

Hunting as the Anti-Gospel of Predation

Allied to the view that animals are here for our use is the idea that animals are here for our enjoyment. It is astonishing to think that this idea should have had such widespread currency within the Christian tradition that St Francis de Sales, to take only one example, could have supposed that hunting was one of those 'innocent recreations' which we 'may always make good use of' in developing our spiritual life.¹ Far from being 'innocent' or morally neutral, I argue that hunting represents the anti-gospel of Jesus our Predator. Few, I think, have really grasped what it means theologically to justify the destruction of sentient life simply for the sport involved in it. Only if parasitical nature is to be celebrated as divinely-purposed existence can hunting for amusement be justified. Whatever the difficulties in conceiving of a world without predation, to intensify and heighten – without any ethical necessity – the parasitical forces in our world is to plunge creation further into that darkness from which the Christian hope is that we shall all, human and animal, be liberated.

Hunting with Jesus

Imagine you are a hunter – with a difference. A Bible-believing, God-fearing, Christian hunter. You are up at 4.30 a.m. in your hunting cabin. Your day begins with some self-examination. 'Who are you today?' you ask yourself. You are aware that not all Christians will approve of your planned activities. But not only do you love hunting, you also love the Lord. You know God loves you and blesses you. You are assured that if you can 'hunt with Jesus, it doesn't matter what anyone else says or believes'. 'I hunt with God as my companion,' you say to yourself, 'knowing He will direct me and keep me safe.'

As you get dressed, you spiritually prepare yourself. Nothing can be done right, you think to yourself, 'unless I include God in it and that applies to hunting too'. 'Remember, in the woods, Satan has a gun!' When you sit eating your breakfast, you put your Bible and the state

game laws in front of you and 'you vow to obey them both that day'. The Christian hunter obeys both the 'law of God' and the 'law of man'. Moreover, before you leave your cabin, you write out lines of scripture on individual pieces of card to memorize at certain times in the day.

As a Christian hunter, you abhor the 'slob' hunters. Slob hunters are those who shoot indiscriminately and without regard to property rights. You used to be one of these, but now you have seen that it is impossible to testify to Jesus on the hunting field and also to be a slob hunter. Jesus, you see, demands the best. While as a Christian hunter you love hunting, you also admit to an element of 'sadness' in being responsible for the death of another creature. You comfort yourself with the thought that death is not an 'end' for the animal but a 'glorious beginning'.

As a Christian then, you kill carefully, not like the slobs. You handle your rifle with care and caution always, doing your best to shoot cleanly with the first bullet. What you kill will always end up as meat in your freezer. As you wait patiently on your tree stand for the Lord to send you a legal buck, you draw inspiration from eternal verities:

you think a lot while you're blending in. You memorise the Bible verse you've propped behind a twig ... Maybe you even wonder what God thinks of you right now. He could spook every animal in the forest anytime he wanted to, but right now everything seems to be pretty cool with him. It's not too hard to know what God expects, if you know your Bible. The Bible never changes, because God never changes.

When it comes to the kill, you pray that the Lord will position the buck precisely to enable a clean shot. The Lord obliges. When it's all over, 'you take a minute to thank Him for sending you this animal'.

Some of you may think that the conscientious Christian hunter here described is a figment of my imagination. Not so. The narrative is taken from an unusual book entitled *The Christian Hunter's Survival Guide* published as one of a series of 'Power Books'.² The author is himself a clergyman, Pastor William H. Ammon. Pastor Ammon resides in Pennsylvania and is executive director of an organization called Sportsmen for Christ.

Conscientious Christian Killing

How are we to evaluate morally and theologically the activity of this Christian hunter? I have chosen to concentrate on Pastor Ammon quite deliberately because those of us opposed to hunting have the

unfortunate tendency to choose the worst possible examples among the hunting fraternity. The tendency to misrepresent, to overstate, to present the opponent in the worst possible light, is of course present on both sides of this debate. When Pastor Ammon, for example, cites Cleveland Amory as applauding the harm done to hunters themselves in 'hunting accidents' – and therefore of valuing animal life over human life – I doubt whether he has fully and properly represented Amory's position.³ Notwithstanding this little exaggeration, Ammon is clearly a conscientious Christian. Those of us having a non-fundamentalist view may smile from time to time at what appears to be the naivety of some of his biblical interpretations – each chapter of his book is concluded with a list of 'memory verses' many of which seem to bear little or no relation to the issue in hand – but it would be impossible to doubt the obvious sincerity of the position he advocates.

Neither can we deny the moral seriousness and probity of the narrative presented to us. Unlike many, Pastor Ammon has pondered the morality of hunting. However defensive some of his arguments may appear, he admits that all is not well on the hunting field. 'It's disturbing to realize', he writes, 'that many hunters are as every bit as bad as the public thinks they are.'⁴ He recommends strict observance of game laws including respect for quotas, and suggests that hunters should 'police' their own ranks. 'A real hunter won't hunt with a slob,' he maintains. Ammon converted from such slobbery. He feels sure that Jesus would agree with the line of Peter Singer that 'If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration.'⁵ Ammon is in favour of reducing wherever possible the suffering which hunting inevitably entails for the animals concerned.

Neither is Ammon a sport hunter in a way that many of his colleagues are. Of course he loves hunting and finds it thrilling. But whereas previously he shot indiscriminately, he now only shoots legally and only what is edible. 'If I am not going to eat it, I don't shoot it,' he maintains.⁶ He honestly acknowledges that his moral scruples are not widely shared. For example: 'Some hunters justifiably argue my buck-only principle is poor deer management – they're right; it's just the way my conscience leads.'⁷

Moreover, Ammon is, despite what he says, sensitive to criticism by fellow Christians. He is aware of how a 'good percentage of the Christians he desires fellowship with would consider him a blood-thirsty Bambi killer if he told them of his hunting'.⁸ Because of this resentment, some Christian hunters – we are told – hardly ever talk

about their pursuits after church and some desist from going to church at all. Ammon very frankly describes how he felt guilty emerging from his parsonage house in hunting clothes and how he went to elaborate lengths to avoid being seen in camouflage gear by members of his congregation. But sensitivity has its limits and Ammon now feels that the time has come to testify both to Jesus and to the moral acceptability of hunting.

I do not want in any way to laugh or sneer at Pastor Ammon. Although I regard his moral and theological positions as naive and untenable, until hunting is finally abolished, I wish there were more conscientious people like Pastor Ammon on the hunting field. None of us, it seems to me, should shun moral sensitivity from any quarter, remembering especially that however morally advanced we may think we are, it is probably the case that each of us still has moral blindspots on one issue or another.

Given this weight of self-disclosed moral and religious sensibility, is there a decisive theological critique to be mounted against him? I think there is.

Our critique should properly begin not by disputing Ammon's seriousness, sensibility or sincerity, but rather by recalling his words on the subject of death. 'As a Christian,' he writes, 'I see death as a glorious beginning, not an end.'⁹ In one sense Ammon is of course right. Christian belief is marked by a refusal to see life as terminated by physical death. However difficult this belief may be for many living in the post-Christian West, it is inconceivable that historical Christianity could have survived – and still survive – without such a belief. And yet this belief has not altered the fact that this tradition has also been characterized at one and the same time by an intense valuing of each and every human life, so much so that nowhere is human murder countenanced within moral theology. Seeing death as a 'glorious beginning' has not prevented Christianity from opposing murder to humans; why should it do so in the case of animals? Ammon interestingly (and, in my opinion, rightly) asks whether: 'If life is eternal for a saved man, why not for a creature who never sinned against the nature God gave him?'¹⁰ Leaving aside the question of animal immortality, if we ask why it should be that the death of an innocent – possibly mortal yet certainly sentient – creature should not be inimical to the Creator of that life, we are, it seems, left with a void. How are we to reconcile the recognition and celebration of this God-given sentient life with its summary destruction?

One answer that Ammon may give is that such killing is not 'wanton'.

'A person who kills an animal and then lets it lie and rot or throws it away is wasting God's creation,' argues Ammon, 'and he continues: 'That turns hunting into wanton killing which is a sin.'¹¹ I agree with Ammon that wantonness is indeed a sin but then so is *all* hunting for sport or meat. Since there is no strict necessity in either (we can live perfectly healthy and happy lives without both) it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the sheer wantonness represented by the unnecessary activity of hunting constitutes nothing less than an offence to God.

¹⁾ Ammon avoids this conclusion by looking in two directions. The first is to biblical authority. 'Thou shalt not kill' he argues applies only to humans. In context, there is no doubt that he is right. In *this* context at least it is safe to assume that the divine command properly concerns human beings alone. But if we are to appeal to biblical evidence, we cannot properly let the matter rest there. Whilst it is true that at one stage some biblical writers saw meat eating as a divine permission (due to human weakness say some biblical scholars), it is also the case that later reflection – represented in Genesis and the prophetic books such as Hosea and Isaiah – held that meat eating was contrary to God's original will and/or was to be transformed into a higher state of peaceful existence in the future.¹² To overlook these varied but consistent passages is to play false to the complexity of theological reflection as represented in the Old Testament. We can admit of course that different views can be held about the authority of these later reflections. We can admit to the plausibility of divergent views. But what we should not do is to ignore or silence contrary views, or worse still, to present the ambiguity of the biblical material as though while God's mind may not change the biblical writers changed theirs. I shall return to the question of biblical perspectives before I conclude.

Jesus our Predator

²⁾ The second direction in which Ammon looks is to some sense of human primacy in creation and that therefore eating animals is God's will. 'God meant man to be different from the earth's animals, over which he was to be dominant. A hunter doesn't go out and kill a "brother animal" when he hunts; he takes game that God has provided for his table ...'¹³ It is this appeal to the dominance of humankind and therefore to the legitimization of the predator/prey relation that I now wish to turn. For it is this perception that theology must underwrite such a relationship that I most want to question.

Ammon is certainly not alone in his view that predator/prey relations are compatible with, or are sanctioned by, Christian theology. Ammon occupies a place which is also cohabited by what seems an increasing number of eco-theologians. Two examples must suffice. The first is from the work of Richard Cartwright Austin, a prolific writer on environmental theology with no less than five books to his credit. He writes perceptively about the need to be sensitized to nature and to avoid cruelty. In the context of a moving meditation on a fish eagle taking its prey, Austin extols the beauty of predation:

Now I think that death may be part of the goodness of God's creation, so long as death and life remain in balance with each other. To eat, and finally to be eaten, are part of the blessing of God.¹⁴

In case it is thought that this is an eccentric view, I choose as my second example that well-known theologian and exponent of creation spirituality, Matthew Fox. In a recent interview with Jonathon Porritt, he is asked why he ascribes both equality and intrinsic value to *all* species. While he argues that 'the being of the whale is just as sacred as the being of the Queen of England', he also insists that

the other reality is that one of the laws of the Universe is that we all eat and get eaten. In fact, I call this the Eucharistic law of the Universe, even Divinity gets eaten in this world. And so the key is not whether we are going to be doing some dying in the process of being here, but whether we kill reverently. And that, of course, means with gratitude. You know, in the Christian tradition, it's interesting that the sacrifice of Divinity is called eucharist, that is, 'thank you', gratitude. Gratitude is, I think, the test of whether we are living reverently this dance of the equality of being on the one hand, but also the need to sacrifice and be sacrificed on the other.¹⁵

Notice how in all three writers, Ammon, Austin and Fox, though especially in Fox, our perception of God's will is tied to what seems God's intended order of things, even to what 'the laws of nature' supposedly reveal. A 'good' theology, it is supposed, will conform itself to these 'laws' of nature, and – in the case of Austin at least – perceive God's blessing in them. In short, the gospel of 'hunting with Jesus' is a gospel of Predation. Life eating life is not some unfortunate aspect of the natural world to be tolerated in the meantime between creation and consummation. Rather, God actually wills and blesses a self-murdering system of survival. God's will is death.

The first thing that should be said in response to this view of nature is that it is by no means certain that it is the whole picture. Whilst it is true that there seems to be cruelty, aggression and violence in the natural world (humans included) it is also true that there is cooperation, mutual aid, even possible altruism between species, animal as well as human. It seems to me that the challenging view of Peter Kropotkin that cooperation as much as competition characterizes the natural order has never really been met.¹⁶ At the very most the predator/prey view of nature has only half of the truth.

Nevertheless, I will stay with the pessimistic view of nature for the sake of argument. For if it was really true that predation is God's will, it would have to follow for Christians that the life of Jesus – what after all is the self-disclosure of God – manifested and vindicated this predator/prey relationship.

Such a gospel would be substantially different from the one we currently have. Jesus would not just be eating some fishes, but feasting on calves and lambs. Jesus, according to the Predator Gospel, would be the butcher par excellence. He would be the one who far from desisting from animal sacrifice actually encouraged his disciples to excel in it. Instead of driving out the sacrificial animals from the Temple, the Jesus of the Predator Gospel would drive them in. The line that most characterizes his ministry would not be 'the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' but rather 'the good shepherd slaughters – with gratitude – as many sheep as he can'. Far from beginning his ministry, according to Mark (1.13), 'with the wild beasts' and thereby symbolizing reconciliation with nature, the Predator Jesus would be 'with the wild beasts' with bow and arrow. Instead of commending the rescuing of a fallen animal from the pit, Predator Jesus would point to the inevitability of God's far-reaching plan of death, disease and decay.

Indeed, since predation is God's 'blessing' – and we are assured by Fox that all species have equal value from whales to the Queen of England – the Predator Jesus would offer a singular example in the human realm too. Far from consorting with sinners or excusing prostitutes, the Predator Jesus would be the first to cast the stone. Instead of healing the sick, the Predator Jesus could only approve of the efficiency of God-given ecological systems. Instead of raising Lazarus from the dead, the Predator Jesus could only comment that death is God's blessing. Instead of preaching the good news of the coming kingdom of God, the proclamation would run: 'Eat and be eaten'.

And as for all the stuff about the primacy of love, the value of humility,

and the power of forgiveness, another commandment would be given to us: 'Obey the Law of Death' or simply: 'Love Death'. Remember, killing is spiritual experience. When performed with thanksgiving, you are only God's priestly agent in the cosmic forces of renewal and sacrifice.

I have allowed myself some literary licence in reconstituting the gospel of Jesus our Predator only to show the incontestable incompatibility between such a gospel and the real gospel of liberation offered by Jesus Christ. Now I do not deny that there are one or two problems here to be ironed out. Did Jesus really eat fish and if he did were they sentient creatures? Did Jesus really send the demons into the Gadarene swine? And what about the plight of the fig tree who seems to have been rather severely punished for what may well have been poor human cultivation of its affairs?

I do not deny the difficulty and ambiguity in these stories within the Gospels, and since we are dealing with documents themselves written some thirty to sixty years after the events described, we should not be surprised if some details of understanding are no longer recoverable. But overall, and without the faintest fear of contradiction, we can with confidence proclaim that the Predator view of Jesus is untenable.

The Sacrifice for All

What are we to make then of Matthew Fox's interpretation of the eucharist as a vindication of predation? According to Fox 'even Divinity gets eaten in this world'. Leaving aside for a moment whether holy communion can be quite understood in these literal terms, what Fox fails to indicate is that divinity *allows itself* to be eaten. I do not dispute that Jesus' death on a cross is a real sacrifice, even that the eucharist is a means of participating in the renewing power of this sacrifice, but we need to distinguish between being prepared to die and being murdered. God is no murderer. Jesus chooses the cross rather than betray God. But God does not murder Jesus. Fox fails to comprehend the fundamentally most significant point of all which is this: Humans are the species that can and sometimes should sacrifice themselves for God's cause whereas precisely because they cannot choose to sacrifice themselves, the sacrifice of animals is always murder. I mean by murder here the involuntary, unsought death of any sentient creature.

It is a fundamental, possibly disingenuous, mistake to associate the free sacrificial offering of Christ with the enforced killing of other creatures. It is a double mistake because Christians actually came to see

the sacrifice of Christ as that which made the former sacrifices of animals redundant, even theologically perverse. The significance of the eucharistic meal, therefore, is not the perpetuation of the old world of animal sacrifice but precisely our liberation from it. As the well-known lines from the Easter Anthems (recited daily in Anglican Evening Prayer) put it:

Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us:
so let us celebrate the feast,
not with the old leaven of corruption and wickedness
but with the unleaven bread of sincerity and truth ...
See yourselves therefore as dead to sin
and alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹⁷

What the sacrifice of Christ, represented in the ritual of the eucharist, is seen to effect is a new possibility and order of creation in which we can be free from our 'old natures' – indeed nature itself – and live together in a spirit of humility and self-sacrifice. In short: the eucharist is not an invitation to sacrifice but to be sacrificed. It is here that I find myself in agreement with Ammon that humanity can and must be distinguished from animals, not because of some supposed right to kill, but rather because we humans have the power to serve creation. The hope for humanity is that one day they might indeed recognize that they are made in God's image and learn self-sacrifice for the rest of the created world.

A further connection should be made. The eucharist has been traditionally regarded as the messianic feast *par excellence*, even a foretaste of heaven. As the first Christians shared the cup and broke the bread they became convinced that in Christ a new order of creation was made possible. Because of this they also shared the Jewish hope that one day all creation would be free from predation and violence and that even and especially non-human animals would share what St Paul calls 'the freedom of the children of God' through 'deliverance from bondage to decay' (Rom. 8.18–24, RSV). This hope that a new beginning was possible for all nature was born in them because of the realization that even the sinful nature of human beings could be transformed. Thus Christian eschatology developed its own notion of a transfigured new heaven and earth. Some of the earliest eucharistic prayers in, for example, the Apostolic Constitutions are characterized by a conviction concerning the eventual restoration and completion of all things – indeed one of those prayers specifically offers the eucharist for 'all things'.¹⁸

Deliverance from Bondage

As is so often the case, the problem with biblical fundamentalists is that they are not actually biblical enough. What overwhelmingly characterizes both the Old and the New Testaments is the view that creation is not yet finished; it is still in the process of being made. What God wants us and creation to be is a hope as yet unfulfilled. Almost all New Testament scholars agree that the thrust of Jesus' teaching was eschatological, that is, concerned with the eventual fulfilment of God's purposes on earth. 'On earth as it is in heaven' is, after all, the prayer Jesus taught to his disciples. The biblical orientation is not to baptize the 'laws of the universe' as the purposes of God but rather to look to their transformation and fulfilment. If we are to appeal to the life and teaching of Jesus as the revelation of God, we cannot avoid the fact that so much of his life challenges, if not contradicts, the order of the world as we know it.

From this standpoint, to be involved in wanton killing can only be judged deplorable. It is, in the words of Edward Carpenter, 'to fall back into that bondage, into that predatory system of nature, from which the Christian hope has always been that not only [humanity] but the natural order itself is to be released and redeemed'.¹⁹ That the natural order is characterized – to some degree – by predatory forces will always present for Christians a problem and a mystery though some plausible explanations may be possible.²⁰ But one thing is certain. Since in Christ there is a new creation, there can be no justification for humanity to increase, exacerbate and intensify that predatory system itself. The truth is that, whatever may have been the situation for our forbears, we can live differently, and we should. The Christian view has frequently been focussed on the centrality of humanity in creation. It may yet be possible, in ways we scarcely understand, for creation to free itself from bondage by humans releasing themselves from their own.

For those who regard this possibility as rather improbable, I advocate some reflection upon the methods frequently employed in some forms of hunting: in fox, otter, mink and deer hunting, beagling, hare coursing, bear and badger baiting, cock-fighting, and even some forms of shooting with dogs, 'sportsmen' devote themselves to intensifying any natural antipathy between one species and another. Hounds are taught how to chase and kill with consummate ruthlessness or else they themselves are punished or killed. Cocks are drugged and given artificial spurs in order that they may fight with greater wounding power. Terrier dogs are

trained to terrorize and mutilate other animal species. In these and other ways humans do not simply 'imitate' (as some hunters claim) the fallen order of creation. On the contrary, in these examples humans concentrate, heighten and intensify whatever violent propensities there may be in animals to their quintessential point of refined and maximum cruelty. Hunters do not 'imitate' the cruelties of nature: they create them.

Pastor Ammon writes movingly of the day when God saved him from being 'king of the slob's':

It was a boring day, with no game birds and no rabbits, and my Dad and I had sunk to shooting squirrels and pigeons – anything that moved. Suddenly there was a fluttering on the ground to my left. My heart sank when I saw a beautiful little white fantailed pigeon lying there, a victim of my boredom. You call yourself an animal lover? I heard my heart say. Look what you've done! I looked inside myself that day and truly hated what I saw: selfishness, greed, irresponsibility, and a lot more that terrified me. My life changed that day because of that pigeon; God used death to bring me to Him and deliver me from being a slob hunter.²¹

It may not be inconceivable that the same God who can bring Pastor Ammon to desist from shooting pigeons may well have greater conversions in mind for the future.