

Animals in Church: Non-humans and Cultures of Prayer and Worship in Twentieth-century Britain

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The growing visibility of animals in services, prayers, and special days reveals the roots of modern efforts in the Church of England and other Christian churches to reconnect worship with the natural world. This history also allows us to consider how far church histories have been shaped by what the academic literature refers to as animal 'agency'.



The role of animals in Christian worship has undergone significant changes in the twentieth century, reflecting a broader shift toward compassion and stewardship. This article, written by Dr Joseph Hardwick, Associate Professor of British History at the University of Northumbria, examines the evolving presence of animals in British church practices.

Dr Hardwick explores how historical events and cultural shifts have influenced the inclusion of animals in church services. His research sheds light on the growing recognition of animals as integral to faith communities and the ethical implications of our relationships with all living beings.

In December 1994 an episode of the popular British comedy series, *The Vicar of Dibley*, titled 'Animals', aired on BBC television. Geraldine, the vicar of the fictional Oxfordshire village, is struck by the impact the death of pets has on her parishioners and resolves to organise a special Sunday service so that the congregation can bring their animals to church. David, the condescending chairman of the parish council, is appalled.

'Are you seriously going to let animals into our church?' 'Do nits get a blessing? Are fleas to be excluded?' 'What if your congregation start eating each other!'. The special day is a great hit with the community and local people bring a multitude of companion and working animals to a mixed-species service that features blessings, prayers, and the familiar hymn, 'All things bright and beautiful'. Hugo, David's son, considers it a great idea to 'thank God for the animals upon which the economic and social life of our village is based'.

This comedy addresses the place of animals in human communities and invites questions about the extent to which, historically, prayer and worship in the British Isles has involved and included animal issues and living animals. In early modernity churchgoers had commonly brought companion animals with them to church, and while many clergy tried to restrict this practice, dogs remained a familiar presence in many church services in modern times, particularly in country parishes. Historians have shown how animal subjects, such as cruelty, non-human souls, and scientific experimentation on living animals ('vivisection') became topics for preachers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[1] The special services for animals depicted in *The Vicar of Dibley* are a more recent development.

A national religious day for animals, the so-called 'Animal Sunday', was organised by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and was regularly observed by Protestant clergy from the 1890s. Children took pets to church and chapel from the mid-1930s, but only after 1947, when Leland Snell, the Church of England vicar of Holy Trinity, Hereford, and a local RSPCA representative, pioneered a popular and newsworthy 'pets' service' in his church, did mixed-species services become common among Christians, particularly in urban and rural England. Strikingly, in the early twentieth century, prayers that referenced animals became acceptable to England's national church, the Church of England, and a widening range of animals, beginning with farm and domestic animals, were incorporated in the texts, rituals, and practices of everyday Christian worship.



What explains the growing visibility of animals in English worship in the first half of the twentieth century? Three key developments – animal service in world war, the spread of pet-keeping among all classes, and a growing preoccupation with the economic, social, and ecological condition of the countryside – help explain why worship increasingly referenced animals. The appetite for prayers and forms of worship that referenced animals was perhaps influenced by the experience of two world wars and may have reflected a sharper public awareness of animal pain and suffering, as well as the debt humans owed to labouring and military animals.

What was said in these services? Answering this question is easiest for Church of England places of worship, because Anglican prayer and worship traditionally has followed a prescribed form of words, or 'liturgy'. To mark its centenary in 1924, the RSPCA approached the public to recommend suitable prayers and hymns on animal themes such as care and companionship (more controversial issues, such as blood sports, or scientific experiments on living animals, were avoided). The results were then issued as a full liturgy for Animal Sunday.[2] The RSPCA also issued prayers on cards that might be used privately at home, or in quiet moments during church services. The focus was on companion, working, and farm animals. The RSPCA service referred to 'the companionship and affection of animals in our homes', and emphasised themes of mercy, animal service and human stewardship that had been familiar in animal welfare literature since Victorian times. One prayer appealed to God to 'put into the hearts of all men a spirit of humanity' towards the 'lower creatures', another asked 'that all cruelty may cease out of our land' and a third, a prayer for guidance, sought support for 'the efforts of all who seek to reduce such unnecessary pain'. References to animals both 'wild and tame' indicated that concern broadened to include wildlife, a development that was perhaps influenced by countryside tourism and rambling's growing popularity.

The prayers, liturgies and forms of service used in the interwar period show, too, that religious services might include more radical representations of animals, as independent and active subjects that possessed wills. One prayer card carried a prayer thought to be of Russian origin, and which had generated a good deal of controversy during the First World War. This prayer, for suffering horses, was said to have been adapted from the liturgy of the Russian Orthodox Church, and had been distributed widely early in the war by an animal welfare organisation, the Our Animal Brothers' Guild.[3] The prayer was not the usual petition for kinder treatment, but instead represented animals as patriots that had spiritual souls, wills, and agency in the sense that they gave their lives for their countries:

And for those also, O Lord, the humble beasts who with us bear the burdern and heat of the day, and offer their guileless lives for the well-being of their countries, we supplicate Thy great tenderness of heart, for Thou has promised to save both man and beast, and great is Thy loving kindness, O Master, Saviour of the world. Lord have mercy.[4]

Worshippers might then pray directly *for* animals, as opposed to their better treatment by humans. The so-called 'Russian prayer' was controversial because it raised the question of whether, theologically, it was appropriate to pray for animals that, it was conventionally supposed, could not sin, experience salvation, or be redeemed. In late 1914 the high church Slavophile William J. Birkbeck had written to Anglican newspapers to explain that rituals involving animals could never take place in church, and one could not offer a prayer that presented animals as patriots who made decisions and sacrificed their lives for nations.[5]

In the decades after the First World War, the inclusion of animals in ritual and worship remained controversial, and many clergy followed the fictional Dibley David, and sought to marginalise non-humans, either by keeping animals from services, or by restricting references to animals in prayers and sermons. Archbishop Cyril Garbett of York spoke for many Anglicans and Christians when in 1942 he rejected a proposal to include animals in a national day of prayer on the grounds that 'theologically it is inaccurate to pray *for* animals'.[6]

In 1951 the RSPCA suggested to the heads of British churches that a 'prayer for animals' should be included 'in church services every Sunday throughout the year', but the most senior Anglican – Archbishop Fisher of Canterbury – refused, possibly because regular prayers might set a precedent for altering the calendar of worship to meet contemporary social needs.[7] No animal prayer was included in the revised services that would appear in the 1980 Alternative Service Book. Non-human animals would

remain at the margins and periphery of Anglican worship until the 2000s, when, in a new era of ecological concern, a ‘celebration of animals’ was included in the authorised materials for church worship in the Church of England’s ‘season of creation’, observed in September and October.



Why is this topic important? Opposition to prayers for animals, and the reluctance of some clergy to permit non-humans to be present in sacred spaces, illustrate that what have been called the ‘animal-friendly’ traditions in Christianity – traditions that challenge old assumptions about human distinctiveness and “dominion” over the natural world – have been, as one scholar has put it, ‘distorted, suppressed, or forgotten’.[8] On the other hand, the growing visibility of animals in services, prayers, and special days reveals the roots of modern efforts in the Church of England and other Christian churches to reconnect worship with the natural world. This history also allows us to consider how far church histories have been shaped by what the academic literature refers to as animal ‘agency’. Animal agency is difficult to find in Christian rituals, but the ‘Russian prayer’ recognised that animals make decisions, and there is a case for arguing that animals shaped Anglican worship, not as ‘agents’ or ‘actors’, but because they were visible presences in human communities.

Joseph Hardwick is Associate Professor of British History at the University of Northumbria. His most recent academic research considers the ways that people in modern Britain have engaged with the natural world, non-human animals, and ecological issues through rituals and ceremonies, both in religious and secular settings. He is also interested in how the religious respond when outbreaks of disease in the animal world – such as ‘cattle plague’ – coincide with epidemics and other crises among humans. To read more about the issues discussed in this article, take a look at Joseph’s ‘Animals, Anglicans, and Cultures of Prayer and Worship in England, c.1900-1950’, The Journal of Ecclesiastical History, 75:2 (2024), pp. 290-314, available open-access, [here](#).

[1] Jane Spencer, “‘Love and hatred are common with the whole sensitive creation’”: animal feeling in the century after Darwin’, in Angelique Richardson (ed.), *After Darwin: animals, emotions, and the mind* (Amsterdam, 2013), pp. 24-50; John Morillo, *The Rise of Animals and the Descent of Man, 1660-1800* (Lanham, Maryland, 2017), ch. 3, Philip Sampson, *Animal Ethics and the Nonconformist Conscience* (Basingstoke, 2018), Chien-hui Li, *Mobilizing Traditions in the First Wave of the Animal Protection Movement* (Basingstoke, 2019).

[2] RSPCA, *A Short Form of Service Containing Hymns and Prayers Suitable for Use on Animal Sunday* (London, 1924).

[3] A copy of the litany is available in W. J. Birkbeck papers, in Lambeth Palace Library, at call number 1/12//9, fos 33-4. Philip Johnson, in his blog, [‘Animals matter to God’, studies the origins and subsequent use of the prayer in prayer anthologies and animal ethics literature](#), last accessed 12 August 2024

[4] The *Westminster Gazette*, 11 November 1914, was one of the many newspapers to reproduce the text of the prayer in late 1914 and early 1915.

[5] Birkbeck made his objections in lengthy correspondence printed in the *Church Times*, 11, 18 and 24 December 1914 and the *Guardian*, a religious newspaper, 17 and 31 December 1914.

[6] This correspondence is in Lambeth Palace Archives, William Temple Papers, vol. 1, fo. 329.

[7] RSPCA Archives, Horsham, Education Committee Minutes, 1935 to 1952, entries for 21 February and 15 May 1951.

[8] Aaron Gross, [‘The inescapable religious dimension’](#), last accessed 2 August 2024.