Religion: A Friend or Foe to Animals?

People who advocate for animals from a religious perspective often highlight those texts and traditions that favor animal protectionism and ignore or downplay less animal-friendly writings. In *Kinship and Killing: The Animal in World Religions*, animal advocate Katherine Wills Perlo takes a different tack. Her approach rests more on cultural anthropology and the history of religion. She credits human psychological and anthropological factors, rather than divine inspiration, with the content of the texts, and she observes that religious texts reflect their writers' diverse attitudes toward animals.

Perlo demonstrates that there are inconsistent and conflicting views about animals in several major world religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. On the one hand, ancient people often needed to exploit animals for food and labor in order to survive in harsh conditions. On the other hand, they recognized and wanted to respect animals' feelings and will to live. Perlo contends that these conflicting perspectives heavily influenced narratives about animals in the major world religious texts written between 1,500 and 3,000 years ago, and that modern interpretations of these ancient texts similarly reflect contemporary attitudes toward animals.

Perlo identifies several psychological strategies used by people—and religions—to justify the exploitation of animals. Evasion, one such strategy, diverts attention from the exploitation by offering appearances of kindness or respect. Many aboriginal people believe, for example, that animals willingly sacrifice their bodies to hunters, and many pray for a killed animal's soul, evading the actual harm they do to the animals. The kosher prohibition against consuming flesh and milk at the same meal evidently stems from consideration for the mother-child bond—an example of evasion, since flesh and milk consumption involve animal exploitation and, often, abuse.

Defensive strategies involve recognizing an ethical problem but "laundering" rather than changing the behavior. As an example, Perlo describes how in some cultures an animal slated for sacrifice is sprinkled with holy water, and the priest and people interpret the animal's head movements—designed to shake off the water—as a sign of assent.

Perlo argues compellingly, however, that the fundamental values and principles held by the major religions point to an animal rights ethic. All religions, for example, articulate a version of the "Golden Rule" that we should treat others as we would want others to treat us. But religions often do not include animals among the "others," although there are no sound grounds for excluding animals, who, as best we can tell, experience pain and pleasure in ways similar to ourselves. Perlo shows that, by combining the timeless wisdom of the Golden Rule with modern science's insights about animal experiences, one can make a compelling case that religious people should acknowledge and respect animal rights.

Perlo is only one among the many scholars who have recently explored how different religious traditions deal with the treatment of animals. I want to focus on writers in the Christian tradition—the dominant religious tradition in the West. Andrew Linzey, for example, proposes "theos-rights" (*Animal Theology*, pp. 24-26), arguing that we have duties to show animals kindness and respect because they belong to God, not us. It remains possible, however, within the framework of theos-rights, to regard human beings as far more valuable than nonhumans. Those who endorse theos-rights while maintaining belief in...
humanity's paramount importance can countenance such harmful activities as vivisection. In contrast, Perlo finds that the Golden Rule, if properly applied to include animals among "others" who we should treat as we would like to be treated, forbids killing animals except in cases of absolute necessity, such as self-defense.

Stephen Webb's book *Good Eating* and Richard Alan Young's *Is God a Vegetarian?* argue that Christian teachings and traditions favor plant-based diets today. They address passages that vegetarians have found problematic, such as those concerning ancient Hebrew sacrifices and Noah's permission to eat meat, by offering animal-friendly interpretations. They focus on the Bible's vegetarian, nonviolent ideals as depicted in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1:29-30) and Isaiah's prophecy of the Realm of God (11:6-9). The Bible's description of the brutal conquest of the Holy Land remains problematic, however, for anyone trying to infer a humane, loving God from the Hebrew Scriptures. Here, Perlo's anthropological approach helps make sense of these stories without attributing violent motivations to God.

In my book *Guided by the Faith of Christ: Seeking to Stop Violence and Scapegoating*, I argue, as Perlo does, that the Bible presents conflicting attitudes toward animals. I suggest that one might regard the Bible as a collection of stories about humanity's maturation process. The Bible records humanity's gradual recognition that we have a tendency to generate and maintain communities through the scapegoating process, and the Bible reveals that community can and should be grounded in love. People have always gained a personal sense of self-esteem and a communal sense of camaraderie by victimizing innocent individuals through the scapegoating process. Unfortunately, even though scapegoating humans on the basis of gender, ethnicity, or disability has become less palatable to many people, scapegoating animals remains ubiquitous. Indeed, scapegoating animals might even be increasing because we live in increasingly troubled times, and our current ethos makes human scapegoating victims less readily available.

Perlo's solid scholarship, insightful analysis, and clear writing help make sense of how religions are replete with inconsistencies—obvious to animal advocates but evidently imperceptible to mainstream believers—when it comes to animal issues. Her insights into the psychological defenses that enable people to resist embracing animal protectionism can help activists devise effective strategies. One such strategy, I think, is to remind people of the imperatives of the Golden Rule.

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References


