



Sample Theological Reflection

A Theological Reflection on a Visit to a Dairy Farm

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Introduction

The moral status of non-human animals as fellow created beings has become in recent decades an increasingly mainstream concern within Christian Ethics, and Christian Theology more broadly. This article is a personal reflection on my own experience, as a Christian, a theological educator and a vegan, when visiting an intensive dairy farm as part of my involvement with the Christian Ethics of Farmed Animal Welfare (CEFAW).

Background

When I had the opportunity to become involved with the CEFAW project, I was interested because I had been a vegan for over five years, vegetarian before that, but I felt that my views on animal welfare and the difficulties of the animal agriculture system needed to be better integrated into my theology. These views were largely private, partly because I felt uncomfortable talking about them in professional and church settings, knowing that they made others feel uncomfortable, guilty, defensive or angry. I didn't really want this in my professional life or in my church ministry. I wanted to be a theological educator and a priest, and not to be pigeonholed as a vegan. In my personal life I was well engaged in the secular vegan movement, and had attended many vegan talks and events, and watched vegan documentaries. In my personal faith I felt being vegan was a right and faithful response in my relationship with a God who created me and all God's creatures. However, my theological work was almost totally unconnected with this side of my beliefs. It is ironic as a theological educator, who teaches those training in ministry to reflect theologically, that this was an area of my life which was insufficiently integrated between theology and practice. But the difficulty in approaching these issues from a theological point

of view perhaps says something about the depth of feeling, and the sensitivity of these issues. As Judith Thompson et al note ‘The “gap” between faith and the issues of daily life is often extremely hard to cross...Theology and experience do not always map easily onto each other so that we can relate them together’.¹

Experience and Analysis – A Thick Description

I approached the visit with lots of ideas and expectations going through my mind. I had read the CEFAW policy framework² and begun engaging with the theological thinking behind the approach to the ethics of farmed animal welfare which the project was advocating. I had read the description of what a flourishing life might look like for cattle, including free social interaction, the importance of mother-calf bonds and varied grazing. I had heard, from my secular engagement with the vegan movement, that male calves were of little use in dairy farming, and so were usually culled. Female calves needed to be raised to become dairy cows themselves and could not be allowed to use up their mother’s milk, so calves were usually separated from their mothers shortly after birth, which is very distressing for them both. I had watched a number of documentaries. Some of these were from a specifically vegan perspective.³ Others were from mainstream media outlets such as on the BBC.⁴ From these, my expectations of the visit were that intensive dairy farming was mainly indoors with high intensity feed and close packing, and calves taken away at a day or a few days old, and male calves sent straight to slaughter at a very young age, or shot on site. I expected that occasionally there would be abuse and inhumane treatment, with cattle treated like part of a factory rather than as sentient creatures. I expected it to be harrowing.

We were told that the farmer, who will not be identified here, was nervous about having us come. It was not long after the Panorama exposé at a dairy farm⁵, which no doubt

¹ Judith Thompson with Stephen Pattison and Ross Thompson, *SCM Studyguide to Theological Reflection* (second edition), (London: SCM Press, 2019), p.98.

² David L. Clough, Margaret B. Adam, David Grumett, and Siobhan Mullan, *The Christian Ethics of Farmed Animal Welfare: A Policy Framework for Churches and Christian Organizations*, (2020) <[CEFAW Policy Framework | The School of Divinity, History, Philosophy & Art History | The University of Aberdeen \(abdn.ac.uk\)](#)> [accessed 8.3.23]

³ *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret*, dir. Kip Andersen and Keegan Kuhn, (A.U.M. Films, 2014). Also *Earthlings*, dir. Shaun Monson, (Nation Earth, 2005).

⁴ *Panorama: A Cow's Life: The True Cost of Milk?* (BBC, 2022).

⁵ *Ibid.*

led to anxiety amongst dairy farmers. We were asked not to take any photos, and we were invited in as guests, on the understanding that we were there to learn and not to expose them. I felt it was important to arrive with an open mind, and to try to see the whole thing from the farmer's point of view and from the points of view of my friends and colleagues who ate meat and dairy.

We began by going into an upstairs room and being given a talk from the farm owner. He explained that when he inherited the farm many decades ago, it was much less intensive. It was what you imagine a dairy farm to be – herds of cattle out in the fields, coming in for milking and housed in sheltered barns in poor weather in the winter. He said that he did not imagine when he took the farm on that he would go to fully indoor housed cows, but that it was economically the only way to survive, and he now sees it very differently and believes the cows are well cared for. The level of awareness of each individual animal was astounding. It was all computerised, he showed us the records for each cow – milk production levels, personalised feed, medical information. He spoke of the cows with respect and care, even admiration. He spoke of them as 'elite athletes', producing more than twice the milk output of extensively farmed cows. He was very concerned for their welfare. I was convinced that this was not just mercenary. He cared for them and he knew them. But it was also an economic imperative: unhappy, unhealthy cows would not produce as much milk, so it was essential that they were kept in the best possible conditions. It struck me that all those documentaries showing abused cows, harangued and hit by frustrated workers, was not just undesirable and deplored by animal welfare campaigners, but also by farmers such as this one. He would not want that because stressed cows would not be as economically viable.

We then walked down from the upstairs room into the milking parlour. For a moment, I was awed, shocked, and felt like I'd walked into a vision of hell. The smell, the overwhelming strangeness of seeing twenty odd cows in a huge contraption, a horizontal slowly turning wheel, in which each cow was in a compartment in each 'spoke', being milked. By the time the wheel had completed a rotation, the milking was done and the cow backed out. But with time, watching carefully, the shock subsided and I began to observe the animals themselves and how they interacted with this machinery. I began to see how calmly and expertly they walked on at the start, and off at the end. There was a system of

gates to filter them one by one into the point to enter the milking parlour, and they jostled with each other gently on their way in, but clearly looking very comfortable with it all, very practiced. Unlike for me, this was a normal every day experience for them.

Then we walked around the outside of the barn. The thing which struck me the most was that I had expected indoor housed cows to be literally indoors, no or little sunlight, but that was not at all the case. They were in a vast, open sided shed, with just a roof. And in this, there were a number of sections for cows of different types, as the farmer explained, at different stages of development or rotations of pregnancy and lactation. The farmer told the story of a couple of cows who got out and wondered around the field for a bit. After a bit of a nose around, they wondered back into the shed. For my part, I felt it was the cow equivalent of urban children who didn't know how to climb trees. These were city cows. This was their home, all they had known, and they were used to life here. But was it really what was best for them? Like children in Romanian orphanages in the 1990s, they didn't know anything else. But was this flourishing? Harari argues that 'the Agricultural Revolution gave humans the power to ensure the survival and reproduction of domesticated animals while ignoring their subjective needs'.⁶ The cows were used to being in these barns, used to going for milking, used to the fact that they never saw grass, but lived on concrete floors and sand beds. Yet their lives were a constant round of pregnancy, painful separation from their calves the instant they were born, eating monotonous food which was served up ready rather than meeting their strong urges to graze, with some but limited socialization in a confined area. Their subjective needs were only met in very limited ways, and many were entirely unmet. This was not torture on the whole, but neither was it really flourishing.

We went to see the calves. Those who had been born in the last week or so were kept in pairs, but beyond that they were all housed in separate pens, with a shelter and an outdoor area where they could see the other calves, but couldn't get to them. The pens adhered to the size requirements of the law, but they didn't have space to pace about, run, or do much at all other than go inside or out, and to eat and drink. The new-borns were removed from their mothers immediately after birth. Some farms give calves a day or two

⁶ Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, (London: Random House, 2017), p.96.

with the mothers, so that they can drink the colostrum from their mothers, but here they were given it in a bottle. The farmer believed other farms were cruel: the longer the calves spent with the mother, the more distressed they were when, inevitably, they were separated.

One thing I thought I knew about dairy farming was that male calves were killed shortly after birth. But in the case of this farm, I was wrong. They used a system whereby bull semen is sexed, allowing almost all Y chromosome semen to be excluded, leaving only a very few male calves. Culling just wasn't needed in this system. Most of the dairy cows were bred with beef bulls and their calves just went into the beef herds. Others were bred to be dairy calves, and so the cycle would begin again.

Reflection

One of the things which had prevented me engaging more deeply in these issues before I got involved in the CEFAW project was that I felt slightly guilty about my veganism. I knew that many people I loved and respected were involved in the farming industry, and I did not feel that these people were inhumane, at least not with that part of my brain. But another part of my brain was appalled at the idea of farming sentient beings for food. I had ministered in rural settings with farmers who worked hard and lovingly with their animals. I had celebrated harvest with them, and knew that these were people who worked incredibly hard, for very little profit, and that they cared for their animals. I had not really resolved my largely secular vegan ideals very well with my respect for the farming community. I knew that campaigns from vegan and animal rights groups had put an already stressed farming community under immense added pressure. Also, most people I loved and respected ate meat and animal products, including most Christians. Where did all these swirling thoughts and feelings leave me? Aware, as I visited the dairy farm, that I was not as knowledgeable about the actual practices as I thought I was. I have never worked on a farm, even though I have lived most of my life in rural communities. Scientist and small-scale farmer Stephen Budiansky's critique of the animal rights movement was a fair critique of me:

There is a ... galling naïveté in those, far removed from nature, who see in farming the "exploitation" of animals and who imagine that anyone who disagrees with them is either the unenlightened slaves of unquestioned convention or an economic creature of base self-interest. I don't demand that

those who would dictate to farmers how to treat their animals lie on a cold barn floor with their hand up a ewe's uterus to save the lives of ewe and lamb... I merely note that they haven't.⁷

The CEFAW project consulted widely with many interest groups, including farmers and vets, as well as animal welfare campaigning groups and theologians. In doing this it has achieved a very important thing, since this is a subject which is so charged and emotional that it is very difficult to get meaningful dialogue between people with vastly different perspectives on the questions of what constitutes ethical treatment of non-human animals. But what it is about our treatment of animals which makes it so difficult to have meaningful dialogue? Questions concerning what we eat touch areas of human experience which are both intimate and core to our sense of meaning and identity. Food is part of how we define who we are, our culture, what we share together as families and communities. Wirzba's exploration of the significance of food for mortal creatures is profoundly telling:

Eating involves us in a daily life and death drama in which, beyond all comprehension, some life is sacrificed so that other life can thrive. It establishes a membership that confirms all creatures as profoundly in need of each other and upon God to provide life's nutrition and vitality. Food is a holy and humbling mystery. Every time a creature eats it participates in God's life-giving yet costly ways, ways that simultaneously affirm creation as a delectable gift, and as a divinely ordered membership of interdependent need and suffering and help.⁸

Food binds us together, not only with those with whom we eat, but also with our culture and society, with animals and plants, with the farmers and shopworkers and those who provide transport to get the food to our tables. Eating food says something about who we are. It is 'among the most intimate acts imaginable' which maintains and polices boundaries of identity.⁹

⁷ Stephen Budiansky, *Covenant of the Wild*, (London: Phoenix, 1997), p. vii – viii.

⁸ Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p2.

⁹ Harvey, *Food, Sex and Strangers*, p.213.

My own discomfort at finding myself on the opposite side to the mainstream culture on questions of the eating of animal products is not due to lack of thought about it. I have thought about it a lot, and my thinking has left me at odds with my culture, my family and some may even argue my religion. I usually manage this tension by not talking about it much. The visit to the farm forced me to face this disjuncture, and the questions of my feelings about animals, farms and farmers. They were mixed and various, and not at all as one sided as a sometimes-acrimonious debate would portray them. An emotionally charged subject is one about which it is difficult to gain proper perspective. Budiansky describes modern American (and this would equally apply to British) attitudes to animals as fluctuating between ‘anthropomorphism and blindness’.¹⁰ We treat animals either as objects, commodities to be manufactured, harvested and cut up into packages for consumption without any regard for them as living, feeling beings. Or else we treat them as exactly like people – family members who are loved, cherished, spend vast quantities of money upon feeding and making them better when they are sick, and then bury them in pet cemeteries when they die. The contrast between our treatment of different species of animals is breathtakingly blind. Non-human animals are not the same as humans: perhaps meat is not murder, but neither is it ethically unambiguous. From a Christian theological standpoint, I am convinced by Clough’s arguments in his two-volume exploration of a Christian Theology and Ethics of animals, that animals cannot be regarded as beyond our ethical consideration within an authentically Christian worldview.¹¹ They are fellow creatures and ‘fellow recipients with us of God’s grace in creation, reconciliation and redemption, willed by God to flourish and to glorify God in their flourishing’.¹² So, the question which remains is whether modern intensive farming methods, in which the vast majority of the animal food products consumed in the UK are produced, are compatible with a Christian ethic which sees animals as fellow creatures of God, of ethical worth and

¹⁰ Budiansky, *Covenant of the Wild*, p.3.

¹¹ David L. Clough, *On Animals: Volume One, Systematic Theology*, (London: T & T Clark, 2012) and David L. Clough, *On Animals: Volume Two: Theological Ethics*, (London: T&T Clark, 2019).

¹² David L. Clough, ‘Consuming Animal Creatures: The Christian Ethics of Eating Animals’. *Studies in Christian Ethics* 30.1 (2017), 30–44.

value in themselves. This is exactly where the farm visit came in, to see for myself the systems in which, in this case, milk is produced for the UK market.

The farmer we met really did care about the cows, and was strongly motivated, both from sympathy and respect for his animals as well as from financial motives, to give them the best lives he could, under the constraints of needing to maximise production and minimise costs in order to make the farm viable economically. As I noted when I visited the farm, these cows were the equivalent of urban people. They were used to the indoor housing, the milking parlour, the rhythm of life which was possible within these very limited circumstances. And yet, I cannot think that this constitutes flourishing for dairy cows. They may not know what they were missing, but they lived lives which were ordered entirely around maximising the yield from them, and which closed off opportunities to graze, to socialise, to bond with their calves, which makes a cow's life the full life they were created to live. Their lives were centred entirely around maximising their milk yield, at incredible cost to them physically, socially and emotionally in their repeated separation of mothers and calves, and the isolation of the calves.

The problem here was not cruelty on the part of the farmer, but the system in which he was operating, with massive demand from a growing population for access to large volumes of cheap milk. They were not allowed to 'enjoy lives in which they can flourish as animals, rather than as potential products'.¹³

Kairos Moment

I have chewed over these experiences, and read around the topic over a number of months. But for me the *Kairos moment*, the moment of 'emerging insight'¹⁴ came when preparing to teach an entirely unrelated module on Christian doctrine, and particularly a session on the Enlightenment. Robert Jenson summarises Karl Barth's response to the Enlightenment thus:

The Enlightenment was the human subject's declaration of independence from every limitation but faithfulness to him – or herself. Obviously, independence from the authority of revelation and church had to be central

¹³ Clough et al, *A Policy Framework*, p. 6.

¹⁴ Thompson et al *SCM Studyguide to Theological Reflection*, p.100

to this project. What the Enlightenment thus thought of as human freedom is what Christianity means by 'sin'.¹⁵

Having explored modern intensive farming methods, and having seen them in this farm visit, the thing which strikes me most powerfully is the massive and alarming scale of the whole business. This is not meat eating as has been known throughout most cultures and all of human history. For most of human history meat eating was a rare treat for festival occasions, and a by-product of animal husbandry for milk, eggs and wool.¹⁶ Modern meat eating is on a scale which is leaving the local ecosystems, the global environment, and the individual animals living their short lives within this system bled to the point of exhaustion. Something has to give.

There is something so terrifyingly unrestrained in the ways that human beings are using animals for food today, which would have been impossible in the past. This is mainly because modern science and 'improvements' in farming technologies have made cheap production of animal food products on a massive scale possible in a way it could never have been in the past. But it is also due to the unrestrained anthropocentrism which the Enlightenment celebrated, and which Barth recognised as sin. The Enlightenment project was fired by a stripping back of all restraints on human reason, a celebration of human achievement, and a crowning of humanity as the undisputed master of this world, toppling God from God's throne in the process. This promotion of human reason has enabled the scientific project to make astounding improvements in human living conditions, and has also enabled the breeding programs, feeding technology, antibiotics and other veterinary support, which have made animals like the dairy cows I saw so productive, and their milk so cheap and available. We live in the Anthropocene age, in which many of the sufferings and shortages which have plagued human history have been greatly reduced, but at the cost of degrading the earth with the intensive use and abuse of its resources. The cost is borne by animals in the farming system, by wild animals whose habitats are degraded and by the most vulnerable human beings, the first casualties of climate change. The 'exercise of the

¹⁵ Robert. W. Jenson, 'Karl Barth', in David. F. Ford (ed), *The Modern Theologians, Second Edition*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), p.21-36, p.23.

¹⁶ Clough, 'Consuming Animal Creatures'.

forms of freedom that maximize control, convenience, and comfort for some have put in jeopardy the future freedom of many others'.¹⁷ As Harvey observes,

...religion may be, at its core, a way of dealing with the eating of relational and related beings...No individual or single species has the right to take or consume without limits. There are boundaries that define appropriate relations. Giving up and giving back (taboos and sacrifices) are ways in which people dramatize the limits their community encourages. Religion is about disciplined living.¹⁸

There is something about the lack of restraint of the modern relationship between humanity and the animals it farms for food, which treats them like commodities rather than living feeling beings, fellow creatures with worth before God and a life which should be worth living and allowed to flourish. My experience of this visit confirms, for me, Clough's argument, that modern intensive farming systems do not allow for this flourishing, and that Christians should aim to not support these systems by refusing to buy their products: '...if we are to make use of animals for food, we should ensure that such use respects their relationship to us as fellow creatures of God'.¹⁹

Decide and Plan

I have very much valued the opportunity which my involvement with CEFAW and the farm visit have opened up for me to reflect theologically upon farmed animals, farmers and the food system in which we live. The Theological Reflection cycle ends in action, so what will be my action? I continue to be happy with my choice to consume a plant-based diet, and not to participate in the modern intensive animal agricultural system. While I may have gained understanding and respect for farmers, I continue to believe that this is not something I wish to contribute to. I also continue to be happy to respect those who see this differently and to work in the farming industry or to consume animal products, and I feel I have a more nuanced understanding of the theological underpinnings of this.

¹⁷ Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity's Place in a Wounded World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p.5.

¹⁸ Graham Harvey, *Food, Sex and Strangers: Understanding Religion as Everyday Life*, (Durham: Acumen Publishing Ltd, 2013), p.213.

¹⁹ Clough, 'Consuming Animal Creatures', p.30.

The big change for me is an increase in confidence about my beliefs about what a Christian approach to consuming animal products may look like. Western societies cannot continue to consume animal products at the rate we have been doing, with almost every meal being based primarily around meat and other animal products. This necessitates a vast scale of intensive farming of millions of God's creatures in miserable conditions, and I now feel more confident in arguing that this is not appropriate within a Christian ethical stance towards farmed animals, nor for that matter the wider created order. The CEFAW framework,²⁰ I think gives a balanced and nuanced conclusion of how to act, which I hope most Christians could be convinced of. This advocates a Christian approach to animal products which asks all of us to consume 'less and better': much smaller quantities of animal products which come from extensive farming systems which have much higher welfare standards, whilst continuing to support and value the work of farmers in caring for the smaller quantities of animals which continue to be farmed.

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