

Abstract

Religious Sacrificial Sympathy: How Man Became More Valuable than Beast

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Attitudes toward animal slaughter have evolved over time reflecting a gradual loss of sympathy for the object of sacrifice. Such a change is but a microcosm of the religious man's indifference and even abuse of the world around him. As anthropologist Walter Burkert has pointed out, men in the Paleolithic period felt a deep sympathy with the animals they slaughtered for nourishment so much so that they relied on the shaman and their divine insight to guide their hunting efforts so as only to kill those elected by God. Belief systems surrounding the God known as the "Animal Master" evidence a symbiotic relationship between man and animal wherein the Animal Master regularly sends flocks to be killed and eaten by man and in return man assures the Animal Master that the rights necessary for a posthumous life will be conducted. Some of these practices included hunters sharing in the sorrow of animals until their time of death came, the dawning of animal costumes, ritualistically laying out bones and pelt, and burial.

These practices indicate a remarkable concern of the wellbeing of animals in the earliest religious traditions that is sorely lacking today. The introductions of ritual sacrifice seen

as early as the 4th Millennium BCE in Mesopotamia prompted the commodification of animals the commencement of religious distancing from animals. Animals were offered to gods to intrigue them to influence temporal affairs such as weather, fertility, and moral absolution. By offering animals as sacrifice man asserted a dominance over animals suggesting their lives were justly taken to improve the lives of man because the lives of man were of greater value. Ritual sacrifice also had a profound effect in the development of early reincarnation structures such as in Hindu tradition. Where previously there had been a more sporadic understanding of reincarnation where one may be reincarnated as any creature at random, the assertion of man's value over animals led to a hierachal development where consequentially it was more desirable to be human than animal.

This division between man and animal has grown exponentially as we approach the modern day. The demand for meat in the United States today reaches astronomical numbers. According to the USDA, U.S. consumers on average ate about 227 pounds of poultry, beef and pork in 2022, despite 81% claiming theistic belief. Quite a few of the most popular religious traditions in the US today involve restrictions around meat consumption. Muslims and Jews are forbidden to eat pork, Hindus should not eat beef, and Buddhists belonging to certain branches should restrain from meat eating altogether. However, in a recent study by the pew research center Eight-in-ten Indians limit meat in their diets, and four-in-ten consider themselves vegetarian.¹ In a 2020 study pew research center found that only 17% of Jews keep kosher in

¹ Corichi, Manolo. "Eight-in-ten Indians limit meat in their diets, and four-in-ten consider themselves vegetarian." Pew Research Center, July 8th, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/08/eight-in-ten-indians-limit-meat-in-their-diets-and-four-in-ten-consider-themselves-vegetarian/>

their homes.² Interestingly, 90 percent of Muslims surveyed said they abjure pork. Finally, only 4% of Buddhists abide by a vegetarian diet.³ Though to be fair the Buddha only recommends vegetarianism or those of a higher path, not everyone.⁴ Additionally, Christian theology expresses no concern to restriction of meat and even goes so far as to expressly condone it in Mark 7:18-19.

For the religious populations in America, the religious man has travelled a long way from their roots of weeping with their dinner as it gave its life for man's nourishment. Even with the theological assertion of animal's uncleanliness or sacrality, religious populations are unwilling to restrict themselves from asserting their superiority over animals as they divvy out death to their fellow creatures on a regular basis. The religious man of America today highlights how far man has come in his perceived superiority and subjugation of nature and how hard his heart has become. This is but a microcosm of the religious man's trend toward pillaging and abusing nature from which he emerged.

² Mitchell, Travis. "Jewish Practices and Customs." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, May 11, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-practices-and-customs/>.

³ Hussain, Grace. "Do Buddhists Eat Meat? What Did Buddha Say about Meat?" Sentient Media, November 1, 2022. <https://sentientmedia.org/do-buddhists-eat-meat/>.

⁴ Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, Chapter 8.