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WHY ARE CHURCHES NEGATIVE ABOUT ANIMALS ?

We have seen from the previous quotes from Laudato Si' that Pope Francis criticises the Church's anthropocentrism time and time again. So why is the Church so anthropocentric? This is a question that David Clough, Professor of Theological Ethics at Chester University, has been investigating and writing about. Professor Clough is President of the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics, Co-chair of the Animals and Religion Group of the American Academy of Religion and is a Methodist preacher. He is author of 'On Animals' (London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2012). He shares the results of his research with us here.

BY PROFESSOR DAVID CLOUGH

As a Christian, who has been convinced for most of my life that my faith has direct relevance to how I treat non-human animals, I have regularly been disorientated to find that most other Christians do not see the link. This has made me interested in asking why many consider that their Christian belief gives them faith-based reasons not to be concerned about animals. In this article I explore four of the answers I have encountered most commonly, with most focus on the first, which I take to be the most influential.

Why Are the Churches Negative about Animals?

Answer 1: 'It's all about us' theologies

A strong strand in the Christian tradition has focussed on God's grace in creation and redemption as wholly directed towards human beings, holding that creation is 'all about us'.¹ This is an anthropocentric view of creation, where humans are the centre of God's project. Philo of Alexandria (c. 15 BC–50 AD) was a Jewish philosopher and theologian, one of the earliest commentators on the Genesis creation narrative and perhaps the most theologically influential advocate of the 'It's all about us' position concerning the purpose of creation. He was strongly influenced by Platonism, and sought to interpret the Mosaic Pentateuch as a philosophical book.

Philo's commentary on Genesis clearly has Plato's *Timaeus* in mind as a point of comparison. In the *Timaeus*, creation takes place in two stages: first the eternal world and world soul are made by the deity, then demiurges are charged with the task of making human beings within a second creation that exists in time. Beginning with immortal souls, they create different bodily parts to encase it, but then find that placing it in the hostile environment of the fire and air, their creature quickly perishes. The demiurges therefore make 'another nature' to grow: trees, plants and seeds, to create an environment more congenial to the new mortal creature. In Plato's account, women, birds, animals and fish then descend from mortal creatures that are deficient in some respect: unjust or cowardly, simple-minded, wild or stupid, respectively. Here is a universe with the immortal soul of man -used in the gender-exclusive sense -placed clearly at the centre.

Reconciling Genesis with Platonic Anthropocentrism

Philo is frequently troubled by discrepancies between this Platonic account and the Genesis narrative, and one of his first questions is why, in Genesis, human beings were created last of all

the creatures, suggesting their inferiority, in contrast with the Platonic account. To answer this point, he pictures God as the host at a banquet who does not summon his guests until the feast is prepared, or the organizer of a gymnastic contest who does not gather spectators until the performers are ready. Similarly, Philo states, God ordered things 'so that, when the human being entered into the cosmos, he would immediately encounter both a festive meal and a most sacred theatre'.²

Philo's interpretation of this point in Genesis has had a significant influence on Christian commentators on Genesis who followed him. Early Christian theologians, such as Lactantius, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom, give the same answer to the question of why human beings were created last and, at the Reformation, both Martin Luther and John Calvin adopt a similar position.³

In reflecting on the import of this tradition of reflection on why human beings were created last by God, we need to note that, the reason so many thinkers commented on this issue, was that the Genesis 1 account of creation did not seem as anthropocentric as they thought was necessary. These discussions are therefore an attempt to explain away the Genesis 1 affirmation that God's work of each day is declared by God to be good in its own right, without reference to its utility to human beings. In short, the doctrine that human beings are the aim, centre and goal of creation is being read into the Genesis text in order to make it congruent with a view of the place of the human in creation derived from other sources.

The weight of theological opinion that human beings are God's aim in creation, therefore, is not matched by a similar weight of theological argument.

The Stoic Influence on Anthropocentrism

The Genesis narrative is not the only locus of theological arguments suggesting human beings as the purpose of creation. One of the most thoroughgoing statements of this view is found in Origen's disputation with Celsus. Origen cites Celsus's argument that, contrary to the Christian view 'that God made all things for man', 'everything was made just as much for the irrational animals as for men'.⁴ As Henry Chadwick notes, however, this is a rehearsal of a well-established argument between Stoic and Academic philosophers: the latter regularly attacked Stoic anthropocentrism on the basis of arguments similar to those used by Celsus, and most of what Origen says in reply are standard Stoic responses.⁵ The best that can be said of Origen's position here, therefore, is that he recognized and took advantage of common ground between Stoicism and Christianity on the centrality of human beings to God's purposes in creation. Given his strong dependence on the Stoic view of rationality as a division between human beings and all other animals, however, and the lack of any theological appeals in his argument, it seems more likely that he is over-influenced here by traditional Stoic positions, which are convenient in his overall aim of opposing Celsus at every possible point.

While other Patristic theologians share Origen's view that the universe was created for the sake of human beings, this is most commonly stated formulaically rather than argued for, and often seems influenced by contemporary philosophies. Justin Martyr was first taught philosophy by a Stoic teacher and his writings regularly debate with philosophy. While he has no hesitation in opposing Stoic ideas where he sees them to be in conflict with Christian teaching, he seems to concur with Stoic views on human beings as God's purpose in creation, with a specific reference to human salvation. ⁶

Irenaeus of Lyons similarly states that God creates for the sake of humanity - 'creation is suited to man; for man was not made for its sake, but creation for the sake of man'.

The lack of argument supplied by these authors, and the lack of biblical or theological support for them, suggests that this affirmation of the centrality of the human was common ground between themselves and their Stoic and Platonic interlocutors.

John Calvin's concern to affirm God's special providence in relation to human beings, while far removed in time from the Patristic context, seems close in motivation. In the *Divine Institutes*, after outlining his uncompromising view of general providence, he states that within these wider providential purposes, God is especially concerned with human beings, though at this point he states only 'we know' that the world was made chiefly for the sake of human beings.⁷

It is a self-centred theological mistake, therefore, to think that God created for the sake of humanity.

Modern Theologians Apply Anthropocentric View

Early modern theologians were quick to apply these anthropocentric texts to justify the exercise of new-found human power over the natural world. Of the many examples cited by Keith Thomas in *Man and the Natural World*, the most striking is Henry More's opinion in 1653 that cattle and sheep were only given life to keep their meat fresh until we need to eat them.⁸

It is clear from this brief survey that it is not difficult to find Christian theologians stating that human beings are God's sole or primary purpose in creation. It is harder, however, to find good theological argument in defence of this proposition. The weight of theological opinion that human beings are God's aim in creation, therefore, is not matched by a similar weight of theological argument.

The best response to 'all about us' theologies is that positing human beings as God's purpose in creation is a theological mistake. For Thomas Aquinas, the goodness and glory of God are the final end of creation.⁹ Bonaventure agrees the final end of creation cannot be anything outside God.¹⁰ More recently, the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg has offered another answer: 'the creature was not created in order that God should receive glory from it' because God has no need of glorification by creatures. Instead, God's end in creation is God's creatures: 'both the object and goal of creation'.¹¹ It is a self-centred theological mistake, therefore, to think that God created for the sake of humanity. Instead, God's glory is manifested in the flourishing of all creatures, who find their final end in God.

Why Are the Churches Negative about Animals?

Answer 2: Human needs take priority

Many Christians would concede the point that God cares for the wellbeing of all creatures, but argue that humans are of much greater value, so should always be prioritized. Jesus's teaching in Matthew 10 captures this position well: even though two sparrows are sold for a penny, not one falls to the ground apart from God, but humans should be reassured that they are worth more than many sparrows (vv. 29–31). Passages like this mean, in my view, that Christians could never propose a species-neutral ethic, which gave equal weight to the interests of humans and all non-human animals. In response, however, I think it is crucial to recognize that most issues of animal ethics do not weigh similar human and non-human interests against each other. For example, it would be much better for global human food and water security if we stopped feeding a third of global cereal crops to livestock and instead grew food to feed humans directly. In

addition, the cheap meat produced by intensive farming has led to an overconsumption of meat, which has played a role in the growing human health challenges of obesity, diabetes, chronic heart disease, and stroke. Intensive farming conditions have also helped incubate new diseases, such as avian flu, that threaten human health globally. The antibiotics that are fed to farmed animals to try to control infection in the crowded conditions -accounting for 80 per cent of antibiotic usage in the US -contribute significantly to the huge challenge of bacterial resistance to current antibiotics. Reducing livestock numbers would also reduce the production of anthropogenic greenhouse gases that are a major cause of climate change. Ending intensive farming, therefore, would not only eliminate the manifold cruelties visited on farmed animals in these processes, but would also be good for human health too. The only argument against doing so is the interests of meat and dairy producers and the current dietary preferences of consumers.

In the use of non-human animals for medical research, there may also be less conflict between the interests of humans and non-human animals than is often recognized: many procedures are likely to lead to little advance in human health and are conducted because of methodological conservatism among research scientists or governmental regulation requiring testing on non-human animals. In most cases, improving the well-being of other animals either produces a net human benefit, or is at very little human cost compared to the magnitude of the harms done to other animals under current conditions.

In the context of many debates, therefore, significant advances for non-human animal welfare, such as bringing an end to intensive farming and cutting meat consumption, can be seen to be required by a Christian understanding of the place of all animals in God's purposes of creation. Christians do not need to sign up to Peter Singer's rallying cry of 'all animals are equal' in order to recognize the demands of their faith in relation to other animals.

Why Are the Churches Negative about Animals?

Answer 3: Animals are a secular issue

The movement for animal rights in recent decades has been a predominantly secular affair, that is strongly critical of the Christian tradition as the basis for moral views that are dismissive of concern for non-human animals. In response, Christians have sometimes opposed initiatives aimed at promoting the interests of animals, on the basis that it is an atheistic liberal issue, rather than one rooted in their faith.

To respond to this concern, it is necessary only to recall the history of the first animal cruelty legislation. This was enacted in the UK in the early nineteenth century through the efforts of evangelical Christians such as William Wilberforce, who saw opposition to animal cruelty alongside other social issues, such as the abolition of slavery, as a Christian concern. The campaigning group the Society for the Protection of Animals (later the RSPCA) was founded by a group of Christians together with a prominent Jew, and published contemporary sermons against animal cruelty. This followed in the tradition of Christian discussion of the place of animals in God's purposes in the eighteenth century, through the work of figures such as John Hildrop and John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. It is hard to understand why Christians seemed less interested in animal welfare issues in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but it is clear that the promotion of animal welfare was recognized as a Christian issue at its modern origin.

Why Are the Churches Negative about Animals?

Answer 4: The perceived costs of change

If we are realistic, a large factor in the maintenance of negative attitudes towards animals, both inside and outside the church, is the fact that the practical implications of a more positive attitude would be significant and far-reaching. The vast majority of meat and dairy products now come from systems of raising livestock that are intensive and prioritize economic efficiency over any respect for the lives of the animals caught up in them. Any recognition that non-human animals are entitled to respect would mean that most of these products would have to be rejected. This is a significant issue for individual Christians, who would have to change their eating habits, for institutions such as churches, which would have to rethink their communal practice, and for the farming industry, which would have to radically reshape itself if the majority of consumers came to recognize that most of what is from farmed animals is unacceptable in its disregard for animal life. These radical implications from thinking more positively about other animals are a powerful force against changing minds on this issue, and can often lead to good arguments for change being discounted because of the perceived cost of change.

Responding to this issue will be an enduring challenge, but the answer can only be to keep highlighting the novel and cruel practices our current disregard of animal lives permits. Anyone who learns that current systems of egg production requires the maceration of 4 billion day-old male chicks each year, or that broiler chickens are slaughtered at 35 days old after a monotonous existence on sawdust floors of crowded and windowless sheds, must recognize the deep wrongness of our current practices in relation to other animals. In time, Christians must come to see that what we are doing is ungodly as well as unethical, and that none of the obstacles I have surveyed can stand in the way, not only of being more positive about animals, but also of making the practical changes in lives of faith that such a change would require.

Sources

1. This section is a partial summary of David Clough, *On Animals: I. Systematic Theology* (London: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2012), ch. 1. See the book chapter for a more extensive discussion, with source references.
2. Philo of Alexandria, *On the Creation of the Cosmos According to Moses*, ed. David T. Runia (Leiden: Brill, 2001), ch. 14, §§ 77–84.
3. For more detail and source references, see Clough, *On Animals I*, ch. 1.
4. Origen, *Origen: Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), bk. 4, §74.
5. See Chadwick's introduction to *Origen, Contra Celsum*, x–xi, and his article Henry Chadwick, 'Origen, Celsus and the Stoa', *Journal of Theological Studies* 48 (1947).
6. Justin Martyr, 'Dialogue With Trypho', in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 1, A. Cleveland Coxe, James Donaldson, and Alexander Roberts (eds.) (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), ch. 2, §2.
9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (London: Blackfriars, 1963), 1.65.2.
10. See Alexander O. F. M. Schäfer, 'The Position and Function of Man in the Created World, Part I', *Franciscan Studies* 20 (1960), 271.

11. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 56.

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