



# Lukas Vischer: Living with the Animals Introduction and Lessons from the Bible

## 1. Place and Date of Publication

Charles Birch and Lukas Vischer, eds, *Living with the Animals: The Community of God's Creatures*, Geneva, WCC, 1997, IX-XII; 1-33.

## 2. Historical Context

In 1994, the Ecumenical Association Church and Environment in Switzerland (oeku) chose „Animals and Humans“ as theme of the Creation Time, proposed to be observed from September 1 to October 4. In the following article, Lukas Vischer relies on his earlier reflection on “Das Tier und wir” (1994).

## 3. Summary

As never before, animals are dominated by humans and subject to their arbitrary decisions. The Bible, however, sees humans and animals in close community, called to praising God. All living things serve one another, even by their passing away. All form part of the vast sacrifice that life as a whole makes possible. By rejecting God, humans establish their rule. They believe that the only purpose of living creatures is humanity as the centre of creation. The use of violence is taken as self-evident. As a concession, God's ordinance laid down in the act of creation is replaced by a new ordinance of limited violence.

In the Old Testament it is taken as self-evident that sacrifices of animals or fruits are to be offered to God. This notion is remote from modern sensibilities, even if by making a sacrifice, humans are acknowledging that every living creature belongs to God. Some prophets criticize sacrifices as an empty ritual. In the New Testament one passage mentions Jesus' relation with animals: "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts" (Mark 1:13). In numerous legends of saints, peace with wild animals is a sign of God's presence in this world. For Paul, the expectation that was associated with sacrificial animals in the Old Testament has been fulfilled in Christ, the “sacrificial lamb”. Animals are no longer sacrificed. They are freed from a role that in reality they can no longer play.

Undoubtedly the problems which demand ethical decisions in the present-day situation lie beyond the bounds of scripture. Animals are being regarded as objects of scientific knowledge and manipulation, of trade and industry. This very *presupposition* is called into question by the biblical point of view. Furthermore the destruction brought about by technological civilization is so devastating that endangering the survival of animals might threaten the human race as well. Can the biblical understanding of God's creation be the new inspiration needed in the present crisis? To be sure, the first step is to restrict the current development by putting a stop to the most appalling excesses. But the heart of the matter has to do with a number of questions: To which extent are humans prepared to respect animals as fellow-creatures, to reduce violence against them to a minimum, to reduce their general demands on creation, and finally to join in a community of creatures that rely on one another in order to live?

Charles Birch &  
Lukas Vischer

---

A detailed painting of a lush garden scene. In the center, a human figure sits on the ground, looking down with a contemplative or distressed expression. Surrounding the human are various animals, including several colorful birds with long beaks, a dog in the upper right, and other creatures in a dense, natural setting. The style is reminiscent of a classical or religious painting, with fine detail and a rich color palette.

*Living  
with*

*the*

The Community  
of God's  
Creatures

*Animals*

---

Charles Birch &  
Lukas Vischer

---

*Living*  
*with*  
*the* The Community  
of God's  
Creatures  
*Animals*

---

**Risk**  
*BOOK SERIES*

WCC Publications, Geneva

Cover design: Rob Lucas

Cover illustration: Detail from “Der Garten der Lüste”,  
Hieronymus Bosch

ISBN 2-8254-1227-9

© 1997 WCC Publications, World Council of Churches,  
150 route de Ferney, 1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

No. 77 in the Risk Book Series

Printed in Switzerland

# Table of Contents

vii FOREWORD *Martin Robra*

ix INTRODUCTION

## PART ONE: LESSONS FROM THE BIBLE

*Lukas Vischer*

- 2 1. THE COMMUNITY OF THE SIXTH DAY  
OF CREATION
- 6 2. VIOLENCE IN CREATION
- 11 3. THE FALL AND ITS CONSEQUENCES
- 15 4. "HE WAS WITH THE ANIMALS"
- 19 5. THE MEANING OF SACRIFICES
- 26 6. THE WITNESS OF SAINTS
- 29 7. PRAISE OF GOD AND RESPECT FOR LIFE

## PART TWO: RESPECT FOR ANIMALS *Charles Birch*

- 36 8. SO LIKE US
- 48 9. HOW MUCH IS AN ELEPHANT WORTH?
- 63 10. WHAT TO DO?
- 82 SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

# Foreword

How can a system that protects Madonna's royalties by imposing trade barriers against pirated productions of her music not also protect the rights of indigenous peoples?

That question was recently raised in a critique of the priorities of the World Trade Organization. Behind it lies the struggle of indigenous peoples around the world who are seeking to defend their lands and livelihoods against the pollution and destruction caused by mining and logging. Through their actions, they are not only protecting themselves and their own cultures, but also saving numerous species living on the land.

Indigenous peoples are well aware of the web of life of which they are a part and on which they depend. Their claim for justice and life in dignity includes a call for the protection of creation. And so they reject both environmentalists who ignore the quest for justice and developmentalists who are blind to the consequences of economic growth.

*Do not separate what belongs together.* The culture or civilization that does not take into account its own destructive impact on creation, the suffering it causes to human beings and other forms of life, will finally destroy its own basis. It has no future. At the same time it constantly betrays and makes impossible the praise of God the Creator. This is the scandal which challenges Christians to commit themselves to struggle for justice, peace and creation.

It was Charles Birch whose remarkable speech at the fifth assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi in 1975 opened the eyes of many in the ecumenical movement to acknowledge and take up their responsibility for creation. As a world-renowned scholar of biology, he has contributed much to the debate on sustainability. And he has always questioned a romanticizing understanding of the integrity of creation.

Lukas Vischer, who served the WCC for many years as director of Faith and Order, has in recent years put much of his energy and expertise at the disposal of the WCC's work on climate change. In the 1980s he was also a driving force behind the discussion on "The Rights of Nature" in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

In this book, these two experienced ecumenical leaders join forces to offer a stimulating contribution on a related subject which is emerging with new importance in the light of the realities of contemporary civilization: the relationship between human beings and animals.

It should not be taken for granted that Christians and the churches already have sufficient ethical sensitivity to address the issues at stake here: an intriguing survey whose results were published recently was conducted by Harold Takoo-shian, a sociologist at Fordham University. His research disclosed that in the debate on animal experimentation — one of the topics treated in this book — the groups that gave the lowest rating to animals and the highest level of approval to vivisection were farmers, hunters and the clergy!

Martin Robra  
Executive Secretary  
Programme Unit on Justice, Peace and Creation  
World Council of Churches

# Introduction

What is our relationship with animals? What does it mean to share the same planet with them? This question, which has always been asked by human beings, is posed in a different way today. The relationship between humanity and animals has undergone a fundamental change in the context of technological civilization. Human beings have extended their environment to the disadvantage of animals. As never before, animals are dominated by humans and subject to their arbitrary decisions.

On the one hand, people do not have to depend on animals so obviously as in times past. Their aid is no longer essential in many areas of human life. In transportation and agriculture, for example, motors have taken over many operations once carried out by animals. Oddly enough, "horsepower" remains the current term of measurement, although real horses no longer have any part in these functions. As the technical devices made by human beings do the necessary work, animals vanish from the field of human awareness.

On the other hand, the technical supremacy which humans have won by their own efforts leads to an invasion of the living space of animals. To feed themselves, human beings take over animal territory for agriculture and industrial production. The habitats of undomesticated animals too are increasingly restricted. Hunting and fishing are now so efficient as to deprive animals of even a sporting chance, and wild animals, once a threat to humans, are now largely under their control.

Consequently, human aggression against animals has intensified dramatically. The issue is no longer the slaughter of individual animals but the extinction of entire species. Admittedly, animal species have always become extinct. Nature has a history. Every species has its own time and will come to an end sooner or later. The existence of the human race, too, is finite. But the process currently unfolding is especially alarming because it is so rapid and unremitting, and above all because its source is our own behaviour. Entire species of plants and animals are vanishing because the



demands of the human species have destroyed their essential conditions of life.

That does not mean that people of our generation are no longer really aware of animals. Indeed, they find them just as fascinating as ever. Research into animal life has never been so intensive. Scientific work in this field is very popular. Animal books and films sell in vast quantities. The number of domestic animals — from dogs and cats to guinea pigs and goldfish — is constantly rising. They are essential “pets” and “companions”, not just for children and lonely adults, but for many others too.

Animals have always had a profoundly significant place in the human imagination in ways that have nothing to do with their actual existence as this or that animal. It is as if people see something of themselves and their own lives reflected in these creatures and their behaviour. In the world of allegory, fable and fairy-tale, animals serve as keys to human existence. They are given human characteristics and introduce people to worlds which they could never otherwise enter. They appear as symbolic figures in our dreams. Animals have something approaching a “second existence” in the human mind and fantasy. Children come to know animals in books and cartoons and stuffed toys before they meet them as living creatures, and their acquaintance with these animal “characters” bears no relation to the living creatures they represent. An immense gulf separates the animals inhabiting the human psyche from those in the real world; indeed, these anthropomorphic figures can even block access to real animals. It is interesting to consider from this standpoint the use of animal imagery and caricatures in modern advertising, which turns animals into bearers of human messages.

Unfortunately, all of this has not halted but hastened the destruction of animals in the real world. It does seem, however, that people are becoming increasingly uneasy about the extent of the devastation. As if to limit the results of this process, animal protection has developed in the context of technological civilization, partly on the basis of

Christian motivation. It is an attempt to protect the living space of animals from human exploitation and violence. The movement was ridiculed at first, but over the course of time has gained growing recognition and has successfully established a number of principles and legal measures to help animals. The constant mounting of new campaigns reminds our society that animals have their own dignity and therefore rights of a certain kind.

Above all, it is the disappearance of whole species which has led to new initiatives in this area. Alarm at the destructive role of human beings in creation is beginning to spread. The call to maintain the great variety of species is heard on all sides. Measures to protect threatened species — seals, whales and elephants — are now being pursued seriously. Already it is no longer acceptable to wear “garments of skin” (Gen. 3:21), at any rate if the skins come from rare animals. The most important step has been taken at the level of the United Nations: the adoption at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 of a convention on biodiversity, that is, the maintenance of the variety of species on this planet.

Yet the effect of all these measures has been limited. Animal protection is no more than a corrective manoeuvre. There is no guarantee that the convention on biodiversity will lead to a major reversal of relations between humans and animals. To date, the general orientation of technological society has remained unchanged. It is still a fact that the relationship between the human and animal worlds is out of kilter and that the work of destruction continues unabated.

What are the implications of all this? Can humankind go on extending its territory in this way? Can it continue its onslaught on the great variety of animal species — which God made “of every kind” — with impunity? Surely such behaviour represents a fundamental challenge to God’s covenant “with every living creature”. Does this cruelly destructive process not betray something of the fatal degeneracy of our present way of life? And surely our arbitrary treatment of

God's creation will eventually turn on us. In one sense, indeed, every vanishing species is an intimation of the end of the human race.

Against this background, what does it mean to speak of our responsibility to animals? What can we glean from Scripture in this respect?

Part One:  
Lessons from the Bible

*Lukas Vischer*

# 1. The Community of the Sixth Day of Creation

The testimony of the Bible sees humans and animals in close community. They are near to one another. Even though the special role of human beings is emphasized, Scripture as a whole takes it for granted that animals form part of the human environment.

To many this statement may sound surprising. The assertion that the Judaeo-Christian tradition not only puts human beings at the centre of creation but also makes all creatures subject to them often goes unchallenged. On this view, the extra-human species represent the “beastly” level, to which humankind must not sink. But there is no warrant for this in the language of the Bible itself. It sees animals in proximity to humans and as part of their immediate environment. They are God’s creatures, and like all that he has made they are bound to praise him. The degradation of animals to the status of objects finds no justification in the Bible. While the cultural roots of it are in antiquity, it is essentially the product of the sequence of modern thought since Descartes (1596-1650), which has made humankind the centre of the universe and has seen the outside world as subject to the human mind.

In Part V of his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes describes animals as *automates* (automata). There is no underlying contempt here; rather, Descartes’s desire to stress the uniqueness of human beings forces him to such a conclusion. In his view, the rational minds of human beings distinguish them from animals. Bodies are machines made by God:

Those who know how many automata and moving machines human industry can produce with minimal means, compared with the vast number of bones, muscles, nerves, arteries, veins and all the other parts to be found in the body of every animal, will see this body as a machine which, because it is made by the hands of God, is incomparably better designed than any product of human invention.

Rational beings, however, are more than machines. Even if it proved possible to produce machines that were indistin-

guishable from animals, we could never produce a machine “that would act in all the circumstances of life just as our reason makes us act”. Animals do not possess reason. Descartes is categorical about this: “It is not that animals have less reason than humans; they have none at all.” The rational mind cannot be developed from matter. It must be expressly created by God. “The soul must be united with the body to constitute a true human being.” Descartes firmly rejects the view that “the animal soul is of the same nature as ours, and that accordingly, like flies and ants, we have nothing to fear or hope for after this life... Our soul is wholly independent of the body... It is immortal.”

The primary objective of these statements by Descartes is to assure us of “the existence of God and of the soul”. But their inevitable consequence is a clear contradistinction between humans and animals. The rational soul of human beings assigns them to a different world. They are infinitely superior to animals, which are all but reduced to the status of artefacts.

This is not the testimony of the biblical tradition. Scripture bears witness that humans and animals form one community. According to the creation story in Genesis 1, God created humans and animals on one and the same day. The six days of creation correspond to one another. On the first three days the spaces are created, on the fourth, fifth and sixth days creatures come into existence to fill the space. On the second day the waters below the sky are separated from those above the sky, and the oceans are created. Correspondingly, on the fifth day the water and air are filled with fish and birds. On the third day, God causes the “dry land” — that is, the earth — to appear out of the waters and to put forth vegetation. This corresponds to the sixth day, on which God summons animals and humans, the population of the earth, into existence. The common destiny of animals and humankind could hardly be underlined more emphatically.

The second creation narrative in Genesis 2 has similar accents. God creates the cattle, the birds of the air and the animals of the field as “helpers” of humanity. Adam is

invited to see what he will call them. “And whatever he called every living creature, that was its name” (Gen. 2:19). By naming the animals, humans enter into a special relationship with them. They are not asked to name *everything* God has made. The task is limited to the animals. A special bond unites humans and animals, because God has designated them as helpers of humankind. Each animal received its name from humankind. Whatever humans called it, “that was its name”. In this way humans and animals were joined in an indissoluble community. To be sure, this community is incomplete. It is one-sided, for animals can respond to human beings only to a limited extent. True community comes into being for Adam only when he sees Eve as “bone of *my* bones and flesh of *my* flesh” (Gen. 2:23). Genuine, full and entirely reciprocal community can exist only between human beings. But this does not mean that human beings and animals as God’s creatures could not also be related to one another as a community.

This community of creatures is the background against which Scripture emphasizes the special position of humans within creation. God distinguishes humans from animals by making them capable of a special relationship with the Creator. To be sure, God blessed the fish of the sea and the birds of the air as well as humans. But it is not the same blessing. Whereas in the case of the other creatures we are told that God blessed them, in the case of humans we read that God blessed them and *spoke to them* (Gen. 1:22, 28). Humans are thus made to be God’s partners, and this partnership defines their position on earth, which extends beyond that of animals. The second creation narrative has a similar emphasis. The fact that humans name the animals shows that human beings have a say in regard to them. They are responsible before God. To that extent humans are marked out as over and above other creatures, and in a certain sense are at the centre of the community of God’s creatures.

Yet this special role of human beings among the animals does not mean that God no longer enjoys a direct relationship

with animals. As we shall see in more detail later, even when we are told that God says of animals, “into your hand they are delivered” (Gen. 9:2), the Old Testament does not see them as withdrawn from divine care. The Psalmist, extolling God’s faithfulness and steadfast love, says, “You save humans and animals alike, O Lord” (Ps. 36:6). Even more pointedly, the Lord, speaking out of the whirlwind, asks Job:

Can you hunt the prey for the lion,  
     or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,  
 when they crouch in their dens,  
     or lie in wait in their covert?  
 Who provides for the raven its prey,  
     when its young ones cry to God,  
     and wander about for lack of food? (Job 38:39-41).

We find the same emphasis in the words of Jesus: “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (Matt. 6:26).

All creatures, humans and animals, praise God. All creation is a single hymn of praise in which humans, animals and nature as a whole praise God with one voice (Ps. 148:7-10).

It is this creation which is termed “good” in God’s eyes (Gen. 1:25), and even “very good” once it has reached completion with the creation of humankind (v. 31).



## 2. Violence in Creation

But is this creation really so good? Do these descriptions in Genesis 1 and 2 not apply only to an ideal state which does not exist in reality? In fact, relations between humans and animals, and even between animals and animals, are often anything but harmonious. They are characterized by force. There is a group of “tame” or “domestic” animals roundabout humans which allow people to use and exploit them. But no matter how capable they are of being the partners of human beings, they remain at the disposal of humankind. As far as these animals are concerned, human beings are their lords and masters, with power over their life and death. When people want to, they kill them. Similarly, as hunters, human beings look on undomesticated animals as their obvious prey. On the other hand, “wild animals” represent a permanent danger to humans in their immediate environment, who must be on their guard and defend themselves against them.

Violence is also a feature of the relationship between one animal and another. Animals are food not only for humans but for fellow-animals. Even when the world appears at its most peaceful, it is the stage for a permanent struggle between life and death, in which the weak succumb to the power of the strong. There is a masterly description of this process in Dino Buzzati’s short story “A Peaceful Night”. A couple has gone to stay in the country. One evening the husband is reading after his wife has gone to bed. Suddenly she wakes up in a fright and calls out: “I think there’s someone in the garden! Have a look.” To placate her he goes to the window and looks out: “What a splendid moon! I’ve never seen anything so peaceful!” Just then, however, a beast of prey was breaking cover. A spider was demolishing a grasshopper, and not long after that the spider was consumed by a toad which later ended up in the talons of an old owl. But the husband looking out into the garden sees nothing. “It was all lyrically, divinely peaceful.” His wife wakes up again: “Carlo, I dreamed that someone was being killed in the garden.” Trying to calm her, he goes to the window again: “Go to sleep, dear. There

isn't a living soul outside. I have never seen such a peaceful scene."

How does the Bible see this world of violence? Not only does it take it into account, but it treats it expressly as a subject for reflection.

First of all, it is taken for granted that it is inevitable that humans kill animals and use them for food and clothing. Killing animals is part of everyday life, and there is no attempt to hide the fact that God himself made "garments of skins" (Gen. 3:21) for people. Yet we can also detect a certain aversion to the violent treatment of animals. The creation narratives maintain that killing animals was not part of God's original ordinance. They distinguish between two stages. Originally human beings were intended to be vegetarians: "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food" (Gen. 1:29). Permission to eat meat came later, and is represented as a concession on God's part: "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything" (Gen. 9:3). Absolute respect for God's creatures proves impossible. In their manifestation as historical beings, humans turn out to be carnivorous.

Nevertheless, the Bible keeps the original order of things in mind. To be sure, human beings are free and able to kill animals. But from the outset God sets limits to this freedom and capability. Humankind must never forget that animals are bearers of life made by God. "Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood" (Gen. 9:4). And even though humans may kill animals, their victims remain under God's protection. The covenant God made after the flood is applied expressly not only to Noah and his descendants, but to "every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark" (Gen. 9:9-10). Now as before, humans and animals are seen as a community. A series of injunctions in the Old Testament reflect this same spirit of

concern for animals, most notably perhaps the commandment that rest on the sabbath day also applies to “livestock” (Ex. 20:10f.; Deut. 5:14).

Second, the mystery of wild animals which threaten humans and cattle was a constant concern of the authors of the Bible. They represent a sphere which is somewhat withdrawn from human control. Wild animals break into the living space of humans and remind them how insecure and vulnerable their life is. But the wild animals are not instruments of some dark power, for they too are in God’s service. They remind people of the extent to which they are dependent on God. Wild animals can be messengers of divine judgment. A city that falls under God’s judgment is abandoned to “wild animals”:

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms,  
the splendour and pride of the Chaldeans,  
will be like Sodom and Gomorrah  
when God overthrew them.  
It will never be inhabited  
or lived in for all generations...  
wild animals will lie down there,  
and its houses will be full of howling creatures;  
there ostriches will live,  
and there goat-demons will dance.  
Hyenas will cry in its towers,  
and jackals in the pleasant palaces (Isa. 13:19-22).

On the other hand, God sets bounds to the activity of wild animals. The prophets foretell that in God’s own time God will institute peace between humans and wild animals: “I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals..., and I will make you lie down in safety” (Hosea 2:18). “I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely” (Ezek. 34:25). And this promise extends to the well-known vision of reconciliation between the world of humans and cattle on one hand and that of the wild animals on the other: “The wolf shall live with the

lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them” (Isa. 11:6).

Yet the Bible not only mentions tame and wild animals, but also acknowledges that the animal world extends far beyond the human environment. Though the Bible bears emphatic witness to the central position of humans in the world of animals, it is also aware that certain areas of God’s creation are outside human control. This aspect of things is most heavily stressed in the book of Job: “Who has let the wild ass go free? Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass, to which I have given the steppe for its home, the salt land for its dwelling place? It scorns the tumult of the city; it does not hear the shouts of the driver” (Job 39:5-7). Humans know only a part of creation. While everything — including animals of all kinds — is “under their feet” (Ps. 8:6), they are not actually able to exercise this “dominion”. At every step, the variety of the forms of life made by God reminds them of their limitations. “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding” (Job 38:4).

Finally, violence among animals is seldom a theme in the Bible. That every animal will feed appropriately is assumed to be even more self-evident than in the case of human beings. God’s care for the young lions and ravens is shown in their discovery of their prey. The fact that other, weaker animals must surrender their lives for this purpose hardly concerns the biblical authors. It is clearly part of God’s creation that life can exist only at the cost of other life. Nevertheless, the creation story contains the astonishing statement that the animals too were originally created as plant-eaters. “And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food” (Gen. 1:30). At this point at least, violence between animals is seen as something repugnant. Though Isaiah’s vision of peace in creation, which we have cited above, refers to the relationship between humans, cattle

and wild animals, the indication that a time will come when the “lion shall eat straw” (Isa. 11:7) clearly reveals an expectation that God will bring all bloodshed in creation to an end. God is aware of the suffering of animals among their own kind. Their death is not simply pointless and forgotten.

### 3. The Fall and its Consequences

But how did the second state of creation follow on the first? What opened up the way to violence and suffering? The book of Genesis merely draws a contrast between the first and second states, but the reason for the entry of violence must be inferred from the context rather than based on any explicit statements. The assumption is that discord has its origins in humankind. By rebelling against God, humans become a source of violence — between people and between humankind and animals. Just as Cain's act of shedding blood begins a spiral of violence (Gen. 4), so humans become a threat to animals: "The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered" (Gen. 9:3). And just as God sets limits to violence among human beings by putting a mark on Cain and thus preventing him from succumbing to violence (Gen. 4:15), so he restricts human dominion over animals by including them in his covenant (Gen. 9:10). The ordinance laid down by God in the act of creation is replaced by an ordinance of limited violence.

When humans transgress the boundaries laid down for them, they bring disaster on themselves and on all creation. They are capable of this because they have the gift of freedom. But animals must bear the burden of suffering. They are delivered into the hands of human beings. They become victims of humans or flee from them. Now as before they move along the pathways laid down for them by the Creator. In this respect, humans and animals are strangely contrasted. "Even the stork in the heavens knows its times; and the turtledove, swallow and crane observe the time of their coming; but my people do not know the ordinance of the Lord" (Jer. 8:7). Creation has to suffer human beings in all their violence. Regardless of how appropriate it might have seemed to bring destructive human existence to an end, God allowed people to go on living on earth. As Paul says, God himself subjects creation to the futility brought about by humankind: that is, to the disorder inappropriate to creation (Rom. 8:20). Creation lives in fear and groaning.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius of Loyola invites us to meditate on the astonishing fact that the heavens, the sun, the moon and the stars, the elements, fruits, birds, fish and animals support us and that the earth does not open to swallow us up (first week, second exercise, fifth part). Contrary to what should be, creation is sentenced to suffer patiently. Unlike humans who decide not to serve God, animals continue to serve humans: “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (Isa. 1:3).

This state of affairs can be overcome only by a renewal of humankind. Since the discord in creation originates in humanity, the way to redemption must also lead through humankind. The destruction that comes about because of the human rejection of God’s ordinance can cease only if the relationship between God and humankind is restored. God’s redemptive action in human beings therefore has direct consequences for all creation. The gospel proclaims good news for all creatures. They will be freed from human domination. Creation is allowed to hope that it “will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). This state has not yet been reached. Creation is still “groaning in labour pains” (v. 22), but a new creation free from the rule of force has already been announced.

But is this really the way we should understand all the violence that occurs in God’s creation? Do the consequences of original sin actually extend so far beyond the human environment? Should we not recognize that much of what we interpret as violence has always been part of God’s creation? All creation is transient. Every created thing has its own time and must die. Passing away inevitably brings suffering with it. Therefore death and suffering are not essentially meaningless. Is the same not also true of the dependence of all life on the death of other life? Surely this fact too forms part of God’s good creation. Even though the Bible is opposed to violence and sees created life as under God’s protection, it does not denounce this reality. No created form of life can



live without feeding on other life. This applies not only to carnivores but also to vegetarians, for even though no animal needs to lose its life in order to feed them, they must kill plant life. Every creature is nourished in its own way. The idea that the lion or the spider changed its nature only because of the fall is scarcely tenable: the position of humans in creation as a whole is hardly as central as that.

God's creation is so designed that one part depends on another. Life is born from life. Life must come to an end so that new life can begin. The creation is characterized by constant dying away and coming into being. It lives by the continual sacrifice of living things. All living things — humans, animals and plants — share in this process, each in its own way. They all pass away and serve one another by their passing away. All form part of the vast sacrifice that life as a whole makes possible. In the end, no part of the whole can escape this common feature of creation.

By rejecting God, however, humans bring a new dimension into this factual state of affairs. They upset the fragile equilibrium of all creation in order to establish and implement their rule. Having exceeded the boundaries laid down for them, they then make humankind the centre of their universe to such a degree that they lose sight of the community of creation as God intended it to be. They believe that the only purpose of living creatures, animals and plants is humanity as the centrepiece of creation. The use of violence is taken as self-evident. The basic rule of creation is perverted. Instead of producing new life, humans work death and destruction.

Fundamentally, every slaughtered animal is a victim, and those who take the lives of animals must be aware that they are victimizing them. In a passage on killing animals, Karl Barth refers explicitly to this:

The slaying of animals... undoubtedly means making use of... an innocent victim... Man must have good reasons for seriously making such a claim. His real and supposed needs certainly do not justify it. He must be authorized to do so by his acknowledgment of the faithfulness and goodness of God, who in spite



of and in his guilt keeps him from falling... He must not murder an animal. He can only kill it, knowing that it does not belong to him but to God, and that in killing it he surrenders it to God in order to receive it back from him as something he needs and desires... The killing of animals, when performed with the permission of God and by his command, is a priestly act of eschatological character (*Church Dogmatics*, III/4, §55.1).

## 4. "He Was with the Animals"

There is relatively little about animals in the New Testament. They are referred to incidentally in descriptions of everyday life and appear in parables and figures of speech, but they are never the express topic of any passage. Nevertheless, we may assume that the Old Testament point of view on animals was taken as valid in Judaism at the time of Jesus, and in the New Testament it is considered as self-evident. Animals belong to the human environment and are under God's special care. "They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them" (Matt. 6:26). As a whole, however, the pronouncements of the New Testament centre on the relationship between God and humanity. The fact that animals are not in the immediate field of concern is exemplified in Paul's interpretation of an Old Testament commandment in favour of animals: "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" (1 Cor. 9:9). Paul cites this regulation from Deuteronomy 25:4 to support the right of the apostles to "reap material benefits", justifying his interpretation thus: "Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Or does he not speak entirely for our sake?"

More about animals and mercy towards them is to be found in the apocrypha of the New Testament. We read at one point:

You beat animals, therefore, woe unto you not once but three times for not heeding their complaints to the Creator in heaven and their cries for mercy! Woe to those who are the cause of their complaints and cries of pain! Cease striking your beasts, that you yourself may be found worthy of mercy.

The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew says that lions and leopards accompanied Jesus, Mary and Joseph on the flight to Egypt. There are also occasional reports of animals that renounced all force when they encountered apostles and evangelists. Thus the fourth-century Acts of Philip tell of a great leopard whose "beastlike and wild nature" was changed "into tameness".

One passage in the canonical New Testament expressly mentions Jesus' relationship to animals. At the beginning of

the gospel of Mark we read an unusual and mysterious statement: “He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him” (Mark 1:13). Probably the evangelist wrote this as a way of portraying Jesus as belonging to the company of the righteous whom even wild animals cannot harm. As we read in Job: “At destruction and famine you shall laugh, and shall not fear the wild animals of the earth. For you shall be in league with the stones of the field, and the wild animals shall be at peace with you” (Job 5:22f.). Or Jesus is seen as a second Daniel, the prophet who was succoured by an angel when in danger: “My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong” (Dan. 6:22).

In Jesus peace with wild animals as foretold by the prophets becomes reality. His resistance to Satan is the dawn of the kingdom of God. Jesus comes for the sake of humans. He is *the* human being created as God intended, and therefore his relationship with animals accords with God’s original design. What the creation narrative has to say about the relationship between humans and animals becomes reality in Jesus’ presence. The “community of the sixth day” is restored. It is certainly no accident that in the post-biblical period the ox and ass were introduced into the account of Jesus’ birth (for the first time in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew) — for these are the animals capable of recognizing what human beings ignore. Recall again Isaiah’s words: “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but... my people do not understand” (Isa. 1:3).

To what extent, however, are we warranted in maintaining that God’s redemptive action extends to the animals? The question has been posed again and again — eloquently by Swiss writer Joseph Victor Widmann (1842-1911) in his impressive poem “The Holy One and the Animals” (1905). When Jesus is faced with violence among animals, what people otherwise do not realize enters his mind: the infinite suffering of animals. The question occurs to him:

Does it have to be so? Is there no ransom that will set them free? If, on behalf of all of them, one person... but that is the very dream that often enraptures me at night, though by light of day I find it sheer empty foolishness. For no one has the only money acceptable as a ransom: the treasure of eternal life which is proof against death. A God who would die for them could pay, but no human being, no son of man, for we are all prisoners of death...

The Tempter approaches and tries to convince him that in fact this is his particular mission: "Why are you shilly-shallying? Why don't you get on with it? There they are in the sand at your feet, pleading..." Although Jesus recognizes the deception in this suggestion, that does not solve the problem. So he asks the angels, "Tell me, does my Father's vast habitation, arrayed with shining mansions, not contain a single peaceful retreat where the least of all animals can take refuge after earthly suffering?" The angels have no answer to this: "The last things are hidden from us too." He has to acknowledge that he will never understand the mystery of suffering: "I am merely wandering in an outer circle full of soulless shapes, which revolves around a hidden mystery." He has to take his leave of the suffering animals:

I too could not find the power to solve so immense a problem. So live and die as best you can. Now I must follow other paths. At least I was permitted to learn from you. You good, unassuming creatures have taught me one thing: how to be true to oneself and to bleed even though innocent.

But is this all there is to say on the subject? The Pauline references point in a quite different direction. When Paul speaks in Romans 8 of the creation waiting "with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God", he takes for granted that the redemption of the children of God is very closely associated with the redemption of creation as a whole. It is the redeemed human community who are the key to the redemption of creation. Why else would Paul picture creation as waiting for redemption? Only when human beings really become free can all creation be liberated and breathe freely. A new world will come into being. All life

will not only be accepted anew but transformed by God. Humankind will not be redeemed by itself, as it were, for it will enter into glory together with the whole creation.

Thus, even in the earliest years of Christianity, Christ was associated with the Creator of the whole world. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created" (Col. 1:15f.). The fact that he became a human being does not mean that God's redemptive action is directed to humans alone and that the rest of creation is excluded from it. By becoming a human being, God embraces the world. He enters into the circumstances of created life. He subjects himself to transience. He shares in the life of creation, which is characterized by domination and violence and depends for its continuing vitality on the constant slaughter of victims. By entering into the world created by God and perverted by human beings, Christ himself becomes *the* victim. It is this fact which makes all things new. "For in him," the letter to the Colossians continues, "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:19-20).

The Bible is silent about what this peace might mean in detail. Will there be a new world? Or will this present world be transformed? Will life no longer depend on the passing away of other life? Or will the creation be liberated only from destruction by domination and violence? The questions remain open. What will be surpasses all of our ability to conceptualize. But in any event, it is not human beings alone but all of creation that will be taken up into the hands of God.

## 5. The Meaning of Sacrifices

We turn now to a specific aspect of the subject which plays an important part in the Bible: the sacrifice of animals. Throughout the entire Old Testament it is taken as self-evident that sacrifices are to be offered to God. The notion that sacrifices of animals or of fruits of the field are acceptable to God and could seem pleasing to him is so remote from modern minds and sensibilities that we can scarcely project ourselves into the same conceptual world. Animal sacrifices now seem “primitive”, something belonging to a stage of human development that we have grown out of. The idea of a temple in which animals are slaughtered and whose altar is smeared with blood now seems repulsive; and we usually tend to ignore the many passages in the Old Testament which mention sacrifices. Perhaps this is too hasty a reaction; and the use of sacrifices may be more meaningful than we generally suppose it to be. Above all, in connection with our subject in this book, we should ask what the offering of sacrifices might tell us about the relationship between humans and animals.

First of all, it is important to realize that animal sacrifices are not to be seen as acts of enmity towards animals. The practice is much more an expression of the profound union between humans and animals. Animals play an irreplaceable part in human beings' relationship with God. Only a relatively small group of animals was sacrificed in Israel. These were exclusively animals that were directly involved in the human environment: bulls, cows, sheep, doves and the like. By making a sacrifice, humans were acknowledging that everything which has life belongs to God — even those animals which seem to “belong” to humankind.

To be sure, God gave animals into human hands. They can serve people as food (Gen. 9:3). But what actually constitutes an animal's life belongs to God alone and human beings may never encroach on it. That is the sense of the commandment that the blood of any animal, whether slaughtered or sacrificed, may not be eaten. The blood of humans and of animals alike is “sacred”. Humans and animals are as if they were related by blood. Just as human blood when shed



cries out to heaven for vengeance, the blood of animals is reserved to God (Gen. 9:4-6). Because of this relationship, animals can take the place of humans. The sacrifice of the firstborn son is replaced by the sacrifice of an animal (Exod. 34:19f.; Num. 18:15). He lives by virtue of this sacrifice. Even for Jesus, two turtledoves were offered as a sacrifice in the temple (Luke 2:24). Animals' blood has a saving and preservative effect for human beings. It protects them from evil. It grants access to God. Association with blood was of prime importance in all sacrifices offered in Israel.

What are sacrifices? So wide is the range of phenomena covered by the term "sacrifice" that any attempt at a definition is soon thwarted. Sacrifices differ so profoundly in content, intention and method that it is hardly possible to cite any common features, let alone common roots. This applies to religions in general and to the Old Testament in particular. There is no single equivalent of the word "sacrifice" in Hebrew; rather, the Old Testament presents a range of actions, each of which has its own name, to which the term "sacrifice" was later applied. It is an abstract collective term; and to give it a precise meaning we would have to examine the specific features of each sacrifice as it occurs: the Passover sacrifice commemorating the exodus from Egypt and Yahweh's saving action, burnt-offerings, communal sacrifice, the various types of expiatory sacrifice and numerous other forms of sacrifice offered for special reasons.

Each of these sacrifices has its own particular significance. In addition, the understanding and practice of it developed over a long history, not every detail of which can now be traced and elucidated. A long path led from Israel's sacrifices during the early nomadic period to those which became customary after the settlement of the promised land; from sacrifices in families and individual sanctuaries to the centralization of worship at the temple in Jerusalem; and from the experience of exile to the restoration of the temple and the minutely organized form of worship of which it became the centre. Thus the many forms of sacrifice usual at

the time of Jesus represented the cumulative outgrowth of a long history.

But does Scripture itself not call into question this whole world of sacrifice and finally show it to be irrelevant? Already in the Old Testament the offering of sacrifices was subjected to radical criticism by certain prophets and in some passages in the psalms and in wisdom literature: "Of what use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor are your sacrifices pleasing to me" (Jer. 6:20). Has Jesus not made the final break with offering sacrifices, and did the early church not irrevocably reject it?

On closer examination, however, it appears that the whole question of sacrifice is much more complex than this. The critique of sacrifice is not merely a matter of putting an end to sacrifice but of effecting so radical a change in its nature that any need for it as a cultic practice begins to disappear. It is also evident from the New Testament that the Old Testament tradition of sacrifice is not simply rejected but undergoes a subtle and profound transformation.

We may perhaps make this clearer by taking a more detailed look at three aspects of the issue.

First of all, the critique made by the prophets was based on the insight that the offering of sacrifices can become empty ritual, and that by relying on the outward sign of sacrifice the nation can even abandon its own responsibility before God. God looks into human hearts. People cannot hide behind the sacrifices and offerings that they make. Humans cannot rely on representation by animals. They themselves are called on to act appropriately, to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24), to "offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay vows to the Most High" (Ps. 50:14). Cultic sacrifices cannot elicit grace and forgiveness, for "the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Ps. 51:17). The rigour of this critique is apparent in the choice of the word "acceptable"; for although the law stipulates what is needed



to ensure that sacrifices are acceptable to God, they awaken only God's displeasure if the deepest intentions at the basis of the sacrifice are not fulfilled. "All deeds are right in the sight of the doer, but the Lord weighs the heart. To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice" (Prov. 21:2f.; cf. Eccles. 5:1; Judith 16:16).

God is not dependent on sacrifices; he does not *need* them: "I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills... If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine" (Ps. 50:9-12; cf. Micah 6:7). Amos puts it most emphatically when he says that the sacrifices offered by the people were never mandatory: "Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?" (Amos 5:25).

This line of criticism is taken further in the New Testament. The real sacrifice is human obedience to the will of God (Matt. 15:5-6). The proclamation of God's immediate presence eliminates any reason for the temple and the sacrifices made there. Why would disciples who are invited to address God with the words "Abba, Father" continue to rely on the outward signs of sacrifice? Jesus' "cleansing" of the temple by expelling money-changers and dealers is the almost inevitable consequence of this proclamation. The sacrifices consist of the disciples themselves and all that they are and have. This consideration is expressed in Paul's exhortation: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a *living sacrifice*, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1).

Second, Christ's coming especially calls into question the practice of expiatory sacrifices. The New Testament constantly reinforces the insight that reconciliation with God cannot be secured by sacrifice and offerings but only by God's liberating grace. It also continually confirms the certainty that in Christ this grace has become tangibly historical and real. Jesus lived a life of complete obedience; and in so doing he unmasked the devices of power, violence and

destruction that characterize human society. By avoiding involvement in them, he himself became the target for hatred and persecution. The way he took had to end on the cross. For his disciples, however, God's acceptance of this way has become visible in the resurrection. Clearly Jesus was the servant of God who "was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities", who "did not open his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter", the one who, "when you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper" (Isa. 53:5, 7, 10).

In him we see that God takes on himself the burden of all the consequences of disobedience: power, violence and destruction. Christ himself is the sacrificial animal: the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. "For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). What meaning could animal sacrifices have now? This point is quite evident in the letter to the Hebrews: "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:10). Now that he has offered himself up for us, it is clear that traditional sacrifices were no more than a semblance of the revelation to come.

The third line extends from Passover. Jesus celebrates Passover with his disciples. But while taking part in the feast which commemorated the liberation from Egypt, he also transformed the meal by using it to announce his death to the disciples: the body broken for them and the blood shed for them. The lamb that was slaughtered for the meal is now out of place. "Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed," says Paul (1 Cor. 5:7). The eucharist recalls this sacrifice; and "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). The community that celebrates the meal is made free by this death; for its part, it is summoned to break through the machinery of power, violence and destruction.

Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, is himself the sacrificial animal that was brought to the slaughter. In the book of

Revelation, the idea is developed further: the Lamb that is slain rules the whole world: "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!" (5:13). The sacrifice has brought about a reconciliation. It has restored God's ordinance in the world and opened up the way to God's kingdom. The Lamb that was slain is the true key to history. By his blood he "ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation" and "made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God" (Rev. 5:9-10). The expectation that was associated with sacrificial animals in the Old Testament has been fulfilled in Christ. But the sacrificial animal is still with us. The Lamb that was slaughtered serves as a symbol of the way and means by which God leads the world to salvation.

What does all this imply for the relationship between humans and animals? In a certain sense the fact that animals are no longer offered as sacrifices means liberation. Animals are freed from a role that in reality they could no longer play. They are released from the confines of the relationship between humans and God and fully acknowledged as creatures in their own right.

One other development deserves mention in this context: the questioning of the distinction between clean and unclean beasts. Jewish tradition took for granted that certain animals should not be used for food. It should be noted that the creation narrative does not mention a distinction of this kind. It even emphasizes that everything coming from God's hands is to be seen as good. But the clean-unclean distinction is certainly derived from old traditions which were included in Jewish legislation. This threat occurs in Isaiah: "Those... eating the flesh of pigs, vermin and rodents shall come to an end together" (Isa. 66:17). Jesus however puts a radical question to the distinction between clean and unclean, declaring that "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (Mark 7:15). In Acts we have the plain statement: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 10:15).

Animals are liberated from taboos and recognized as creatures in their own specific right. The old form of community between humans and animals is unsettled and shattered. But although humans stand alone before God, their responsibility towards animals is not reduced. They have to respect the new freedom of animals. The self-evident community between God, humans and animals on which sacrifice was based has been broken up. Now it must be rebuilt on the foundations of conscious responsibility.

But will that happen? No longer bound by the old communal rules, human beings may slide into an even more uncaring domination over animals. Instead of liberation, the end of sacrifice can mean all the more suffering for animals. All depends on how firmly the image of the Lamb of God has been impressed on human hearts. Humans have to remember that life can only emerge from sacrifice and that essentially every sacrifice made by animals belongs to God himself. Human beings must arrange their lives so that they can walk before God as part of the creation for which they are jointly responsible.

## 6. The Witness of Saints

“And he was with the animals.” For centuries the idea that the peace of Christ radiates into the animal world has remained firmly rooted in Christian tradition. Peace with animals, especially with the wild animals, was a sign of God’s presence in this world.

Both in the East and the West, the legends of the saints bear eloquent witness to this. Certain saints are associated with specific animals. St Jerome is never represented without the lion at his feet watching over his prayers and scholarship. The Celtic traditions of the British Isles but also the Georgian tradition are replete with examples of saints who had a special relationship with animals, many of them hermits living alone in the forests and attracting animals from their surroundings. The 6th-century Irish saint Kieran of Saighir collected a virtual monastery of animals around him: he lived with a wild boar, a fox, a badger, a wolf and a deer. Tradition says of St Guthlac of Croyland (673-714) that “the grace of the great love of which he was possessed overflowed onto everything, so that birds of the lonely wilderness and the scattered fish of the marshes and in the water hastened to fly and swim towards their shepherd at his call; for they were wont to eat whatever food they needed from his hands”. In the 12th century St Godric is said to have lived in seclusion in a forest near Durham where all wild animals were his friends. He feared neither their appearance nor their touch, and welcomed the company even of wolves and snakes and any other beast.

Saints are understood as being able to reduce the amount of violence in nature. They liberate weak animals from the grasp of their stronger foes. Wild and carnivorous creatures become tame in their presence. Every Swiss citizen knows the legend of the bear that brought wood to St Gallus. Thereafter the saint prevented it from “harming either humans or cattle”. So effectively did St Francis convert the wolf of Gubbio from its ways of violence that it never again harmed any living creature.

Animals appear not only as companions but also as protectors of saints. Ravens play a special role in this

respect. It was a raven that ensured that the body of St Vincent of Saragossa, variously said to have been thrown into a marshy field or cast into the sea by his murderers, was found and received proper burial. Legend also says that two ravens were loyal companions of St Meinrad of Einsiedeln, pursuing his assassins with hoarse croakings until the ruffians were arrested and executed.

A theological basis for this friendship with animals, indeed with creation as a whole, was offered by St Kentigern or St Mungo (c. 518-603), the first bishop of Glasgow:

Before human beings rebelled against their Creator not only the animals but the elements obeyed them. But now, after the fall, because everything has taken to enmity, it is usual that the lion should rend, the wolf devour, snakes bite, the water swallow up, the fire turn to ashes, the air rot, the earth — often hard as iron — starve, and — the height of everyday evil — humans not only rise up in anger against other humans but ravage themselves through sin. But because saints for the most part are found perfect before the Lord in true innocence and pure obedience, in holiness, love, faith and justice, they so to speak recover from the Lord their old right and natural rule and hold sway over these animals, the elements, sickness and death.

Strange to say, this view of things almost entirely disappeared with the Renaissance and the beginning of the modern era. After the turn of the 16th century, scarcely anything more is heard of saints in whose spirituality community with animals plays a special part. A rare exception is Rose of Lima, the Peruvian mystic and saint (1586-1617), who joined in the songs and humming of birds and insects and performed duets with them. Since the Renaissance, it is as if animals have been banished from the company of saints. Even saints, in this respect, became people of “modernity”.

The great change that occurred in the late Middle Ages was the result of a growing tendency to focus attention on humans. What is their vocation in the world? How are they intended to develop? What are their capabilities for good and evil? On the one hand, a new awareness of human mastery of the world emerged. The world became an object of human

knowledge and human will. On the other hand, the evil of which humankind is obviously capable brought the question of salvation to the fore. How does God see and treat human beings who are like this and behave like this? Gradually the accent came to fall on the uniqueness of humanity. Their fellow-creatures began to fade from Christians' field of vision. So predominant did this new emphasis become that the point of view of previous centuries was no longer applicable or even comprehensible, but was dismissed as the product of a naive and no longer sustainable way of looking at the world.



## 7. Praise of God and Respect for Life

What does community between humans and animals mean? Undoubtedly the biblical view is far removed from the modern way of looking at things. It sounds like the description of a remote and long-lost era to which there is no return. A development has taken place which has established new conditions for the relationship between humankind and animals, and modern society has been profoundly marked by its consequences. It can function only if animals are absolutely subordinate to humans, who may do entirely what they wish with them. Quantitatively speaking, the rule of humans has gone so far that the number of victims on which they depend has risen enormously in comparison with times past.

Thus at first sight the biblical viewpoint no longer seems directly relevant to the world today. Exegetes may cite it, and historians of culture may compare it with other views in order to characterize the specific nature of Christian thought. But attempts to transpose it into contemporary terms run up against the difficulty that the problems which demand ethical decisions in the present-day situation lie beyond the bounds of the scriptural world of debate. They rely on assumptions alien to the world of the Bible. How much pain may we visit on animals? At what point may we be said to be torturing animals? What exactly is humane rearing of animals? To what extent are we bound to maintain animal and plant species? What rules are we to apply to animal experiments in scientific research? How far is it permissible to use gene technology to modify animal species? Should new species be "protected" by patents?

Questions like these arise from the fact that animals are objects of scientific knowledge and manipulation and especially of human trade and industry. But this very presupposition is called into question by the biblical point of view. The pronouncements of the Bible are so radically opposed to the perspectives of the modern age that it seems almost impossible to go back to them.

Yet the destruction brought about by technological civilization is so devastating that doubts that it is really justifiable must grow almost irresistibly. An increasing number of



writers, scientists and activists are insisting that we must establish a new relationship to nature, and to animals in particular. More and more people are coming to see that endangering the survival of animals could threaten the survival of the human race as well. The fundamental question of what principles will enable us to find a way into the future is becoming ever more urgent. Perhaps the new inspiration needed in the present crisis can be discovered in the biblical understanding of God, creation. Perhaps we must risk a leap into that unknown world. It is growing increasingly obvious that a mere moderation of what has happened will not afford anything like the new direction that is necessary. A change of course in our relationship with animals is needed, something far more profound than a protest movement that amounts only to tinkering with current approaches.

To be sure, the first step is to restrict the current development by putting a stop to the most appalling excesses. Animal protection regulations and legislation and a commitment to maintain certain species are moves in this direction. But the heart of the matter has to do with the demands humans make on creation and the extent to which they are prepared to respect animals as fellow-creatures and to reduce their violence against them to a minimum. Whenever and wherever this issue is raised, the biblical view of community between humans and animals is relevant.

But what would it really imply if we were to adopt this viewpoint in our lives? The following three reflections are offered as an initial, if incomplete, response to that question.

1. The notion that animals are objects is deeply embedded in our minds and reflexes. Consequently, any attempt to escape its hold deserves encouragement. Animals can be perceived as fellow-creatures only if we actually encounter them in that way. Yet a major aspect of the degradation of animals to the level of objects is that we no longer really see them or the sacrifices they make for us with our own eyes. For many people, to be sure, domestic animals stand for the animal world; and there is no doubt that pet animals are an important initial means of access to the animal world, espe-

cially for children. Nevertheless, the image thus created is a distorted one, since pets make up only a small part of that world — a few privileged animals not only protected but maintained as companions by humans. Their very readiness to serve and submit further intensifies the idea of animals as dependent. But most people are quite unacquainted with the actual sacrifice of the countless animals that are slaughtered to feed human beings — 86 kilogrammes of meat for every person in Switzerland in 1994. Animals have become products and foodstuff. How can there be any true compassion for animals as long as we do not really see how they die? If the process of animal slaughter remains in the realm of anonymity and ignorance, the animals that serve as our sustenance will continue to be seen as products for sale rather than primarily creatures giving up their life.

2. Animal rights can be secured only if human beings exercise restraint and reduce the demands they make on the rest of creation. For many centuries the generally accepted life-style, consciously based on Christian tradition, was one of satisfaction with sufficiency. To be sure, ascetic life was not exclusively based on this consideration. Yet abstinence also meant limiting the area of creation to which human beings laid claim. In one of his homilies on the six days of creation, Basil the Great speaks of the relations between God's creatures and the fact that the strong feed off the weak. He advises human beings not to take advantage of their position of strength, but to live in the "poverty of true self-sufficiency". Asceticism is the way to a more profound relation to creation. St Francis of Assisi, often lauded as the saint of animals, was primarily an ascetic of poverty. In his case at least, self-sufficiency and openness to the animal world were closely related.

Complete or partial abstinence from eating meat is also a sign expressing something of the biblical view of the relationship between humankind and animals. This notion was scarcely unusual in the church in earlier times. St Jerome wrote in his tract against Jovinian, for example, that "until the flood... eating meat was unknown. Thereafter Moses

allowed us to do so because of the hardness of our hearts. But since Christ came at the end of the ages and restored omega to alpha, taking the end back to the beginning, we no longer eat meat." Among recent theologians, Karl Barth has addressed the issue of vegetarianism:

Yet it is not only understandable but necessary that the affirmation of this whole possibility [killing animals] should always have been accompanied by a radical protest against it. It may well be objected against a vegetarianism which presses in this direction that it represents a wanton anticipation of what is described by Isa. 11 and Rom. 8 as existence in the new aeon for which we hope. It may also be true that it aggravates by reason of its inevitable inconsistencies, its sentimentality and its fanaticism. But for all its weaknesses we must be careful not to put ourselves in the wrong in face of it by our own thoughtlessness and hardness of heart (*Church Dogmatics*, III/4, §55.1).

At a time when human demands on animals are becoming ever more problematical, the importance of this sign may indeed be all the greater.

From the earliest times, it was the practice in the Christian church to abstain from eating meat on certain days and at certain times. What was the purpose of this abstinence? And why particularly at times when Christ's passion and death were commemorated? The first consideration was certainly to foster concentration on essential things. But abstaining from meat was also a sign of peace with creation, an expression of thanksgiving for the sacrifice that Christ had made. It is no accident that it is precisely since the beginning of the modern age that these times of fasting and abstinence have been called in question and have increasingly lost their significance.

3. The Bible says that the whole creation is there to praise God. Everything from the elements of nature through plants, animals, reptiles and birds to human beings is called to join in praising the name of God (Ps. 148:7-10). This raises the question of what part this praise really plays in our life and in the life of the church. The praise described in this psalm is indeed the praise of a community of creatures that

rely on one another in order to live. They praise the Lord's name in awareness of their transience and in recognition that as they pass away they make room for new life. Human beings, too, cannot praise God without recalling the sacrifice involved in creation. Every grace before or after a meal refers to our dependence not only on the Creator but on his creation. The elements of holy communion make this clear. This joint praise of God is the deepest source of "respect for life".