

# Christianity and Farmed Animal Welfare

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## ABSTRACT

The Christian Ethics of Farmed Animal Welfare project is an interdisciplinary engagement between Christian ethics and veterinary animal welfare science, with major UK churches and other organisations as partners. This article gives an account of the project and summarises its findings. The project concludes that Christians have reason to be concerned about farmed animal welfare, and that current animal welfare science provides good evidence concerning what particular species of farmed animals need to flourish. The project assesses current UK certification schemes in relation to the opportunities they offer for farmed animal flourishing. The project recommends that churches and other Christian organisations consume fewer, but higher welfare, animal products and avoid sourcing animal products from systems offering poor opportunities for flourishing.

## KEYWORDS

ANIMAL ETHICS, ANIMAL WELFARE, CHRISTIAN ETHICS, FOOD ETHICS

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By the beginning of the twentieth century, the biomass of farmed animals had grown so that it exceeded the biomass of wild mammals by 24 times (Smil 2011: 619). The biomass of domestic chickens alone has now grown to the same order of magnitude as that of all wild birds (Clough 2019: 215). Over 80 billion farmed birds and mammals were killed for human food in 2016, but 40 times as many fish were farmed for food: around 3 trillion (Clough 2019: 36). These figures are on a steep upward trend, with global demand for meat expected to rise by 73% between 2010 and 2050. There is now widespread recognition that the human farming of animals on this scale is environmentally unsustainable, as well as creating problems for human food and water security, human health, and biodiversity loss and wild animal extinctions from the additional land needed to graze animals and grow fodder crops (Clough 2019: 54–59). In addition to these broad impacts on humans, wild animals, and our shared environment, there is also the question of the direct impacts on the animals being farmed.

The Christian Ethics of Farmed Animal Welfare research project aimed to consider how the welfare of farmed animals should be assessed ethically in a Christian context. An interdisciplinary team of academic researchers worked with representatives of a wide range of partner organisations, including major UK church denominations, to seek a way of framing an approach to the question. They sought an approach with the potential to enable dialogue between Christians with diverse starting points, and to provide practical guidelines that churches and other Christian organisations could use to guide their practice. The project considered the reasons farmed animal welfare should be a concern for Christians, how Christians should approach thinking about the topic, how current farming systems should be evaluated ethically in a Christian context, and what the implications of this analysis are for the practice of churches and other organisations. In addition to planned academic outputs from the project, we drafted and published a Policy Framework aimed at making available findings and recommendations from the project in a format that organisations could use to resource their

policy development (Clough et al. 2020). Details of the research team members and partner organisations are provided in the Appendix to the Policy Framework.

In the first two years of the project, the Partner Reference Group met every six months and between meetings we invited partner representatives to accompany the research team on visits to ten farms and two slaughterhouses. Very different views about the farming of animals were represented among the Partner Reference Group: it included members working within industrial animal agriculture systems, members representing farmers committed to giving animals access to pasture, church officers in regular dialogue with farmers and rural communities, and vegan representatives of Christian animal advocacy groups. From the outset, the task was to find a way of framing conversation across these points of difference, with the aim of establishing what it was possible for the group to agree upon. The site visits were not intended as empirical research on farmed animal welfare standards, but to situate conversations about farmed animal welfare in the context of first-hand experience of how animals are being farmed. They also provided opportunities for talking to farmers and farm workers. Researchers and partner representatives heard about the difficulty of making investment decisions without knowledge about the future of the sector, of farmers not wanting their children to follow them into the business, and of the difficulty of finding good farm workers, especially post-Brexit. The last site visit was to a slaughterhouse on the day the first UK COVID-19 lockdown was announced. We were checking email up to the moment we arrived because we expected the visit to be cancelled. Our visit took us between swinging sheep carcasses suspended on chains from a roof-mounted track in constant motion while a workforce of predominantly South Asian heritage undertook the various skilled tasks required to process them. The news in the following weeks of strikes by slaughterhouse workers in the US and UK in protest at dangerous jobs being made still more dangerous by the pandemic was a vivid reminder of the connections between farmed animal welfare and human social justice.

The first task of the project addressed the question of why farmed animal welfare should be a concern for Christians because our dialogue with partner representatives made clear that we could not take this for granted. Many Christians in the UK do not connect their faith with their everyday eating practice at all, and do not recognise any relationship between their faith and their consumption of animals. Some Roman Catholics remain connected with historical Christian practices of fasting from animal products by avoiding meat on Fridays and during Lent, though observance of these restrictions are weaker since Vatican II. The project argued that Christians should care about farmed animal welfare because they are enmeshed with modern systems of farming animals that have severe impacts on the lives of animals, and have biblical and theological reasons to care about these impacts. The Bible presents humans in relationship with God, with each other, and with the wider creaturely world. It witnesses to a God who is the creator of all creatures, who provides for their needs and wills their flourishing. It depicts a covenantal relationship between God, humans, and other creatures that includes particular human responsibilities for fellow humans, domestic and wild animals, and the wider creaturely world. It details the failure of humans to live up to this high calling. It describes the work of God incarnate in Jesus Christ as the means of healing these failures, and looks forward to a time when the whole of creation will be liberated from its groaning bondage to give glory and praise to God. This biblical vision, encompassing the entire universe of creatures, is taken up in later Christian theological traditions and gives Christians have strong faith-based reasons to attend to the welfare of fellow creatures, including animals farmed for food.

The project next turned to the question of how to approach the ethics of farmed animal welfare in a Christian context. The concept of creaturely flourishing seemed a strong foundation for this work because it represented a common concern among those starting from very different positions. The project affirmed that all God's creatures share a creaturely purpose to give glory to God through their flourishing. This is most clear in the Genesis

creation narratives and the creation theology of the Psalms, but is also evident in the New Testament and in Jesus' teaching, such as his affirmation that not a single sparrow is forgotten by God (Matt 10:29; Luke 12:7). Like other creatures, farmed animals praise God by reflecting God's goodness in their creaturely lives with the unique capacities and gifts God has given them. They praise and glorify God 'by gathering in social groups, dust-bathing, rooting in the earth, grazing, swimming, caring for their young, teaching and learning, and growing to maturity, all as created by God in their species-specific particularity' (Clough et al 2020: 7). This means that conditions that deprive or inhibit farmed animals from living out these particular modes of creaturely life prevent or inhibit their opportunities for flourishing. The 1965 Brambell Report set out the idea that farmed animals are entitled to five freedoms: four negative freedoms, from hunger and thirst, pain, injury or disease, and fear and distress, and one positive freedom, to express normal behaviour (Brambell 1965). Basing a Christian ethics of farmed animal welfare on the concept of flourishing recognises the importance of these freedoms for flourishing and strengthens the emphasis on enabling the characteristic modes of life of farmed animals. The project identified five key ways that current farming practice diminishes the flourishing of farmed animals: it subjects them to impoverished lives in monotonous environments; it routinely employs bodily mutilations such as castration, tail docking, beak trimming, dehorning, and teeth clipping; it separates family groups prematurely, preventing the giving and receiving of maternal care; it severely shortens animal lifespans, often killing them well before maturity; and subjects animals to selective breeding programmes that prioritise productivity over physiological well-being (Clough et al 2020: 14–16). Taking creaturely flourishing as a foundational concept also has the advantage of recognising connections between the flourishing of farmers, farm workers, rural communities, workers in other parts of the food system, and human consumers, and the flourishing of the wider environment on which human and animal flourishing depend.

The next stage of the project was to consider what the major species of animals farmed for food in the UK need to flourish, and to evaluate how far this flourishing is enabled within the various farming systems used for each species. This work drew extensively on current farmed animal welfare science, which has demonstrated significant continuity between the preferences of farmed animals and those of their wild ancestors, even after extensive selective breeding. For example, chickens prefer to spend the majority of their time foraging for diverse foods in an outdoor range, with clear dietary preferences. They prefer environments with partial cover, like the jungle fowl from whom they were bred. They like to rest on elevated perches, especially at night. They spend time preening, augmented by dustbathing every couple of days. The relationship between mother hens and their chicks helps them learn about their social and physical environment. Much less is known about the preferences of fish, but there is clear evidence that they are sentient and have the ability to experience pain and studies have shown preferences for enriched environments. The most commonly farmed fish in the UK are Atlantic salmon, who in the wild spend 2–5 years growing in freshwater rivers before transitioning to life in seawater and migrating hundreds of miles in down rivers to the sea before returning to their original river to spawn. The next numerous farmed fish is the rainbow trout, some of whom in the wild follow a similar migratory pattern. Like other mammals, sheep enjoy maternal care, play, and eating tasty foods. They spend a high proportion of their time grazing and then resting to chew the cud. In the wild, they form small single-sex social groups that mix only during the breeding season. Pigs share these preferences for maternal care, play, and tasty foods. They are intelligent and have a strong need to explore their environment orally, showing particular interest in novel objects. In the wild, they spend most of their active time rooting for food. Sows in the wild build nests to protect their piglets and protect them from other pigs, except for trusted friends. Cattle in wild settings spend more than 90% of their time grazing, ruminating, and resting. Cows farmed for dairy prefer to spend time at pasture, especially overnight, unless the temperature makes this uncomfortable. Cattle live complex

social lives and enjoy social interaction and play, even into adulthood. Cows form long-lasting relations with their daughters and other cows (Clough et al., 2020, 18–51).

In addition to these preferences belonging to particular species, the flourishing of all farmed animal species requires the avoidance of prolonged pain, frustration, physical restriction, boredom, and the ability to exercise choice and control in relation to their environment. Chickens, sheep, pigs, and cattle share needs to begin their lives in a comfortable environment promoting maternal care, good health, and opportunities for pleasure; to live in stable social groups and have sufficient enjoyable food, thermal and physical comfort; and to have opportunities for play, cognitive enrichment, and rewards for foraging behaviour. There should be no or minimal transport for slaughter. Where necessary, animals should be handled gently and their fear and distress minimised. They should not be inverted while alive and should be effectively stunned before slaughter.

After surveying current scientific understandings of what different species of farmed animals need to flourish, the next task for the project was to evaluate how far this flourishing is enabled by the different farming systems for each species currently in use in the UK. To ensure this analysis was relevant to decisions about purchasing and production, the project evaluated current UK farm certification schemes according to a simplified scheme of whether they offered *poor*, *better*, or *best available* opportunities for farmed animal flourishing. It also identifies further improvements that are desirable to promote farmed animal flourishing beyond any existing certification scheme. For example, most chickens farmed for meat are kept in unenriched broiler warehouses. They have been bred to grow to slaughter weight very rapidly, in 35–40 days, and are physiologically unable to do little more than eat and rest. The Red Tractor certification scheme accredits broiler systems of this kind. The project evaluates this system as providing *poor* opportunities for flourishing. The RSPCA Assured scheme requires slower growth rates, lower stocking densities, and monitoring of welfare outcomes, which the

project evaluates as providing *better* opportunities for flourishing. Organic standards require much slower growth rates and access to pasture, which the project evaluates as providing *best available* opportunities for flourishing. In relation to chickens farmed for eggs, about half of chickens farmed for eggs are kept in colony cage systems. Most laying hens have the ends of their beaks cut off as chicks to reduce the damage they do to one another from feather pecking when kept at high stocking densities. Their beaks are complex and delicate sensory organs, including taste buds, so this mutilation reduces their ability to forage and gain enjoyment from doing so. Battery cages were prohibited under European Union regulations in 2012. Cages are now required to keep hens in larger groups and contain a nest box, perch, and scratching area, but the cages are still highly restrictive and offer limited opportunities for pleasure. The Lion Code enriched cages certification accredits this kind of caged laying hen systems. The project evaluates these caged systems as providing *poor* opportunities for flourishing. The RSPCA Assured scheme bans cages, requires access to an outdoor range, prohibits stunning before slaughter, and monitors welfare outcomes, which the project evaluates as offering *better* opportunities for flourishing. Organic standards go beyond this in prohibiting beak trimming, and limiting the maximum group size to 3,000. A serious issue not addressed by any certification scheme is that all male chicks are redundant by-products of breeding laying hens and are culled after hatching. No current commercial farming system allows maternal care between mother hens and their chicks or requires access to outdoor wooded areas. The project identifies these as desirable further improvements to promote further opportunities for the flourishing of chickens.

The project evaluated certification standards for the other major species of animals farmed in the UK: salmon and trout, sheep, pigs, and cattle. The RSPCA Assured scheme is the intermediate standard the project evaluates as offering *better* opportunities for farmed animal flourishing; the project assesses the Organic, Pasture for Life, and Free Range Dairy as



offering *best available* opportunities for flourishing. Fish are a particular concern: farming on a large scale has developed only from the 1960s and regulation of the industry is underdeveloped compared with that relating to other farmed species, with no requirements for veterinary oversight of medicine, transport, or slaughter. RSPCA and Soil Association schemes address issues such as stocking density, but no scheme has any requirements in relation to environmental enrichment. Sheep usually have access to pasture. The project identifies the key issues for their flourishing as the mutilations of tail docking and castration, often performed without any pain relief, and the length of life of lambs. Pigs have poor opportunities for flourishing when their tails are docked, when they are kept indoors and cannot perform exploratory rooting behaviour, when they do not have sufficient enrichment, and when sows are kept in farrowing crates. Cattle typically have access to pasture in season. For cattle farmed for beef, the project identifies key welfare concerns as the mutilations of castration and disbudding. For dairy cows, the major issues are not allowing the expression of maternal care between cows and calves, and the growing numbers of cows that are permanently housed and do not have access to pasture.

The final stage of the project was recommendations for the practice of churches and Christian organisations based on the ethical assessment of opportunities for farmed animal flourishing provided by current farming systems. The key project recommendation is that churches and Christian organisations should seek to source animal products from farming systems that promote the flourishing of farmed animals. That means paying attention to the welfare certification of current animal products and replacing those sourced from systems the project identifies as offering *poor* opportunities for flourishing with those evaluated as *better* or, preferably, *best available*. A secondary recommendation is to promote the consumption of fewer, but higher welfare, animal products. This is because it is not possible to replace the current volume of consumption of animal products with the same volume of higher welfare

products, as doing would increase carbon emissions from animal agriculture. Reducing consumption also helps make more costly, higher welfare, animal products affordable within institutional or domestic budgets. The project Policy Framework contains full details of the project conclusions and these recommendations, together with recommendations for support of farmers and farm workers; food retailers, wholesalers, and manufacturers; Christian investors; and policymakers (Clough et al 2020: 52–55). The final year of the project engaged teachers of religious education in schools, academic staff at theological education institutions, and church schools to develop learning resources and consider wider practice in schools based on the project's findings.

The Christian Ethics of Farmed Animal Welfare project is an interdisciplinary engagement between Christian ethics and veterinary animal welfare science, with the participation of major UK churches and other organisations as partners. It concludes that Christians have reason to be concerned about farmed animal welfare, and that consideration of what farmed animals need to flourish is a helpful way to frame a Christian approach to this issue. Current animal welfare science provides good evidence concerning what particular species of farmed animals need to flourish. The project assesses current UK certification schemes in relation to the opportunities they offer for farmed animal flourishing, evaluating systems accredited by the schemes as offering *poor*, *better*, or *best available* opportunities for flourishing. This analysis is set out in the project Policy Framework (Clough et al 2020: 52–55). The project's recommendations draw on this analysis and recommend that churches and other Christian organisations consume fewer, but higher welfare, animal products, avoid sourcing animal products from systems offering poor opportunities for flourishing, and towards products assessed as *better*, or preferably, *best available*.

## References

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