. What people believe or disbelieve about God and the world affects all aspects of their being, including their day-to-day behaviour. The animal protection movement is about changing and shaping people's belief systems about animals. Religion can affect attitudes towards animals, and the way in which animals are treated, either positively or negatively.

Religion can be important to the animal protection movement in different ways: -

- Firstly, it can be used in support of the animal protection cause. This can be particularly useful and powerful in countries where religion is important and influential.
- Secondly, religion is sometimes used to justify cruel treatment – and even sacrifices – of animals. Some animal protectionists fight against these cruelties carried out in the name of religion.

Positive Attitudes Towards Animal

All major religions of the world praise creation and acknowledge that humankind depends on nature for its own survival. They also teach compassion and love of all living creatures. Nearly all religions recognise the inherent value of animal life and the need to avoid animal suffering.

Positive attitudes are probably generated from two main factors: -

- Firstly, because such attitudes are included in the religious texts and scriptures.
- Secondly, because caring and compassionate people who have become revered as religious leaders have consistently recognised that a loving and compassionate God would care about beings who desire to live and are able to experience pleasure and pain. Only a cruel god would wish that such creatures suffer and die at human hands. These people exist in each religion, and speak out for compassion to animals.

A Brief Summary of Major Religions and their Attitudes Towards Animals

Hinduism and Jainism

For the great Eastern religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, nature is held as sacred and humans are not more significant than any other living thing. This contrasts markedly with Judaism, Islam and Christianity, which are human-centred religions. To a Hindu, animal souls are the same as human souls, progressing to higher means of conscious expression in each life. Hinduism teaches that every soul takes on a life for a particular reason and to kill an animal stops the progression of the soul and thus causes great suffering. The

Bhagavad Gita (verse 5.18) proclaims that a self-realised soul is able to understand the equality of all beings.

Hinduism preaches non-injury, truthfulness, freedom from theft, lust, anger, greed and doing what is beneficial to all creatures. A principle of Hinduism is Ahimsa (harmlessness), and in India, this is even written into the constitution. Strict followers of Hinduism are vegetarian.

Jain traditions respect ahimsa (non-violence), aparigraha (non-acquisition), asteya (respect for others' rights) and satya (truth). While Jains comprise less than 1% of India's population, they contribute more than half of all social welfare. Almost all of India's seven million Jains are vegetarians, reflecting Jainism's central tenet that it is wrong to kill or harm any living being.

Buddhism

Buddhism is based upon a universal idea of compassion for all life. A man is holy if he has pity on all living creatures. Meat eating is not permitted to committed followers. The Buddhist faith also teaches that sentient beings are subject to rebirth as other sentient beings, and that consciousness cannot be killed. Thus, there is an interconnectedness of all living beings. The first of the Five Precepts, which are the foundation of Buddhist ethical conduct, is not to harm sentient beings.

Judaism

Judaism is as much a code of practice for living as a religion and frequently brings animals into the moral arena. For example, working animals, like people, must rest on the Sabbath. One prayer states that 'it is forbidden to harm any living creature. It is one's duty to save any living creature from pain.' Judaism embraces the Hebrew concept of *tsa'ar ba'alei hayim* - the mandate to prevent the 'sorrow of living creatures.' The scriptures teach that God made covenants with animals as well as humans (Gen. 9:9-10; Hosea 2:20). The Hebrew term 'nefesh chaya' ('a living soul') was applied to animals as well as people (Gen. 1:21, 24). Jews are forbidden to hunt, but meat eating is left to the individual conscience.

Vegetarianism was the first dietary law (Gen. 1:29). After the Flood, permission was given to eat meat, but only with many restrictions (Kosher laws) and with a sense of reverence for life, which, according to Rabbi Abraham Kook, had a goal of eventually returning God's people to vegetarian diets (Isaiah 11:69).

Islam

Despite contemporary Islamic rites involving animals, study of Islam also show the promotion of kindness to living creatures. The Qur'an, the Hadith, and the history of Islamic civilisation offer many examples of kindness, mercy, and compassion for animals. Islam teaches that animal should be given equal consideration to humans. The holy prophet Mohammed said, "It behoves you to treat the animals gently" (Hadith Muslim, 4:2593), "And the earth - He has assigned it to all living creatures" (Qur'n Majeed, 55:10-12), "All creatures are like a family to God" (Hadith Mishkat, 3:1392), and "A good deed done to an animal is as meritorious as a good deed done to a human being, while an act of cruelty to an animal is as bad as an act of cruelty to a human being" (Hadith Mishkat, Book 6, Ch. 7, 8:178).

One of the few Islamic scholars to write on animal welfare was Al-Hafiz B A Masri who founded the International Muslim Association for Animals and Nature. Masri urged that religious beliefs be harnessed with practical reverence for all creation.

Christianity

Christianity shares Judaism's creation story, which many Christians have interpreted as commanding respect for all of nature and its inhabitants. This sentiment was reflected in Jesus' ministry, which stressed love and peace. Recognising this, many devout Christians have been leaders of pacifist, environmental, and animal advocacy movements. For example, St. Francis of Assisi and Albert Schweitzer encouraged respect and reverence for all life.

Evidence of caring attitudes towards animals can be found in the Bible, for example: -

'He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man' (Isaiah 66.3)

'For meat destroy not the work of God' (Romans 14.19-21)

'A righteous man regardeth the life of the beast' (Proverbs 12.10)

In general however, established Christianity was not sympathetic to animals, and some Christians still think that animals were put on the earth for human use. The Judaeo-Christian interpretation of the opening chapter of Genesis which gave humans 'dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth' has caused many to believe that animals were put on this earth to be used by man in whichever way he chose. Thankfully, nowadays 'dominion' over animals has come to be interpreted rather more sympathetically as 'stewardship' (protective caring) of animals rather than power over them.

The Christian standpoint is changing as regards mans' relations with animals. However, ***Reverend Andrew Linzey*** reminds us that leading churchmen argued the case for animal welfare in Victorian England too. As a theologian, his support for animal rights is based on the belief that animals do not belong to us, but to God and must therefore be objects of value for human beings - it is God's right to have his creatures treated with respect.

St. Francis of Assisi was considered the patron Saint of animals in the Christian tradition, viewing animals as his brothers and sisters.

The ***Roman Catholic*** Catechism (the codified text of dominant Roman Catholic views) contains many positive precepts about animals, including the fact that animals are 'God's creatures' and reference to the 'integrity of creation'. However, it also reinforces the concept of dominion and sets out acceptable uses of animals, including food and clothing, domestication, work and leisure, medical and scientific experiments etc. It also speaks against spending money on animals that could as a priority go to the relief of human suffering and giving animals 'the affection due only to persons'.

The ***Greek Orthodox Church*** has not been noted as having an historic appreciation for the plight of suffering animals, or any particularly marked recognition of the important role of animals in God's creation. However, there was an important saint of the Greek Orthodox Church - St Modestos - who is still considered to be the patron saint of animals for the church (similar to St Francis of Assisi).

Baha'i

The Bahá'í Faith draws upon many of the world's religions, advocating compassion towards all creation. `Abdu'l-Bahá , son of the prophet Bahá'u'lláh, wrote: "Then, O ye friends of God! Ye must not only have kind and merciful feelings for mankind, but ye should also exercise the utmost kindness towards every living creature."

Native American

Native American traditions and beliefs vary quite widely, but a common theme is a sense that all of Nature is sacred. All animate and inanimate objects are related to the Divine and command respect. Humans, as part of Nature, participate in the cycle of life and death, but no animal is killed gratuitously or without respect for its soul.

Totem Animals

A 'totem' is a symbol that each Native American family, or clan, adopts. Each clan uses a different animal as its totem. The designs that we see on totem poles are often of clan animals. According to Native American tradition, each person is connected to nine animals that will accompany them through life's path, and nurture their talents and abilities.

Native Shamans also believe that animals are messengers of the Great Spirit, as do some other tribal cultures.

Religion Causing Animal Welfare Problems

There are also cases where religious beliefs actually cause animal cruelty and/or suffering. Some examples are given below.

Cruel Fiestas

Many thousands of these horrific Blood Fiestas take place in villages throughout Spain – and some other countries - each year. Fiestas often take place to celebrate saints' days (each village in Spain has a patron saint, and some more than one). Many take place over Easter. Not all involve cruelty to animals, but very many do. They use different species of animal (including cattle and calves, pigs, geese, ducks, donkeys, squirrels, rabbits and pigeons) and a variety of torture methods. These methods include: -

- A donkey being beaten, paraded and crushed in the Pero Palo fiestas, at Villanueva de la Vera.
- Goats being paraded in the streets and then thrown from the church tower in Manganeses de la Polvorosa.
- Chickens hung from a line and having their heads pulled off (by hand) by horsemen in Nalda.
- Chickens hung from a line cut to pieces by blindfolded young girls with blunted swords in Tordesillas.

Village priests and nuns are reportedly involved in these fiestas, making these acts of savagery and cruelty appear acceptable.

Animal Sacrifices

Many religions have traditionally involved animal sacrifices, and some still do this. Historically, animal sacrifice was rife in religion from the time of animism. It is only the

post-Roman Empire religious world that has fully rejected animal sacrifice. It remains in the holy books of the world's major traditional religions and is still practiced by the followers of Santeria and other ancient religions as a means of curing the sick and giving thanks to the gods (for example, to mark significant events such as birth, marriage and death).

Religious Slaughter

Humane slaughter involves pre-stunning, followed by killing. Stunning is performed by special equipment (captive bolt) to give a blow to the head and make the animal unconscious. When performed properly, this makes the animal immediately unconscious and unable to feel pain (until its subsequent death by bleeding). However, animals killed to provide Jewish 'shechita' and Moslem 'halal' methods are exempted from the requirement for stunning, meaning that they are killed just by throat cutting.

Shechita Slaughter

The Jewish law details the methods that are to be used during the religious slaughtering of animals, known as shechita. Indeed, it is a principle of the Jewish faith that the laws of shechita were divinely given to Moses at Mount Sinai (Deuteronomy XII, 21).

Halal Slaughter

'Halal' dietary laws are contained in the Koran. These include slaughter by throat cutting (without stunning), and include provisions for making this process as humane as possible.

Both of these traditional methods are laid out in their respective religious texts, and were probably the most humane slaughter methods available *at the time these were written*. However, as can be seen with animal sacrifices, many religions review and reinterpret such texts in the light of current scientific knowledge and cultural acceptability. In practice, Muslims often permit pre-stunning (for example, in the UK), whereas Jews do not (although immediate post cut stunning may be allowed).

Further Resources

Web Sites

Animals and Religion Organisations

The Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals
<http://www.aswa.org.uk/>

Catholic Concern for Animals
<http://www.catholic-animals.org/>

Jews for Animal Rights: Micah Publication
<http://www.micahbooks.com/JAR.html>

Christian Vegetarian Association
<http://www.christianveg.com/>

General

An Animal Voice – Web Site on animals and religion

<http://www.animalsuffering.com/religion.html>

Links to animals and spirituality Web Sites and articles

<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s939818.htm>

Psychologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PSYETA): Animals in Religions

<http://www.psyeta.org/sa/sa2.2/sax.html>

Religious Thoughts About Animals

<http://online.sfsu.edu/%7Erone/Religion/religionanimals.html#religion>

Buddhism

Buddhist Resources on Vegetarianism and Animal Welfare

<http://online.sfsu.edu/%7Erone/Buddhism/BuddhismAnimalsVegetarian/BuddhistVegetarian.htm>

Buddhism and Animals

<http://www.anaflora.com/articles/oth-sharon/animal-bud.html>

Christianity

Is Christianity Anti-Environmental?

<http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/environment.html>

Catholicism

St Francis of Assisi

<http://members.tripod.com/cathdev/francis.html>

http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=50

St Francis Stories

<http://www.americancatholic.org/Features/Francis/stories.asp>

Humans and Animals in the Kingdom

<http://www.jacwell.org/articles/1997-SPRING-Flanagan.htm>

The Catechism

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a7.htm

Hinduism and Jainism

Jainism and Jain Principles

<http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/jainhlinks.html>

Harvard: Introduction to Hinduism

<http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion/hinduism/>

Islam

Islamic Concern

<http://www.islamicconcern.com/default.asp>

Imam Hafiz B.A. al-Masri Speaks on Islam and Animals

http://www.petatv.com/tvpopup/Prefs.asp?video=creatures_of_god

Muezza

<http://www.pawsonline.20m.com/muezza.htm>

Animals

http://www.themodernreligion.com/an_main.htm

Pets and Animals in Islam

<http://www.submission.org/pets/>

Judaism

Judaism and Animal Rights

<http://www.bookch.com/1023-toc.htm>

What does Judaism have to say about the Treatment of Animals?

<http://online.sfsu.edu/%7Erone/Religion/religionanimals.html#judaism>

Orthodoxy

Orthodox Church and Animals

http://members.tripod.com/~Near_to_God/AllThings.html

Humans and Animals in the Kingdom

<http://www.jacwell.org/articles/1997-SPRING-Flanagan.htm>

Animal Fiestas

FAACE: Blood Fiestas

<http://www.faace.co.uk/bfiestas.htm>

Books

Animal Rights: A Christian Assessment of Man's Treatment of Animals

By: Andrew Linzey

Publisher: SCM P

ISBN: 0334000343

Christianity and the Rights of Animals

By: Andrew Linzey

Publisher: The Crossroad Publishing Company

ISBN: 0824508750

After Noah: Animals and the Liberation of Theology

By: Andrew Linzey, et al

Publisher: Continuum International Publishing Group – Mowbray

ISBN: 0264674502

Status of Animals in the Christian Religion

By: C.W. Hume

Publisher: Universities Fedn. Animal Welfare

ISBN: 0900767103

Replenish the Earth

By: Lewis Regenstein.

Examines the attitudes and histories of the world's great religions on the treatment of animals and the environment.

Publisher: SCM Press

ISBN: 033401395X

Judaism and Animal Rights

By: Roberta Kalechofsky

Publisher: Micah Pubns

ISBN: 0916288358

Is God a Vegetarian?: Christianity, Vegetarianism and Animal Rights

By: Carol J. Adams (Foreword), Richard Alan Young

Publisher: Open Court Publishing Company

ISBN: 0812693930

Animals in Islam

Publisher: Spectrum Books

ISBN: 9780292330

After the Ark

Religious studies source book

Available from CIWF

http://www.ciwf.org.uk/education/resources/after_the_ark.html

Videos

Animals, Nature and Religion

Michael Fox

Washington: The Humane Society of the United States (2100 L Street, Washington, DC 20037)

We Are All Noah

Tom Regan

Raleigh: Culture and Animals Foundation (CIN Services, Inc., 3509 Eden Croft Drive, Raleigh, NC 27609)