Animal Rights Theology. 
Traditional vs Modern Paradigm

Grażyna Stanek-Czerny
Jesuit University Ignatianum, 26 Kopernika Str., 31-501 Krakow, Poland
E-mail address: graza.czerny@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Christian teaching claims that animals, who are not humans, can’t be moral agents and have no rights. From this point of view “the idea to recognize that animals are equal to man, or that they have rights which should be respected by people, it is not acceptable by a Christianity”. Preachers conclude that constant debate on animal rights is an attempt to disguise the sad truth that human rights are not appreciated. The author of this contribution, as a strong believer in spiritual dignity of every living creature, advocates animals rights and concepts of unity of human and animals suffering in light of animal theology. The article presents two opposite views on animals in philosophy and culture-traditional and modern animal theology. Nowadays animal corporeality should not be understood in utilitarian way. Some theologians postulate changing the definition of animal soul, moreover, they claim that animals live in continuous relationship with God (Hagencord, Linzey).

Keywords: animal theology; animal rights; animal sacrifice; rationality; mercy

1. INTRODUCTION

Who teaches us more than the beasts of the earth and makes us wiser than the birds of the heavens?

Job 35:11
It is unfortunate that the Christian’s use the description from Genesis, chapter one, poetically describing relationship and goodness, to justify exploitation and abuse of animals. Readers narrow the understanding of the whole biblical message to one word: *dominion*.

God said, 'Let the earth produce every kind of living creature in its own species: cattle, creeping things and wild animals of all kinds.' And so it was. God made wild animals in their own species, and cattle in theirs, and every creature that crawls along the earth in its own species. God saw that it was good. God said, 'Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild animals and all the creatures that creep along the ground.' God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying to them, 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on earth.’[1]

While the Genesis narratives significantly distinguish humans from the rest of creation, they also portray them as one creature among others. The fundamental relationship between humans and other creatures is their common creatureliness. In Genesis 2:7 God forms the first human from the earth, just as he does all other living creatures, flora and fauna.[2] Emphasizing the importance of the relationship of humans with other creatures the proper understanding of the vertical relationship of authority over others must be stressed.

2. ANIMAL RIGHTS THEOLOGY

The chapter, which is focused on creating images of peace, has become the source of misunderstanding and disagreement. The image of God is often interpreted in view of power, manipulation and hegemony instead of compassion, mercy and unconditional love[3]. A similar point is made in Genesis 9, where God’s covenant is made not only with Noah and his descendants but also with every living creature; it is for the sake of them all that God promises never again to destroy the earth in a universal deluge (Gen. 9:8–17). Unfortunately it has led to understanding the purpose of creating animals as a source of healthy meaty diet for people, mainly by literal interpretation of covenant with Noah.

God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Breed, multiply and fill the earth. Be the terror and the dread of all the animals on land and all the birds of heaven, of everything that moves on land and all the fish of the sea; they are placed in your hands. Every living thing that moves will be yours to eat, no less than the foliage of the plants. I give you everything [4].

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The flood, as it is depicted in Genesis, destroyed all the earthly vegetation. Noah and his family were given a dispensation to eat flesh to survive and consequently a flesh-eating practice was adopted by all human generations. The question is if God’s permission to kill animals for food was intended to be permanent or temporary.

Because faithful Hebrews slaughtered animals as sacrifices to God it may be assumed that killing animals was the way to fulfill God’s will. The line between sacrifice and eating animals is understandable, because it was established for spiritual and somatic well-being. Scholars have, however, examined the patterns of sacrifice among various cultures and religions and through comparative analysis it may be said that the purpose of sacrifice in every culture is to create a relationship between humans and the spiritual world. By establishing this connection, the divine is invited to manifest its power in the reality of those who offer the sacrifice. It can be noted that rites of sacrificing animals were part of spiritual lives in ancient Near East, Roman and Greek communities, so they undoubtedly influenced the Hebrews.

Many theologians have described the reality of violence in the world as evidence of sin because the world is in a fallen state. Blood sacrifice involves violence on several levels. First, there is the personal violence committed by the one who kills the animal as well as the personal violence experienced by the sacrificial object. Second, there is the “structural violence that becomes institutionalized in the community by blood sacrificial practices when they become the norm” [5]. However, in the words of prophet Isaiah, God condemns animal sacrifice and promises to make peace between every creature.

The multitude of your sacrifices– what are they to me?’ says the Lord. ‘I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts, Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations. I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. But whoever sacrifices a bull is like one who kills a person, and whoever offers a lamb is like one who breaks a dog’s neck; whoever makes a grain offering is like one who presents pig’s blood, and whoever burns memorial incense is like one who worships an idol. They have chosen their own ways, and they delight in their abominations” [6].

Christianity is speciesist and responsible for the speciesism (a form of discrimination against those who don’t belong to a certain species) in Western world [7]. Christians speak about unique status of humans, alone made in the image of God [8]. But the basis of Christian thinking about animals’ role in the universe are deeply rooted in ancient, mainly Greek philosophy. In a Hebrew tradition, both humans and animals are fashioned from the earth, both as living souls as breath infused into humans and animals but only humans are made with image of God. For Plato all creatures have souls, animals’ soul is even capable of primitive believing. Platonists believed in transmigration of souls and claimed, that in order to have their souls released for reincarnation into people, animals want to be killed [9].

Aristotle, as Plato disciple, inherited his teacher’s way of understanding the hierarchy of created order in nature and strongly influenced Christian thinking about animals designed for
human benefit. Aristotle believed that there exists a hierarchy of living things: plants have a vegetative soul, animals are above plants because they have appetites, humans are above animals because they have the power of reason. The body and soul are not two separate elements but they are different parts or aspects of the same thing. The soul is simply the Form of the body and Aristotle not rejects the immortality of the soul. A dead animal is only a flesh because it has lost its soul [10].

Nonrational animals are “naturally under slavery [11]. It was Plato who claimed that the world was created for human persons and that all nonpersons - females, slaves, animals - were deficient in some way.[12] Christian theologians were attracted to the quasi-monotheism suggested by Plato, and took his rationalism as their guide, assuming that knowledge of the natural world could be gained by reason alone [13]. Animals have no mind or reason, they are irrational.

According to Pythagoras and Empedocles people have a fellowship not only with one another and the gods but also with the irrational animals. The same spirit, called a soul, pervades the whole world and unites humans with other living creatures. Thus killing and eating animal flesh should be perceived as committing injustice and impiety. The most detailed account of the Pythagorean view came from the fourth-century Neoplatonist Porphyry. Porphyry distinguishes between the rational (higher) soul and the non-rational (lower) soul. The higher soul is the same as reason, whereas the lower is responsible for physiological and mechanical functions of the body, for perception and desire. Porphyry insisted on the unity of the human soul: the lower functions were powers depended on the rational soul. He opposed the Stoics who denied all reason to other species.” Thus there should be no killing of animals even for food. Furthermore, we should regret that we have to eat other life forms, even plants” [14].

In Porphyry’s opinion animals are not naturally designed to satisfy human needs and to be owned by them. There is a strong relationship between humans and animals, the friendship between them is possible and a man has moral obligations to animals. It is clearly unjust to harm innocent creatures who intend no harm against us so his vegetarianism was also an ethical matter. His defence a and philosophical reasoning of vegetarianism Porphyry comprehended in his On Abstinence [15].

In popular speech the word rationalism usually connotes hostility to belief in the supernatural, it denotes class of opinions characterized by their content rather than by the way in which they arrived at. Sometimes the word rationalism stands for a repudiation of authority in matter of belief. It is also defined as the process of justifying by reasoning after the event and used by theological scholars [16]. In its philosophical sense it denotes the assumption that the law of nature can be known a priori, logically, by reasoning alone.

The rationalist approach has been unfavourable not only to Christianity but also to the spirit of neighbourliness toward animals. The most probable explanation lied in the difficulty of ascertaining the fact about the psychology of animals in an objective way. The teaching of Plato was essentially rationalistic. Under the leadership of Catechetical School, founded in Alexandria in 180, many Christian theologians were seduced by Platonism. It attracted them, because it used lofty language about God and because it reached the conclusions that seemed to be compatible with Christian piety [17]. The intellectual pride of Greek rationalism lay in its exalting the intellect and reason above all other human powers, confusing intellectual excellence with moral excellence, with moral and aesthetic judgement. A philosophy which glorified the intellect above all was bound to be detrimental to the status of animals.
St Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*, inspired by Aristotelian philosophy, introduced the view that animals were devoid of mental powers: ‘Dumb animals and plants are devoid of the life of reason whereby to set themselves in motion; they are moved, as it were by another, by a kind of natural impulse, a sign of which is that they are naturally enslaved and accommodated to the uses of others’ [18]. Christian theology adopted the idea that animals behave only by nature and instincts because they do not employ any mental power. Another ‘theological feature’ of animals is that they have no immortal souls.

St Thomas and his followers distinguished between three kinds of souls: ‘vegetative souls’ of vegetables, ‘sensitive souls’ of animals, and ‘rational souls’ of humans. Only the rational souls of humans were thought to be ‘incorporeal’ (capable of withstanding physical death). The view that only men were fully rational, because men were made in the image of God, led to doubts about both the souls of women (who Aquinas thought were made in the image of God in a secondary way to that of men) and to the complete rejection of animal souls. From the denial of reason and soulfulness to animals, it was only a short step to the idea that animals had insufficient consciousness to feel pain [19].

Rene Descartes was the main representative of ‘lack of pain’ idea. According to Descartes, animals ‘act naturally and mechanically, like a clock which tells the time better than our own judgement does’ [20]. Animals, in short, are simply machines, without feelings, consciousness and of course rationality. “This view has been implicitly or explicitly accepted by many theologians; in this century even the celebrated biologist, natural theologian and Professor of Divinity, Charles Raven doubted whether animals could feel pain” [21]. Considering aspect of animal nature it was assumed that animals had no moral status, that led to persistent belief that people have no direct duties to animals. Thomas centres his teaching on human dignity. The whole creation’s role is to assist people on the way to salvation. Cruelty to animals is forbidden only because it may accustom people to be cruel to others. “The celebrated Thomistic principle that grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it, turns out to be narrowly anthropocentric […] for, in effect, grace does destroy animals, the plants[…]it only perfects spiritual creatures.”[22]

In Aquinas teaching animals are essentially reduced to resources for human well-being in the temporal realm, including bodily nourishment and spiritual knowledge. Aquinas claims that it is this unique rational dimension of the human creature that constitutes the *imago Dei* (“image of God”). All nonhuman creatures and the animalistic dimensions of human beings bear a likeness to God in that they reveal a trace of God’s design [23].

A pioneer of Catholic Orthodoxy, Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130-200) states that nature is good. Because of Christ vocation being, according to Irenaeus, balanced between the fulfilment of creation on the one hand and the redemption of humanity on the other, eschatology is inclusive of everything: nothing of the good creation will be lost. Creation, in
this theory, has not fallen—it retains its created goodness—but it has been cursed by Adam’s sin, and so needs to be restored to full health [24]. Origen (c.185-c.254) enumerates different reasons why animals are subjected to humans. However, a person is weaker than beasts, possesses many abilities given by God to master every creature. For Origen animals have only instincts, not wisdom and intellect, so God himself provides them with everything they need to survive. Augustine of Hippo in his City of God explains the God’s prohibition against killing (from biblical commandment Thou shall not kill) as the law concerning only humans, because animals are ‘subjected to us to kill or keep alive for our own uses’ [25].

Catechism of Catholic Church states that “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” (CCC 2417). This doctrinal indication of the value of animal life for the benefit of humanity adversely influenced absolving way of thinking how Christian treat animals. However, Catechism also reminds that ‘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.” (CCC 2415).

Andrew Linzey emphasises the necessity to modify our understanding what integrity of creation is.

We need to abolish what St Paul calls the ‘old man’ which is humanity in moral bondage or slavery sin. Demythologized a little, what St Paul might have said is that we must stop looking on God’s beautiful world as though it was given to us so that we can devour, consume, and manipulate it without limit […] Then, and only then, when we have surrender our idolatrous power, which is nothing short of tyranny, over God’s good creation, shall we be worthy to have that moral dominion over all which God has promised us [26].

Nature has been reduced to stuff that we can use as we wish, not by the Bible, but by the modern age, with its rejection of God and its instrumentalizing of nature. The Bible has de-divinized nature, but it has not de-sacralized nature [27]. Nature remains sacred in the sense that it belongs to God, exists for the glory of God, even reflects the glory of God, as humans also do.

Take delight in all things that surround us. All things teach us and lead us to God. All things are droplets of the love of God - both things animate and inanimate, the plants and the animals, the birds and the mountains, the sea and the sunset and the starry sky. They are little loves through which we attain to the great Love that is Christ. Flowers, for example, have their own grace; they teach us with their fragrance and with their magnificence. They speak to us of the love of God. They scatter their fragrance and their beauty on sinners and on the righteous [28].
The Hebrew Scriptures are not responsible in themselves for this interpretation of revelation, but rather what ‘exegesis, theology and preaching have often made of them’ [29]. In this perspective the human being is less separated from other creatures, he is created to protect (in Hebrew samar) and serve (in Hebrew abad). Adam’s naming of the animals is not an act of power, as was thought in nineteenth century, but an act of affection, a bonding, enabling a relationship between man and fellow creatures, in the way that God names Israel and Adam names Eve [30]. As it was mentioned above, not only Noah is included within God’s covenant, but also every creature that lives on the Earth.

In legendary stories about Christian saints the hierarchical order is understood as a state of harmony which benefits all God’s creatures, the animals are not the saint’s slaves, but are depicted as fellows, companions of the saint, they are the objects of saints concern and care. According to the Bible, all creatures, animate and inanimate, worship God. This is not, as modern biblical interpreters have sometimes supposed, merely a poetic fancy or some kind of animism that endows all creatures with consciousness. The creation worships God just by being itself, as God made it, existing for God’s glory. Only humans desist from worshipping God; other creatures, without having to think about it, do it all the time [31]. In legendary stories about Christian saints the hierarchical order is understood as a state of harmony which benefits all God’s creatures, the animals are not the saint’s slaves, but are depicted as fellows, companions of the saint, the objects of saints concern and care.

Contemporary theology rediscovers the divine purpose of creation of animals. Animals must be included in the moral concerns circle, since many non-rational humans, the insane, the senile, the comatose, children, the mentally retarded, are also not rational but have moral laws. “Also, we worry about aspects of human nature that are independent of rationality, such as pleasure and pain, which are aspects animals share. If humans had natures, and their moral/legal rights were based on our view of human nature, animals also had natures, the fulfilment or thwarting of which mattered to them” [32].

Contemporary ecological crisis reminds with an unprecedented power that the natural world also needs a “breath” because it faces the danger of exhaustion and death.

Respect for creation issues from respect for human life and human dignity. Modern theologians point out the responsibility of individual person for the creation, respect for the world around us and the God’s gifts, which were given to us. Let’s examin sometimes surprising and controversial reflections of Jerzy Nowosielski, who provokes a profound meditation on the mystery of animals suffering, the continuing drama of nature, mercilessly abused by people. Bloody sacrificial cult in Jewish tradition and the dominant mainstream of Christian tradition contributed to the fact, that in people’s minds a sense of sin in relation to the animal world disappeared. Krzysztof Tomasz Konecki, exploring the issues of interaction between humans and animals with consideration of cultural and religious problems, states that pets build strong social and family ties. In the process of supporting proper development of children, pets become full-fledged subjects of relationships in families [33].

Although full socialization of animals is obviously impossible, pets should be included in human perspective of their role in family life. The author argues that all abilities acquired during the socialization process allow animals to serve extremely important role in the social groups, to help to sustain the most important institutions of the social system, which is the family [34].
One aspect which should be underlined in the process of forming whole societies and individual man is the necessity to appeal to dignity of life. The reverence for life introduced by albert Schweitzer is a universal, trans-species ethics, based on solidarity with all the manifestations of life. The implementation of this program requires people to goodness, hard work and responsibility. The consequence of this Schweitzerian ethics program is the obligation to save lives and the alleviation of suffering and pain. Schweitzer declared that reverence for life requires respect not only to humans but also to animals and plants. He defines a man ethical only if he consider sacred not only humans life, but also animal and plant, and if he would be able to offer own life to save another one [35].

“The more we are aware of our actual state of possession, the greater is our gratitude for this to life, the stronger is the desire to repay the specific debt by our courtesy and kindness towards other people, or by concern about the beautiful garden which is the Earth. For the human being this is the most important commandment to be responsible for actions affecting the surrounding world of nature, animate and inanimate [36].

Listen, my people, and I will speak; I will testify against you, Israel: I am God, your God. I bring no charges against you concerning your sacrifices or concerning your burnt offerings, which are ever before me. I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the insects in the fields are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High, and call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honour me [37].

3. CONCLUSIONS

From the theological point of view the critical point of the discussed issue is that our power and dominion over the animals refer to the example of sovereignty given by Jesus Christ. But if this kind of generosity is indeed a divine paradigm it shall be the standard of human concern for animal world and it ought to be a role model of people power over the Earth. The doctrine of the incarnation involves sacrifice "higher" to "lower", not vice versa.

We humans were created in God's image. But God’s intention was to equip humanity in His virtues and attributes - love, mercy and justice. Modern theology has shown that the God’s “image” can be perceived in parallel with “supremacy”: people’s behaviour must illustrate the merciful care of God in relation to other creatures. If people really believe that God is gracious and that a man was created in his image, the duties of a mankind should be clear: mercy not only in relation to other people, but in the whole God's creation. Here the meaning of theological term “neighbour” has a wider connotation, in which animals are included. The image of God creating a man with his rationality and abilities to create has a bit modified interpretation in modern culture: a mankind must take care of all creation, as God's representative on the Earth. This is because of these exceptional abilities every man should admit liability towards animals and moral superiority understand in a proper way can not be
based on behaviour characterized by coarse morality. Therefore, we can not be a “dominant species” but a “servant species”.

In conclusion it should be underlined, that issues considered above suggest the importance of new elements of theological education, regarding respect for all creation in the spirit of full responsibility for them. The problem of animal theology should be fully investigated in every Christian denomination. Consumerism exploits land resources so that future generations can be deprived of what the Earth was once fully equipped. This is the task for contemporary generation to change the paradigm [38-46].

References


[6] Isaiah 1; 11-13; 66:3


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