

## **Christianity, Animals, and The Concept of Sin**

"Indeed, according to the Law  
almost everything is purified by blood,  
and sins are forgiven only if blood is poured out."  
[Hebrews 9:22]

John Ryder

I wish to argue from a Christian point of view that it is sinful to spill the blood of any creature unless it is absolutely necessary for survival - even then it must be done as compassionately as possible - and that this principle is at the very least consistent with the will of God as revealed in Holy Scripture.

In saying this I am taking the Old Testament to be as essential as the New for a correct Christian understanding of the will of God - for this or for any other issue - as Jesus and his apostles remained devout Jews. You might think I am setting myself an impossible task, considering the daily ritual slaughter in the Temple, never mind all the feasting on meat.

But not, I believe, when you start at the beginning, and see God's plan of salvation unfolding step by step.

Unfortunately it is a part of our fallen nature that we human beings tend to see things only from the perspective of our own species, or even our own subspecies.

I know dividing humanity into sub-species is not politically correct, or allowable in academic circles, but most people in their private judgement still do. It was far worse a few centuries ago of course - just think of the arguments western Christians had between themselves then about the slave trade.

In comparison with such arguments in the past that have been fought and won, I believe my argument is comparatively simple and easy to accept - using the same example of slavery I think there is less in the Bible that supports meat-eating than supports slavery; and more in the Bible that supports veganism than supports the abolition of slavery.

Again we must remember that Our Lord and his first followers remained good Jews. Slaves treated according to the Law of Moses fared a lot better than many an ordinary servant in the Victorian era, and far better than livestock in the factory farms of today.

Easy though it would be, I do not wish to dwell at any length on the environmental aspect of meat-eating, as this is outside the remit I have given myself, and the United Nations has argued our case very effectively in their report "Livestock's Long Shadow". There is no point in repeating their - or Al Gore's - excellent work.

For in this as in all things altruism and enlightened egoism come very close together. If we put God centre-stage and not ourselves, and attempt to see the history of salvation from the perspective of God's love for all of his creation, not just for our own species - or sub-species - part of it, then a number of things fall into place. Livestock farming is one of the greatest, if not the greatest contributor to global warming. In farming livestock on a sufficient scale to satisfy the majority in the western world, the poor are being deprived of food to feed the rich, and the natural habitats of many plants and animals are destroyed. If God loves the second and third worlds as much as he loves the first - something which I hope every Christian would find incontestable - then a livestock-based diet cannot be His will. If He values - and I would say He loves - the non-human part of his creation, then a livestock-based diet cannot be His will. If He wants life on this planet to continue into the next century, then a livestock-based diet cannot be His will. This science teaches us. I believe Scripture does as well.

So let us start at the beginning, at the idyll before the fall. Whatever your view of the early chapters of Genesis as far as science and history is concerned, I hope we can all agree on its theological verity. We look at the 6th day of creation, when mankind came on the scene. My quotes are from the Good News Bible, as that is what I can download free from The Bible Society: (1:26-31)

Then God said, "And now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds, and all animals, domestic and wild, large and small."

So God created human beings, making them to be like himself. He created them male and female, blessed them, and said, "Have many children, so that your descendants will live all over the earth and bring it under their control. I am putting you in charge of the fish, the birds, and all the wild animals.

I have provided all kinds of grain and all kinds of fruit for you to eat; but for all the wild animals and for all the birds I have provided grass and leafy plants for food"-and it was done. God looked at everything he had made, and he was very pleased. Evening passed and morning came - that was the sixth day.

We read here that before sin entered the world all creation was vegan; we humans didn't even kill plants, we ate only fruit and grain.

It would be easy to say here "Point proven, we Christians should be at least vegetarian", especially as the Prophet Isaiah's vision of the end time seems to add certainty to this view. I am sure you all know and love it: (11:6-9)

"Wolves and sheep will live together in peace,  
and leopards will lie down with young goats.  
Calves and lion cubs will feed together,  
and little children will take care of them.  
Cows and bears will eat together,  
and their calves and cubs will lie down in peace.  
Lions will eat straw as cattle do. Even a baby will not be harmed  
if it plays near a poisonous snake. On Zion, God's sacred hill,  
there will be nothing harmful or evil.  
The land will be as full of knowledge of the Lord  
as the seas are full of water."

Wonderful passage. But unfortunately we can't end here, never mind how strongly we believe this is the final goal of all creation. For sin and carnage entered the world soon after the fall, Isaiah's vision has not yet materialised, and we find good people, holy people, killing animals: sometimes to eat, sometimes to share with God, sometimes to offer whole to God.

We need to see how this can be consistent with, and not contradict the deathless idyll of Genesis One, with the vision of Isaiah Eleven, with God's love for all his creatures. Neither does the belief that the shedding of blood is a sin need to contradict the writer to the Hebrews' statement that "sins are forgiven only if blood is poured out."

Before putting forward my thesis I would like to remind us all of something which I hope is obvious to us all: that holy people still sin, and although they are more aware of their sin than the rest of humanity no human being is right on everything. Just because a great prophet ate meat does not mean it is right. The greatest prophets, Elijah and Elisha, also slaughtered their foes mercilessly, and while we might sometimes be tempted to follow their example in this respect, most of us would think it wrong so to do.

But to get back to the story of our, creation. Man sinned, and was expelled from Eden. Death had entered the world. His behaviour went from bad to worse until God could tolerate it no longer, and we come to God's first great act to save the world and to save man from himself: the flood.

And after the flood we get the Covenant with Noah. (Genesis 9) This covenant acknowledges not just that man had sinned, but that sin has entered the world. One sign of this is that both man and some beasts had become carnivores. The friendship between man and man and between man and beast had been broken, and laws are necessary to contain the damage. So in the covenant - made with all people, not just the Jews - we find a prohibition on murder, rules to cover the eating of meat, and the beginning of a judicial system.

It is the relationship between man and animal that concerns us here. The rules on slaughter were not only the most humane in the ancient world, they were also due to their humaneness the most wasteful - the nutrients of blood were not used, and by killing the animal before removing any meat the whole carcass had to be eaten at one time - or the remains destroyed. For the eating of meat was still acknowledged as a sin - although, like divorce, an allowable albeit sinful luxury provided the correct rules were followed.

I am told a Jewish slaughterman has not only to check that his blade is smooth and sharp - so as to cause the least suffering possible - he also has to ask the animal's forgiveness - a token acknowledgement that what he is doing, while it may be allowable, is still sinful. I suppose meat-eating - at the time between the Covenant with Noah and the coming of Christ - is what traditional moral theology would call a venial but not a mortal sin.

The Covenant with Abraham followed - foreshadowing how it was all going to end - with Abraham being willing to sacrifice to God not an animal, but his own son.

Most of us are probably more au fait with the Covenant with Moses and all the rules which followed that than with the other covenants - including the prohibition against the eating of pork, a prohibition shared with Islam. It has been argued that the reason for this prohibition is that mankind had descended into cannibalism - not good for any society as well as it being a custom associated with pagan rituals - and pork and human flesh I am told are very similar. Pork therefore needed to be banned so as not to put unnecessary temptation before the people, as well as to make the ban on cannibalism easier to enforce.

The laws of Moses did a great deal to contain evil - more than any other set of rules or way of life for many, many centuries - but they didn't solve the problem. The blood of bulls and goats was at best only a temporary solution, and was confined only to the people of Israel.

To recap: We started with the idyll of Eden, then the fall, then the unchecked growth of sin until the flood. The Covenant God made with Noah sought to contain the worst excesses of this. Then with Abraham and through Moses God began to form a people, a plan to save the world. The prophets, most notably Isaiah, give us glimpses of what this future will be like.

And a slight pause from the story, for there are two very different traditions here. The West has tended to see the fall as a drop from perfection, the end-time a return to that perfection. The East tends to see the process more organically - the fall as a loss of innocence, as sad but as necessary as a child losing his or her innocence in their growth to maturity. As in all growing up mistakes are made, sins are committed. The future perfection is a maturity only possible through this growth and through the teaching, forgiveness and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I like to think the differences between these two views can be seen as complementary rather than contradictory.

Which brings us back to the story of our salvation, and through Jesus from the people of the Jews back to all mankind.

Our Lord never contradicted any of the past covenants which His Father had made, either with the people of Israel or with all mankind. He said not one vowel would be dropped from the law, and vowels had been added to the text of the law only a few centuries earlier. He came to fulfil what came before, not do away with it. He and his disciples remained observant Jews, and He criticised the Pharisees not for their strictness in following the law, but for following only the - letter of the law, and not the spirit which lay behind it.

And we know what He thought about those who tried to water down God's requirements, and not strive for the perfection that was Eden. We read in the Gospel of St Mark; (10:1-12)

Then Jesus left that place, went to the province of Judea, and crossed the River Jordan. Crowds came flocking to him again, and he taught them, as he always did. Some Pharisees came to him and tried to

trap him. "Tell us," they asked, "does our Law allow a man to divorce his wife?" Jesus answered with a question, "What law did Moses give you?"

Their answer was, "Moses gave permission for a man to write a divorce notice and send his wife away." Jesus said to them, "Moses wrote this law for you because you are so hard to teach. But in the beginning, at the time of creation, 'God made them male and female,' as the scripture says. 'And for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one.' So they are no longer two, but one. No human being then must separate what God has joined together." When they went back into the house, the disciples asked Jesus about this matter. He said to them, "A man who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against his wife. In the same way, a woman who divorces her husband and marries another man commits adultery."

We find a similar passage in St Matthew's Gospel.

In the absence of any other evidence, I think we can only presume Our Lord believed the same about the other values of Eden. We humans are often inconsistent; I do not think we can accuse Our Lord of being so. The diet God prescribed for Eden, like the attitude towards marriage enshrined there, should be ours too.

But again, as I said after the passage from Isaiah, we cannot end here. For while we can - and need to - factor in the time necessary to alter farming and food production from a carnivorous to a vegan system, both in the biblical narrative and in our own attempt to change the world, two huge issues remain to be addressed.

One is that God had commanded animals to be killed and eaten in sacrifice, albeit in a way vastly more humane than most modern methods of farming and slaughter; and secondly that there must be a specific point in time when the rules changed: when meat eating ceased to be an allowable sin. For unless there was such a point in time, I have no right to propose that it is no longer an allowable sin, that it is now unacceptable whenever and wherever it can be avoided.

I think it is reasonable to see the answer to both these issues lying in the historical events of about two millennia ago, traditionally dated as Friday the 25th March, the first when Caesar Augustus was Roman Emperor in the year we Christians call nought, the second during the time when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea in the 33rd Year of our Lord. For ancient tradition holds that the creation of man with which we started, the annunciation when man was recreated in the womb of Mary, and the redemption of man on the cross all took place on the same Friday of the year.

As Christians we believe that the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross replaced all the former sacrifices of the law. By the outpouring of Christ's Blood on the cross our sins are forgiven. By this sacrifice the sacrifice of animals became not only unnecessary but inappropriate, the old covenants sealed with the blood of animals being replaced by the New Covenant sealed with the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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And we have been purified and forgiven by the once-and-for-all pouring out of Christ's blood on the cross.

By his grace we are able to return to our former innocence - or grow into perfection - depending on whether you see The Fall from a Western or Eastern perspective. All allowance for deliberate sin has been removed - whether it be divorce for the sake of remarriage, the eating of meat, or anything else - for we live now not by ourselves, struggling to conform to the old law, but as new creatures with the life of Christ within us.

I therefore put to you my conviction that it is sinful, from a Christian point of view to spill the blood of any creature unless it is absolutely necessary for survival, and that this principle is the revealed will of God in Holy Scripture.

### **A short post-script.**

The fact that a diet put forward all those thousands of years ago by the writer of Genesis 1 is now being put forward by a secular and often anti-Christian United Nations as something necessary to save us from global warming, protect biodiversity and feed a size of population unimaginable just a few centuries ago is to me something quite amazing. It may say nothing to the sceptic - as the miracles of Our Lord did nothing to convince the sceptic. But to those who do believe I think it confirms both our belief in a vegetarian or vegan diet, and our belief in the Divine inspiration of Holy Scripture - however you may wish to understand that inspiration.

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