

C.W. HUME, THE STATUS OF ANIMALS IN THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION (LONDON: THE UNIVERSITIES FEDERATION FOR ANIMAL WELFARE) 1956.

The claim of animals to just and merciful treatment was amply recognized in both the Old and New Testaments, but has fared rather less well in the doctrines and practices of the Christian Church. That is the judgment set forth by C. W. Hume in this slender, fascinating volume published a quarter of a century ago by the animal welfare institution of which he was then Secretary-General.

Major Hume, Anglican layman, Bachelor of Science, Schweitzer Medalist, takes us on a quick tour of historical events--theological, philosophical, sociological--affecting the position of animals in western society from early Biblical to modern times. To the Old Testament precursors of Christianity he is generous in his judgment: "Neighborliness toward animals was such a deeply rooted tradition among the Jews that it was taken for granted." (This may offer some consolation to liberal-minded Jews of today who regard with dismay the insistence of Orthodoxy on keeping up the callous slaughtering rituals of ancient times.) Similarly, Hume cites a spontaneous attitude of fellowship toward animals as among the first manifestations of Christianity: "It is a notable fact that when our Lord required an analogy to represent God's quest for lost souls, he chose for his purpose the case of a man going out to look for a lost animal." (Luke XV, 4-7)

This feeling of acceptance and good will persisted through the early centuries of the Christian Church, and is exemplified by the practices of numerous saints including Chrysostom, Giles and Jerome, who are depicted in art and legend as having treated animals in various ways as their brethren. It did not survive the later Middle Ages, however, when a revival of platonism tended to exalt intellectual over moral excellence in the thinking of the educated, and the fate of "unthinking" animals began a long downward slide from which it has never recovered. By the time of Aquinas, when the Angelic Doctor came to consider questions bearing on the rights of animals, this (quoted by Hume) is what he wrote:

"If in Holy Scripture there are found some injunctions forbidding the infliction of some cruelty towards brute animals...this is either for removing a man's mind from exercising cruelty towards other men...or because the injury inflicted on animals turns to a temporal loss for some man, either the person who inflicts the injury or some other..."

Aquinas also wrote: "God's purpose in recommending kind treatment of the brute creation is to dispose men to pity and tenderness towards one another."

From the pre-Renaissance on through the 17th and 18th centuries the status of animals steadily grew worse, the deterioration enhanced by the growth of commercialism; by waves of superstition which engendered tortures, burnings and massacres both of people and animals suspected of being or harboring "evil spirits"; by the lunatic doctrines Rene Descartes (the "father of philosophy"!) regarding "insensate" automata; and by the vast popularity of savage blood sports and hunts in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

When, in the later years of the 19th century, laymen in many countries began to rebel at institutionalized cruelty toward animals and organized societies for their defense, the churches were in no hurry to fortify this effort with their blessings. Gradually, here and there, prominent clergymen came forward to lend their prestige to the movement: Father Agius of Britain and Bishop Cumbleton of the United States are well-known modern examples. Hume gives the Roman Catholic Church somewhat better grades than the various Protestant denominations in this test, and cites various attempts on the part of the church people and organizations to stimulate positive action; but the shadows of St. Thomas and Descartes are still found hovering, sometimes darker, sometimes fainter, over this terrain.

Major Hume's little volume, although somewhat dated here and there, is full of urbane satire, lightly worn erudition and a spirit of civilized gentleness toward all life. Some of his strictures against offenses visited upon animals are neither gentle nor urbane: one wonders what he would say about the escalated technologies of horror developed since his book was produced.

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