

Respect for Integrity

How Christian Animal Ethics Could Inform EU Legislation on Farm Animals

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7358/rela-2017-001-mass> almamassaro@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The present article is based on the assumption that consideration of non-human animals is an important element of an integral reading of Christian Scriptures. As several authors have suggested animals, as God's creation, have intrinsic value and play an active part in the reconciliation process of the whole Earth. Such a reading of Scripture entails an interesting critique of the ways humans today relate to animals. Moving from this assumption, the present article will focus on EU legislation regarding farm animals, presenting the challenges following from its being mainly economically driven. The primary aim of this paper is, therefore, to show how Christian spirituality could help develop a new comprehensive ethics for living beings, beyond the paradigm of the "human benefit"; it will also suggest that Christian "respect for integrity of creation" could inform EU policy in a positive and more humane way regarding other animals.

Keywords: Christian animal ethics, animal ethics, food ethics, theocentrism, anthropocentrism, EU legislation, applied ethics, respect for integrity, Christian spirituality, encyclics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Christian spirituality, Matthew Scully argues, is *inherently* concerned with animal ethics:

I know that they [animals] do not have reason comparable with ours. I know that their lives and place and purpose in the world are different from ours. I know that theirs is an often violent world. [...] But I also know that whatever their place and purpose among us might be, it is a mysterious one beyond any man's power to know. Whatever measure of happiness their Creator intended for them, it is not something to be taken lightly by us, not to be withdrawn from them wantonly or capriciously. (Scully 2002, 2)

Scully's intriguing analysis resonates with the way the Bible variously characterizes animals: for instance, animals are presented as models of wisdom (*Prv* 6:6-8 and 30:24-28; *Gb* 12:7-10; *Ger* 8:7); as deeply connected both with God and with humans (*Gb* 38-39; cf. Patton 2000, 408); and, yes, as distinct (*Gn* 1:24-28; 2:18-20) but not in opposition to humans. Indeed, in the Bible animals are created as *helpers and companions* for human beings (*Gn* 2:18-19; cf. Kemmerer 2007, 42); and, as it has been suggested, humans and animals "are thought of as constituting a single community under God" (Hume 1980, 7).

The very fact that animal reason and animal lives are markedly different from human lives is not a matter of better or worse. From a Christian perspective humans are not to decrease their compassion because of these differences but, rather, to take seriously the conditions of animals' earthly lives in the light of their heterogeneity. Although a number of theological points concerning Christian animal ethics could be discussed at this point, one thing is explicit: in the Bible not caring for the earthly well-being of animals is regarded as a sinful attitude. As the book of Proverbs states, "The righteous care for the needs of their animals, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel" (*Prv* 12:10). At the base of this approach, as we will see later, there is that human *dominion* over the whole creation is meant as a thoughtful *stewardship* and not as a right to exploit (Thomas 1984, 154; De Benedetti 1999, 20-1).

Historically, Christian ethics has never forgotten this point and "while the Church itself has not been immune from anthropocentrism, there have also been traditions going back to the earliest days which are more in tune with the biblical respect for God's creatures" (Jones 2010, 18; cf. Waddell 1995). From the Desert Fathers (e.g., St. Macarius and St. Pachome) to the Celtic saints (e.g., St. Ciaran and St. Kevin); from the saints of the Middle Ages (e.g., St. Francis and St. Anthony) to those of the Modern and the Contemporary eras (e.g., St. Martin de Porres and St. John Bosco), Christians have always been influenced by exemplars who, in recovering their relationship with God, were able to restore a harmonious relationship with humans and animals too. Not surprisingly, in contemporary times Pope Francis, following a distinguished tradition of papal interest in the treatment of animals (Jones 2010, 26-9) inside the social agenda, has written in his encyclical *Laudato si'* "when our hearts are authentically open to universal communion, this sense of fraternity excludes nothing and no one" (Francis 2015, par. 92).

In spite of these longstanding traditions, contemporary animal ethics has tended to consider Christianity to be at the root of the anthropocentrism that has led the Western world to exploit other animals, and to think

of them as mere resources. Similar to the way the famous American historian Lynn White Jr. accused Christianity of being at the root of the contemporary ecological crisis (White 1967), so too animal ethicists have often considered the mistreatment of animals to be a consequence of the western monotheistic tradition (Thomas 1984, 152). Therefore, not surprisingly, attention to animal well-being has been regarded as the domain of non-religious thought. It is only in recent years that a different approach has led a number of authors promoted an integral reading of the Holy Scriptures, with a new attention to the role played by animals in them (Thomas 1984, 152-65; Ryder 2000, 27-38; Preece 2002, 62-90; Deane-Drummond and Clough 2009).

2. THE ANIMALS IN THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

As Vilma Baricalla has suggested (1998, 1-23), the first chapters of the book of Genesis contain two accounts of Creation where God is presented both as an *architect* (Gn 1:1; 2:4) and as a *potter* (Gn 2:4-24); in the latter account animals are created as *companions and helpers* of humans (Gn. 2:18-19), while in the first humans are endowed with *dominion* over the rest of creation (Gn 1:28). It is essential to note that there is no contradiction between the connotation of animals as companions and the role of dominion endowed to humans. As recent interpretations of the Scriptures have proposed, the verb *dominate* does not suggest human privilege or the right to exploit, but rather the duty to act as a vice-regent of God towards creation (Thomas 1984, 154; De Benedetti 1999, 16-8; Kemmerer 2007, 6-8). Furthermore, the opening chapter of Genesis also contains the first alimentary precept according to which both humans and animals are to follow a plant-based diet (Gn 1:29-30): as Paolo De Benedetti has made clear, the harmony of the Garden is expressed not just in the *perfect cooperation* between living beings, but also in their *diet* (De Benedetti 1999, 13).

However, even if human dominion is to be understood as *stewardship*, human mastery over nature and animals is complete, and for better and worse, it works. The whole creation is said to be involved in the punishment of humans' first sin being subjected to death and suffering (Gn 3:1-24), and, in a subsequent moment, because of the persistent guiltiness of human beings, to the first environmental disaster: the Flood (Gn 6:5-9:17). At this point, the relationship between humans and other creatures is described as subject to a drastic deterioration, epitomised in the second biblical alimentary precept: humans are allowed to eat other animals, and animals, in turn, will fear them (Gn 9:1-4).

As Scully has pointed out, these genesiac narrations present

A view of the creatures as individual beings also known by Him [...], sharing with man not only in the earth's bounties but also – a still more intimate bond – in its punishment and suffering. For the first time animals are not only significant in themselves, belonging to Him and not to us; they are players, however lowly, in the story of our own moral development. (Scully 2002, 92)

That is to say that the involvement of animals in the chastisement of humans reaffirms their close fellowship with humans and justifies their active participation in the eschatological history of the world (Webb 1998, 20).

In fact, although the Old Testament deals within the horizon of a collapsed world, often describing a history of violence and abuse perpetuated against both humans and animals, it also contains the eschatological and messianic promise of a return to the original peace and fullness of the Garden. The whole creation is said to be involved in the salvation process: a *new paradise* awaits both humans and animals, where “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid and the calf and the lion and the fatling together. And a little child shall lead them” (*Is* 11:6). In this time a new alliance will be established between God and all living beings (*Os* 2:20 and *Ez* 34:25; cf. Nicora and Massaro 2013).

The first chapter of this history is told in the New Testament. The restoration begins with the advent of Jesus and will be completed with his second coming (*Ap* 1-6). His advent prepares the conditions to restore definitively the primeval union and harmony of the whole creation (*Rm* 8:19-22). In Jesus, the new Adam who spent forty days in the desert *with the wild animals* (*Mc* 1:13; cf. Bauckham 2009, 1-10), humans can return to an intimate relationship with God and, thus, with animals. Here, Jesus is the Lamb of God, whose blood washes the sins of humanity away (*Gv* 1:29); this is the ultimate and universal sacrifice which brings reconciliation between humans and God, and, therefore, with the whole creation – no more blood sacrifices are required (*Eb* 9:11-14; cf. Webb 1998, 137).

Waiting for the second advent of Jesus, when harmony will be fully restored, humans can choose to experience the reign of God, that is, a reign of Love (*Gv* 13:34) already on this earth. One could interpret the lives of the so-called *saints* throughout Christian history through this lens: in the experiences of countless people, “the Christian spiritual life promotes peace with every creature, and creates a spirit of universal benevolence [...] Christian spirituality entails a vision of limitless love, and a life that reflects this understanding” (Kemmer 2016; cf. Bormolini 2014). Being close to God through meditation, the “saints of all ages have modelled kindness, and are famous for their love of all creatures [...] Christian saints remind

the faithful that to be in relationship with God is to have amicable relations with animals”, even with wild animals (Hume 1980, 26-7). For the present argument, the point is not whether or not these stories are true. In fact, as Ryder suggests,

Whether or not these stories are historical fact, it is true that they were of Church lore for many centuries. If such compassion for beasts was attributed to the saints, it is clear that many ordinary men and women would have striven to follow their example. Regardless as to what theologians were saying at the time, kindness to nonhumans must have been widely regarded as a saintly virtue. (Ryder 2000, 32)

But how far is this perspective from the current farming practices adopted inside the European Union?

3. FARM ANIMALS IN THE EU LEGISLATION

The contemporary practice of farming in the EU is based on a strikingly different conceptualization of animals. A *human benefit* paradigm, primarily based on the idea of economic profit, has led to an objectification of animals – whose bodies are commodities to be transformed into money. Farming is not intended as a relationship between humans – farmers – and animals – farm animals – but is a mere fact of business. In this context, the European Union has developed its legislation for the protection of animals in between the real perception of animals as objects and the will to restore them to their original value as subjects.

This gap between vision and reality emerges by the legal recognition of animals as “sentient beings” (art. 13 of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*), while every year nearly 360 million pigs, sheep, goats and cattle as well as several billion poultry are killed in EU slaughterhouses¹. The same gap emerges from a comparison of the definitions of animal protection and welfare. Even if animal protection is declared “not in itself one of objective of the Community” (Council Decision 78/923/EEC), animal welfare is described as a “community value” (Protocol no. 33 on the protection and welfare of animals annexed to the Treaty establishing the European Community) that needs to be preserved and promoted.

In 2006 the Commission grouped together the various aspects of EU policy on animal welfare. In particular, concerning farm animals it has declared:

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/food/animals/welfare/practice/slaughter/index_en.htm.

A horizontal directive covers the different aspects of the welfare of farmed animals [Council Directive 98/58/EC]. Specific aspects are covered by EU legislation on transport and slaughter [respectively Council Regulation (EC) 1/2005 and Council Regulation (EC) 1099/2009]. Specific EU requirements apply to the keeping of calves, pigs, laying hens and broilers [respectively: Council Directive 2008/119/EC; Council Directive 2008/120/EC; Council Directive 1999/74/EC; Council Directive 2007/43/EC].²

Even if this legislation represents an important step through the protection of animals, it is still highly problematic. Its main issues can be summarized in three points:

1. – Firstly, it does not promote *animal welfare* for itself but rather it reconciles it with *economic* realities. As stated in the preamble of the Directive 98/58/EC – which is a sum of all the practices involving farm animals in EU: “there is [...] a need to establish common minimum standards for the protection of animals kept for farming purposes in order to ensure rational development of production and to facilitate the organisation of the market in animals”. And again “a comparative examination of animal welfare provisions applicable in the Community and in certain non-member countries together with an appraisal thereof should be undertaken with a view to determining the nature of future Community initiatives aimed at eliminating distortions of competition”. If the market is the main goal, then it is not surprising that numerous morally questionable practices are still allowed in EU farms under the name of animal welfare (tail-docking, debeaking, dehornig, teeth pulling, castration without anaesthesia in farm animals, just to mention a few).

2. – It is from this focus on profit that the second problem follows, *vagueness*. This legislation is made *vague* through the use of an unspecific language (i.e., by using expressions as “necessary” and “appropriate” which are not further defined and can be subjective). Looking at Directive 98/58/EC:

- Article no. 3 states: “Member States shall make provision to ensure that the owners or keepers take all reasonable steps to ensure the

² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee on the *European Union Strategy for the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2012-2015*. This same document highlights that “No specific EU legislation exists covering other species of farm animals (such as dairy cows, beef cattle or rabbits) despite several problems which have been highlighted by scientists and by the European Food Safety Authority”, urging therefore the Commission to work in this direction (p. 5).

welfare of animals under their care and to ensure that those animals are not cause any unnecessary pain, suffering or injury”.

- Annex, par. 11: “Animals kept in buildings must not be kept either in permanent darkness or without an appropriate period of rest from artificial lightning. Where the natural light available is insufficient to meet the physiological and ethological need of the animals, appropriate artificial lighting must be provided”.
- Annex, par. 12: “Animals not kept in buildings shall where necessary and possible be given protection from adverse weather conditions, predators and risks to their health”.

This lack of precision has been highlighted in the *European Union Strategy for the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2012-2015* Annex, which states: “The general directive on the protection of farm animals [...] contains provisions that are too general to have practical effects”. On this base the Commission has pointed out “a need to simplify and develop clear principles for animal welfare”. Because only through *clear* principles is possible to get rid of *vagueness*.

3. – The third problem, the *incongruity*, is directly connected with the first two. Several points listed in the Annex of Directive 98/58/EC are extremely controversial:

- Point no. 7, about freedom of movement: “The freedom of movement of an animal, having regard to its species and in accordance with established experience and scientific knowledge, must not be restricted in such a way as to cause it unnecessary suffering or injury. Where an animal is continuously or regularly tethered or confined, it must be given the space appropriate to its physiological and ethological needs in accordance with established experience and scientific knowledge”. Apparently the first sentence is stating the need to guarantee to animals the freedom of movement but, thanks the use of the adjective *unnecessary* a wide range of farm practices that severely restrict the freedom of movement of animals keep being legal: tie stalls, cow electric trainers, and, in general, overcrowded intensive farms.
- Point no. 14, regarding feed, water and other substances: “Animal must be fed a wholesome diet which is appropriate to their age and species and which is fed to them in sufficient quantity to maintain them in good health and satisfy their nutritional needs. No animal shall be provided with food or liquid in a manner, nor shall such food or liquid contain any substance, which may cause unnecessary suffering or injury”. If this point has to be taken seriously to its con-

sequences, then the production of both *foie gras* and veal meat would be definitely forbidden within the whole Community area.

- Point no. 21 finally states: “No animal shall be kept for farming purposes unless it can reasonably be expected, on the basis of its genotype or phenotype that it can be kept without detrimental effect on its health or welfare”. Again, the real practice does not fit with the requirements of the Law. Overcrowded farms, animals permanently confined, the selection of animal with physical characteristic selected only to answer the market demands are all practices that have detrimental effects on the health and welfare of animals. As CIWF as stated: “In intensive pig and poultry production, animals are kept confined in overcrowded conditions, usually with no outdoor access, and they are bred and managed for maximum yield (to grow faster or to produce more meat, milk, eggs, or offspring). These conditions compromise their health and their immune responses and encourage infectious disease to develop and spread easily. Without the aid of drugs for disease prevention, it would not be possible to keep the animals productive in the intensive conditions in which they are often kept and managed”³.

In conclusion, the human benefit paradigm, based on the idea of economic profit, is the main obstacle to the application of the aforementioned art. 13. The gap between vision of animals as sentient being and reality of the Directives on protection of animals will not be filled until this paradigm will be challenged.

4. CONCLUSIONS

There exists a striking difference between the Christian consideration of animals as part of the reconciliation process of the whole Earth and the one that informs the EU legislation about animal husbandry practices, based on an instrumental view of animals. In order to fill this gap, the Community could inherit the broad sense of respect for the *sacredness* of the whole creation entrenched to Christian animal ethics.

In this direction it is possible to read “religious respect for the integrity of creation” mentioned in the encyclical *Laudato si'* (Francis 2015, par. 130). *Respect for integrity of creation* – and, therefore, of animals –

³ <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/media/3758863/Antibiotics-in-Animal-Farming-Public-Health-and-Animal-Welfare.pdf>.

could become one of the objectives of the Community. Society, science, and economy could be guided by a careful attention to the wholeness of creation, that is, its own value estimated in relation to the value of each of its own part, rather than by a relativism, that deprives both animals and humans of their intrinsic value. Recovering Christian sense of sacredness for the integrity of life could help in developing a new comprehensive ethics for living beings, beyond the paradigm of the *human benefit* and the economics driven-society. Christian animal ethics could inform scientific policy in a positive and more humane way. A focus on the integrity of creation calls EU community to promote new respectful way of farming: it would be more compassionate, more merciful and, therefore, more humane.

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