

Does religion have an animosity toward animals?



Highland Views

Chris Highland

Guest columnist

For several years I was a vegetarian – actually a pescatarian since I've always lived near water and I suppose I'm part fish. Living and working on an organic farm for a year I savored fresh steamed vegetables over rice, pasta or couscous. I still don't eat much meat and try to stay conscious of what I'm eating and where it comes from. It seems right to consider all the laborers who bring food to our tables and I'm grateful for the planters and harvester, transporters and grocers. It really is a "food chain."

Have you ever thought about the way animals are treated in the world of faith? We like to think it's all about Saint Francis and his love of birds, or the dove of the spirit and such. We even imagine the baby Jesus surrounded by peaceful creatures in the stable or the donkey he rode into Jerusalem.

In Hindu religion animals are not only "sacred" but they can even be gods – elephants, monkeys and snakes are revered. As we know, cows are protected.

In Pakistan alone, nearly 10 million animals are sacrificed every August-September for the Muslim feast of Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice). Across the Muslim world millions more are killed for religious festivals each year.

Countless lambs are slaughtered for the Jewish Passover and up to 50,000 chickens are killed in Brooklyn alone for Yom Kippur – poultry absorbs sins.

Lest Christians feel any better about how they treat

the animal kingdom, consider Easter and Christmas (let alone Thanksgiving) – "celebrations of life." It's estimated that 22 million turkeys are consumed for Christmas and 300 million pounds of ham are eaten at the holidays.

Not all Buddhists are vegetarians, but like the Jains of India, there is a special "mindfulness" toward all living things. After all, Buddha ate meat, and one legend says he died after eating pork.

For Muslims, the Eid al-Adha commemorates the story of Ibrahim (Abraham) and Ishmael. The patriarch's faith was "tested" by Allah who commanded him to kill his son. We aren't told what his wife thought of this, but Ibrahim was willing. At the last minute God provided a sheep instead. Close call, but lesson learned. I would hope the lesson would be: if someone hears a voice that says to do something awful for God, pause and ask questions.

Of course, all this animal sacrifice in the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) originates in Bible stories where blood sacrifice is integral from beginning to end.

The Lord demands the "shedding of blood" of common birds, cattle and sheep as proof of devotion and as requirement for forgiveness. In the Christian story, the ultimate price of devotion is the "Lamb of God" giving his life for the sins of the world. This is what "atonement" means.

In the centuries after the Bible, some Jewish and Christian scholars explained why killing something was no longer required. Some said that prayer was the new sacrifice, or "giving one's life" in devotion. Then again, the veneration of "martyrs" as heroes of faith – the "saints" – perpetuated the belief that the spilling of blood was the ultimate test of faith.

A song I remember singing in my high school youth group had us in tears: "I've been redeemed by the Blood of the Lamb, saved and sanctified I am; All my sins are under the Blood, I've been redeemed!" In a Pentecostal church we sang, "There is wonder-working power in the Blood of the Lamb!" In Protestant churches, when I led communion services, we would say, "This is the Body broken for you; this is the Blood, poured out for you." As symbolic as most Christians understand this, the message is often interpreted: God had to kill his Son to forgive us. Unlike Abraham, God "proved" His love by following through with the act. It's not pretty to say it this way, I know. But doesn't it need to be said?

Our beliefs have a great deal to do with the way we treat our fellow-creatures. The popularity of wildlife parks and proliferation of "pet-friends" should tell us something, but so does our fear of wild things. Then we leave it to hunters and butchers to do the "dirty work" to give us our food. We can't all become vegetarians, but maybe we could think more about the lives we take and consume.

For years now I've had the thought: animals must really hate religion – especially religious holidays. Millions upon millions of furry and feathery creatures "give their lives" year after year for "sacred celebrations of life." They aren't dying voluntarily, and it makes you wonder whether there really should be a heaven for all these creatures who die so that others may live.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.