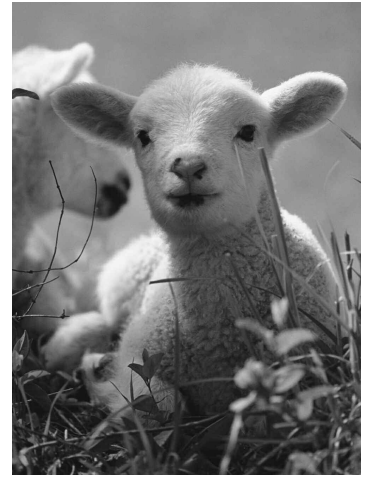


# Religion, Ethics and Animals



**At the core of every major religion is a belief in the sanctity of life. Sadly, however, animals are rarely treated with the compassion and respect required by the humane teachings and laws laid down by the early founders of each faith.**



## Christianity

Although there are many references in the Bible to caring for animals and living humanely, and Christ constantly taught compassion, saying *"Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy"*, the overriding influence on Christian attitudes to animals has been the Biblical story of creation – that humans were created in the image of God and given dominion over the rest of creation. However, scholars of ancient Hebrew tell us the word 'dominion' has been wrongly translated, and that the real meaning is responsible stewardship and guardianship. This shows that we were meant to care for nature and the animal kingdom, living in harmony with it – not dominating and exploiting it.

*"Animals have done us no harm and they have no power of resistance....There is something so very dreadful...in tormenting those who have never harmed us, who cannot defend themselves, who are utterly in our power."* Cardinal John Henry Newman



## Judaism

Jewish law is very strict about the treatment of animals, stating that "It is forbidden, according to the law of Torah, to inflict pain upon any living creature". Jews are forbidden to hunt animals, but the decision about whether or not to eat meat is left to the individual conscience. Kosher slaughter has been criticised (by those within the Jewish faith as well as those outside it) because modern practices are not consistent with the original meaning of the law, which was intended to minimise the suffering endured by farmed animals. Jewish (and Muslim – see Islam) dietary laws stress that the animal must be in good health at the time of slaughter, which is why no blow or shock to 'stun' the animal first is allowed. Reformists, however, feel that the literal interpretation of the law has wrongly been allowed to become more important than its intention.

**Many religions have held a human-centred view of the world, but as we evolve we understand it is not always appropriate to apply ancient customs and beliefs to modern conditions. This includes our treatment of animals and attitudes towards animals.**



## Islam

The most sacred document in Islam is the Koran, which contains divine revelations made by Allah (God) to the prophet Mohammed. According to Islam all life is sacrosanct and has a right of protection and preservation. Mohammed said "You will be rewarded by Allah for your acts of kindness towards living creatures". The Islamic scholar Al-Hafiz Masri, who was a great fighter for justice for animals, said that according to the spirit and overall teachings of Islam, causing avoidable pain and suffering to the defenceless and innocent creatures of God is not justifiable under any circumstances.



## Hinduism

More than 80% of people in India are Hindus. The term 'Hinduism' refers to a culture, which covers a wide range of practices and beliefs, based on ancient scriptures known as the Vedas. Devout Hindus believe in reincarnation (samsara), which means rebirth into a higher or lower existence determined by how we live our lives; this is the law of Karma. Hindus believe that animals, like humans, have souls and are evolving towards a higher consciousness. Kindness to animals is a basic principle of the Hindu religion, which teaches respect for all living creatures. Being vegetarian is highly respected. Cows, especially, are considered very sacred and must not be eaten.



## Buddhism and Jainism

The central principle of Buddhism and Jainism is ahimsa which means many things: harmlessness (not to harm any living creature), non-violence, reverence for life and compassion. Many followers of Buddhism and all followers of Jainism are vegetarians. They believe that we are all part of the same family, the same Life Force, and that what we do to others affects not only ourselves, but all life on earth. The entire Universe is helped by our individual acts of compassion, or harmed by our acts of unkindness and violence. The Dalai Lama, a Buddhist spiritual leader, says "Even ants and other insects will run away from danger – they have intelligence and want to live, too. Why should we harm them?"

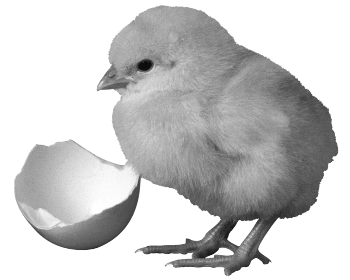
**There are many communities who have always felt at one with nature, and some of the testimonies of the North American Indians are highly relevant to today's threatened world.**

"What is man without the beasts? If the beasts were gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself". Chief Seattle's Testimony, 1854.

But the human species seems set to continue to bring disorder to the Universe, and the situation is becoming more desperate than ever because we now have the technology to cause even greater harm and destruction.

**An estimated three quarters of the world's people follow one form of religion or another.** At the core of every religious belief there is always talk about living a good life, peace, not hurting, not killing. But no religion or social order has been able to prevent cruelty and conflict. We have to act, as individuals, and try to live our lives without causing suffering or harm to each other or to any living thing.

# The Ethical Case for Animal Rights



**Animals are not things. They have lungs that breathe, hearts that beat, blood that flows, eyes that see and senses that warn of danger, through nerve endings reacting to painful stimuli like heat or sharp objects. Hearing, sight and sense of smell, are, in fact, much more developed in many animals than in humans. So, we know that animals' sensitivity to physical pain can be at least as great as ours, and we also know that they have the capability for mental suffering as well.**

## The world does not 'belong' to humans!

Animals are often treated as if they have no value and have been put here for our benefit. We trap them, hunt them and imprison them in factory farms, laboratories, circuses, aquariums and zoos. We pollute the seas and rivers, poison the land and destroy the forests, so the animals have nowhere left to go.

## But animals hurt one another!

People sometimes argue that animals are cruel to each other, so people should not feel bad about using or hurting animals. It is true that some animals are predators who kill in order to eat. If they are carnivores, they have no choice, and need to eat meat to survive. People do not need meat to survive. Animals are not deliberately cruel; many of their actions are driven by instinct. Equally, we know they have strong bonds with their babies, and take responsibility for feeding, nurturing and defending them. People know the results of their actions and we know how an animal will suffer before we are cruel to them.

## Why should animals have rights?

Animal rights is about having respect for all living beings, regardless of their species. Some argue that animals are not entitled to rights because they cannot understand the concept. However, babies and people with severe learning difficulties cannot understand the concept of rights but this does not prevent us from granting rights to them. Long ago, rights were denied to women and to

black people, purely on the grounds of gender, race or skin colour. Today, we would not dream of discriminating against people in that way, so is it therefore OK to discriminate on grounds of species? Animals can't speak for themselves or defend themselves, so we have to do it for them.

## Human rights versus animal rights

There are those who accuse campaigners for animal rights of caring more about animals than other people. However, do we accuse those who choose to help refugees or victims of war of not caring about their own countryfolk? Or those who work for the elderly of not caring about abused children? Of course not! The issue is not whom we care about the most, but whether it is ever morally justifiable to exploit and abuse sentient beings – regardless of their species. Many people who campaign for animal rights also campaign for human rights as well.

## Social progress

Movements for social progress usually face a long struggle. The campaigns to gain equal rights for women and for the abolition of slavery all faced opposition as the changes they wanted seemed too radical or different. People felt threatened by this, but after those changes were made, most people could see they were for the best. Politicians, scientists and businesses will not change until public pressure convinces them to do so. Anything that people can do to help animals must be seen as a positive step forward. If you feel that hurting animals is wrong, then do something about it.

**For more information on animal issues, please contact: Animal Aid, The Old Chapel, Bradford St, Tonbridge, TN9 1AW**

Tel: 01732 364546 • [www.animalaid.org.uk/youth](http://www.animalaid.org.uk/youth) • [youth@animalaid.co.uk](mailto:youth@animalaid.co.uk)