Respect for Life in Early Chinese Christianity

Andrew Linzey

(Andrew Linzey *is a member of the Faculty of Theology in the University of Oxford, England, and holds the world's first post in theology and animal welfare – the Bede Jarrett Senior Research Fellowship at Blackfriars Hall, Oxford. He is also Honorary Professor of Theology in the University of Birmingham, and Special Professor at Saint Xavier University, Chicago. He has written or authored twenty books, including* Animal Theology *(SCM Press/University of Illinois Press, 1994). This article is a revised version of the Preface to the Chinese edition of* Animal Gospel *published by the University of China Politics and Law Press, 2005. Email: andrewlinzey@aol.com.)*

I

During the last thirty years, there have been intense philosophical debates about how we should treat animals – and specifically about the concept of "animal rights". At first sight, this concern for animals might appear a Western import, perhaps even a concession to modern, predominantly secular, Western thinking that is sometimes unfavourably characterized as suffering from a surfeit of sentimentality about animals. This reaction, however understandable, is seriously mistaken.

Consider: in the ancient Confucian temple of Xian, there is a stone stele (monument) originally erected in 781. It tells the story of an ancient religion called "the Religion of Light", led by a monk called Aluoben, who first visited China during the Tang Dynasty. It describes how - when the Emperor heard its new teaching - he was struck by its "mysterious and wonderful" quality, and allowed Aluoben to establish a monastery in the Da Quin province.

The Stone offers this description of the new religion: "To penetrate the mysteries, to bless with a good conscience, to be great yet empty, to return to stillness and be forgiving, to be compassionate … to help them understand the nature of things, to maintain purity, to nourish all things, to

respect all life, and to answer the needs of those whose beliefs come from the heart – these are the services the Religion of Light Church can offer". At first sight, these aspirations might appear largely Buddhist or Taoist, yet the Stone continues:

> The True Lord of the Primordial Void, in absolute stillness and constant naturalness, crafted and nourished all things. He raised the earth and established the sky. *He took on human form and His compassion was limitless.* The sun rises; darkness is banished; and we are witnesses to the true wonder.[1]

The reference to the "True Lord … taking human form" is so unmistakably Christian that it is difficult not to conclude that this "Religion of Light" was Christian in origin – and that monk Aluoben and his followers were none other than early Christian missionaries.

Consider further: in the Da Quin province, where the monks first settled, can be found a pagoda that dates back to the seventh century and which, remarkably, bears the marks of early Christian worship. Excavated in 1999, with the support of the Chinese Government, the second floor of the pagoda shows the remains of an eighth- to ninth-century sculpture of the nativity with the Virgin Mary in a reclining position, as sometimes depicted in Russian icons of that period. Unusually, the plaza of the pagoda runs from east to west (as do all Christian churches) unlike Buddhist or Taoist temples, which characteristically run from north to south.

Consider yet further: at the now famous cave in Dunhuang various ancient manuscripts were discovered at the end of the nineteenth century and, sad to say, largely looted by Westerners and sold to private collectors. Among the Buddhist and Taoist manuscripts were some apparently Christian ones, later described as "the Jesus Sutras". The Second Sutra – the Sutra of the World Honoured One - tells us that it was written "after the physical manifestation took place [i.e. Christ's birth] 641 years ago"[2] - which dates the manuscript closely to the visit of Aluoben in the seventh century. The same Sutra echoes the familiar gospel idea that God cares even for sparrows, and the second Sutra – the Sutra of Cause and Effect and Salvation - speaks of how the "One Sacred Spirit looks with compassion on all life".[3]

In the Fourth Sutra – the Sutra of Jesus Christ – the fifth "covenant" or commandment requires that "any living being should not only not take

the life of another living being, but should also teach others to do likewise". Again, elsewhere, "God protects all that lives: everything that lives does so as a result of this. It is forbidden to take a life even for sacrifice, for these teachings forbid taking any life".[4] John the Baptist is described as a vegetarian: one "who dwelt in the wilderness and who, from his birth, had never eaten meat or drunk wine, but instead lived on vegetables and honey gathered from the wilderness".[5] The meaning of Jesus' death is described in universal terms: "The Messiah gave up his body to the wicked ones for the sake of all living beings … In his compassion he gave up his life." And, remarkably, the day before the resurrection, when Jesus hung upon the Cross is described as the "sixth cleansing, *vegetarian* day".[6]

For this narrative, and the translations of the Jesus Sutras, I am indebted to the pioneering work of Chinese scholar Martin Palmer.[7] His work makes remarkable reading. If Palmer is right (and I have no reason to doubt his evidence), there existed in China an early Christian church whose "teachings on charity, vegetarianism, anti-slavery, equality of men and women, and care for nature … offer models of personal behaviour that draw on the best in Christianity and in other ancient spiritual traditions."[8]

II

Many questions crowd in. Who was Aluoben? Was he a monk, or actually a bishop, sent (possibly) by the Syrian or Persian churches? Why do we apparently have no other records of him? Why would Aluoben and his followers have been given such special treatment by an Emperor not usually known for his non-violent convictions? What were the precise doctrinal beliefs of the Church, and how extensive were its contacts with Taoism and Buddhism? And how many other "Jesus Sutras" might there be hidden in private collections, which could yet spread further light on the phenomenon of early Chinese Christianity?

Many of these questions are not yet susceptible to anything like complete answers. But unless the research is utterly tendentious (which I doubt), it does seem indisputable that there existed an authentic Christian Church in China long before the Jesuit missionaries arrived in the late sixteenth century. And, what is more, this Christian community was committed to a doctrine of non-violence to animals as well as humans, lived a vegetarian life, and preached a Gospel of compassion for all living beings.

Some scholars might argue that the "Religion of Light" was obviously a syncretistic faith, which borrowed freely from Taoism and Buddhism, and this in turn explains its apparent concern for the compassionate treatment of animals. That there is some Buddhist and Taoist influence in the Sutras is undeniable. Just a few examples will suffice. The reference to "karma" and the "five skandas" in the Second Sutra are explicable in relation to Buddhist sutras, though even here, despite the formal similarity, the point behind the reference to "karma" is an explanation of what it means to be saved "from" - presumably in a context in which the notion of "sin" was not easily comprehensible. Elsewhere, in the Fourth Sutra there is a reference to the Buddhas (semi-divine beings) who orbit the Messiah, and also the acknowledgement that there are "great teachers, such as the Buddhas" but, in context, such teachers are understood to be "moved by the Wind" (which appears to be a reference to God the Spirit), and are clearly subordinate to this power.[9]

It would be astonishing, of course, if early Christianity learnt nothing from its cultural setting in China, as it has learnt and borrowed from its development in other contexts whether they be Greek, Roman or Syrian. All preaching of the Christian message is radically influenced – necessarily so – by its environment. What can be understood obviously determines what is said. The real question is: was the development of what may be loosely called "Taoist Christianity" a legitimate one?

In fact, what is remarkable about the Sutras is the way in which, despite a vastly different cultural setting, they maintain strongly orthodox theological leanings, and indicate a process of theological development. The case of animals illustrates this. The First Sutra says:

> Watch the birds: they don't plant or harvest, and they have no houses to worry about. They do no work, yet are fed and watered and never worry about what to wear, because [of] the One who cares for them. You are more important than birds, so why do you worry?[10]

These words are obviously based on St Matthew's Gospel 6:25-26, or on an oral or written tradition known to both. They reflect entirely accurately the spirit of Matthew's recorded saying of Jesus, which concerns God's providential care as Creator of all. The Second Sutra, possibly under Taoist influence, speaks of how "The One Sacred Spirit made a vast multitude of

beings. Everything under Heaven is filled with this Sacred Space",[11] and goes on to describe the various qualities of the individual soul. The Third Sutra repeats this same point, but elaborates: "All that exists does so as the manifestation of the beingness of the One Sacred Spirit."[12] And the Fourth Sutra describes Jesus as the embodiment of compassion for all living beings.

These are entirely orthodox reflections, albeit influenced by other cultural thought-forms. The starting point is that God as Creator cares for all living beings, his Spirit enables other God-given breathing lives, which are therefore manifestations of the same divine Spirit, and finally, Jesus as Messiah expresses the sovereign care of the Creator by dying for the redemption of all creatures from earthly suffering. The Sutras make explicit what is actually already implicit in canonical scripture - for example, in the Prologue to St John's Gospel, and in St Paul's letter to the Romans where he speaks of suffering creation awaiting its deliverance from "bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:18-24, RSV).

III

Some may argue that even if this is so, the emphasis on vegetarianism is surely Buddhist rather than Christian. Even that claim bears some examination. Like most theologians, I have assumed, in accordance with the canonical gospels, that Jesus ate fish, and probably (but not certainly) meat. But that view needs to be balanced by three other considerations, which raise some difficult (perhaps unanswerable) questions.

The first is the existence of an early gospel called the Gospel of the Ebionites. We know that it existed because it is attacked as "heretical" by Epiphanius, the fourth-century Bishop of Salamis, in his principal work *Panarion*, which lists and condemns various heresies. The Ebionites were, it seems, a Jewish-Christian sect whose written Gospel was regarded by Epiphanius as a distortion of the Aramaic Gospel of Matthew. His attack refers to some of the actual lines of their Gospel:

> (i) And it came to pass when John was baptized, that the Pharisees came to him and were baptized, and all Jerusalem also. He had a garment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle

> about his loins. And his meat was wild honey, which tasted like manna, formed like cakes of oil.
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> (ii) They say [the Ebionites] that he [Jesus] is not begotten by the Father but created like one of the archangels, being greater than they. He rules over the angels and the beings created by God and he came and declared, as the gospel used by them records: "I have come to abolish the sacrifices: if you do not cease from sacrificing, the wrath [of God] will not cease from weighing upon you."
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> (iii) Those who reject meat have inconsiderably fallen into error and said, "I have no desire to eat the flesh of this Pascal Lamb with you." They leave the true order of the words and distort the word which is clear to all from the connection of the words and make the disciples say: "Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?" To which he [Jesus] replied, "I have no desire to eat the flesh of the Paschal Lamb with you."[13]

We do not know whether Epiphanius represents the Gospel of the Ebionites fairly or accurately, but we may be struck by the apparent similarity between the depiction of John the Baptist as a vegetarian and also the rejection of animal sacrifices in both the Ebionite Gospel and the Jesus Sutras. (The rejection of the idea that Jesus ate the Pascal Lamb also seems to resonate with the otherwise inexplicable idea in the Sutras that the last day of crucifixion was a "vegetarian day" or, alternatively, it may be due to reflection on the sixth day of creation as depicted in Genesis 1:29-30 where God decrees a vegetarian diet.) This raises the question whether the Gospel of the Ebionites is actually a source for the Jesus Sutras, or whether both are utilizing a common written or oral source, which may have had wide provenance in the ancient Eastern world. Some, like Keith Akers, have argued that this original community of Jewish Christians faithfully recorded the witness of Jesus to a non-violent way of life (inclusive of animals) marked by a special concern for the poor (hence their name, "Ebionite" derived from the Hebrew term *EBIONIM* meaning "the poor" Christians).[14]

The second consideration is allied to the first. From the existence of the Ebionite Gospel, we know that vegetarian Christians existed until a long period after Jesus' death. The Ebionite Gospel was probably (but not certainly) written at the beginning of the second century AD. From

Epiphanius's attack - sometime in the fourth century - we may assume that an Ebionite community had existed for a considerable time, and may still have been active in his life-time. The question should therefore be raised as to why there were *any* Christian vegetarians at all - if their grounds for vegetarianism could be so easily rebutted by those who could give contrary testimony – even by those who may have been living witnesses to Jesus' own meat-eating?

In fact, we know that Christian vegetarians existed right from the beginning because St Paul also attacks them in his letter (around AD 60) to the Roman Church. He writes, "As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions. One believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables" (Romans 14:1-2, RSV). The apparent cause of the disagreement concerned the propriety of eating meat offered in sacrifices to idols, but although the controversy took this precise form, it is possible that it hid a deeper disagreement about the propriety of eating meat in the first place. Although St Paul regards the issue as simply one of "conscience", he nowhere explicitly states what one would have expected him to say, namely that since our Lord ate meat, there should be no problem about his followers doing so. But if Jesus ate meat, possibly meat offered to "idols", even (according to one scholar) sacrificing animals himself[15], why should there be any Christian vegetarians at all, let alone some to whom Paul is prepared to make concessions of "conscience"?

The third consideration arises from the apparent fact that James, the brother of Jesus, was a vegetarian. This raises the obvious question about Jesus' family history. It is unclear whether the references in the tradition to the vegetarianism of James are due to ascetical or moral objections, or a combination of both. But one recent scholar, Robert Eisenman, in an exhaustive study, relates the issue back to the Noahic covenant, which suggests that James adopted a form of theologically inspired vegetarianism, which had an ethical dimension.[16] Given that there were Christian vegetarians who apparently appealed to Jesus himself as their authority, the question arises as to the nature of their vegetarianism and how it was understood. Was it simply a cultic, ascetical rejection or was it based on some rejection of the morality of killing animals for food?

Some scholars have been eager to view vegetarianism as an expression of ascetical rather than moral concern. Roger T. Beckwith describes the vegetarian practice of the Therapeutae as the "vegetarianism of

the ascetics". While the Therapeutae were (as far as we know) first century monastics and therefore generally ascetic in character, their desire to keep their table "pure from the flesh of animals" (as Philo remarks) seems to owe its origin to the Old Testament prohibition against eating blood. It was therefore, as Beckwith acknowledges, a theologically inspired vegetarianism which led to a rejection of the Temple and the sacrificial system itself. But it is difficult to think that this so-called "spiritualization of the sacrificial law" had absolutely no moral content.[17] When one combines this with the decree of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:20 regarding abstinence from "what is strangled with blood" (who else is "strangled" but animals for food rather than sacrifice?) one begins to wonder whether there are deep-seated motifs at play here of which we are only partly or dimly aware. At any rate, it is worth reflecting on the simple known fact that there were theologically inspired Christian vegetarians at a very early point in the Church's life.

These considerations do not, of course, close the issue of whether Jesus was a vegetarian. There is serious evidence on the other side, most notably Jesus' fish eating and his apparent breaking down of food restrictions (Mark 7:19). The debate is still open and it is unwise to be dogmatic. But it is possible, at least *thinkable* that early Jewish-Christian groups have faithfully preserved Jesus' example of vegetarianism and his objection to animal sacrifice, and that is the same tradition which the Ebionites represent in their Gospel, and which in turn is reflected in the Jesus Sutras. Scholars have yet to wrestle with the implications of the fact that there was an early sub-tradition of Christian vegetarianism, which apparently claimed dominical or canonical authority.

In short, then, while we may be tempted to view the Sutras as reflections of contemporary Buddhist thought or practice, it is by no means clear that this is actually the case. It is possible that contact with Buddhism reinforced, rather than originated, an ethical concern for other living creatures. It would not be the first time that a religious tradition's creative encounter with another has re-activated authentic elements within its own.

IV

It will be seen that the debate about animals – how we should live with them and how we should treat them – is by no means a modern one, least of all a purely secular one. Rather, it is a deep spiritual issue that emerges within

many world religious traditions – unsurprisingly, perhaps, there is also a similar debate in Buddhism about whether the Buddha himself was vegetarian, and whether all Buddhists should be vegetarian today.[18] Whether we are Christians, Buddhists, Taoists, or of no faith, it is difficult to speak meaningfully of compassion without also extending that notion to our treatment other creatures capable of suffering pain. If Taoists and Buddhists have helped Christians to re-discover something essential to their faith then Christians should be truly thankful. The generous God - or "the Sacred Spirit" - is not confined within human thoughts or human traditions, however well-intentioned or noble.

The Taoist Church lasted, it seems, until the collapse of the Tang Dynasty in 906. It subsequently suffered such persecution that the Da Quin monastery – and many others – were completely destroyed, and only the stele Stone and the (now restored) pagoda remain as visible symbols of the world these early Christians sought to create. But there are still believers, like myself, who are eager to see the rebirth of an authentic non-violent and compassionate Christian faith.[19] In fact, Chinese and Asian Christians have an opportunity – perhaps a unique one in world Christianity – to engage thoughtfully and constructively with the new movements of ethical sensitivity for the environment, vegetarianism and animal protection, and to demonstrate how these emerging concerns resonate with the deepest aspirations of authentic Asian Christianity.

Notes

1. Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Religion of Taoist Christianity* (London: Piatkus Publishing, 2001) [hereafter, "Palmer"] verses 3:54-55 and 3:70-73, p. 223; my emphases.
2. Palmer, 7:34, p. 67.
3. Palmer, 1:11, p. 139.
4. Palmer, 4:20, p. 164.
5. Palmer, 5:15, p. 166.
6. Palmer, 5:41 and 5:46, pp. 167-68; my emphasis.
7. See also Ray Riegert and Thomas Moore, *The Lost Sutras of Jesus*, trans by Jon Babcock (London: Souvenir Press, 2004).
8. Palmer, p. 253.
9. Palmer, 1:3 and 1:15, pp. 159-160.
10. Palmer, 2:15-17, p. 57.

11. Palmer, 2:6, p. 140.
12. Palmer, 3:16, p. 149.
13. The Gospel of the Ebionites, from Epiphanius, *adv. Haer*., paras 30.13, 30.16, and 30.22, cited and discussed in J. K. Elliott (ed), *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation based on M. R. James* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 15-16. See my discussion of these texts making some of the same points, and nine other apocryphal texts, in http://www.godandanimals.com/PAGES/linzey/apocry.html.
14. Keith Akers, *The Lost Religion of Jesus: Simple Living and Nonviolence in Early Christianity* (New York: Lantern Books, 2000), p. 26. The foreword is by Walter Wink.
15. Richard Baukham, "Jesus and Animals II: What did he Practise?" in Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto (eds), *Animals on the Agenda: Questions about Animals for Theology and Ethics* (London: SCM Press/University of Illinois Press, 1998), pp. 49-60. Baukham's work repays careful study, but one is left with a paradox: Jesus apparently taught kindness to animals, and fulfils Jewish messianic hopes, including an endorsement of the "original vegetarianism of all living creatures", but was not himself a vegetarian and even personally sacrificed animals at the Temple. If that is true, it is difficult, *inter alia*, to account for both the traditions of Christian vegetarianism and the fact that the early Church effectively abolished animal sacrifices (see my critique, pp. 3-7).
16. Robert Eisenman, *Jesus the Brother of Jesus: Recovering the True History of Early Christianity*, Vol. 1: *The Cup of the Lord* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), see pp. 258-390.
17. Roger T. Beckwith, "The Vegetarianism of the Therapeutae, and the Motives for Vegetarianism in Early Jewish and Christian Circles", *Revue de Qumran*, Vol. 13, Nos 49-52, October 1988, p. 409. I am grateful to Dr Beckwith for this reference and for other insights.
18. See, for example, Philip Kapleau, *To Cherish All Life: The Buddhist Case for Vegetarianism* (Rochester, New York: The Zen Center, 2nd edn 1986), pp. 29f., and Bodhin Kjolhede, "The Buddhist Case for Vegetarianism" in Andrew Linzey (ed), *Animal World Encyclopaedia* (Plymouth: Kingsley Publishing, forthcoming 2006). And for a seminal work on *ahimsa*, see Christopher Key Chapple, *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

19. Some of the non-violent and compassionate themes that emerge from a study of Asian theology are explored in Choan-Seng Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (London: SCM Press, 1988). But, despite the author's admirable concern with creation and ecological issues, the tradition of vegetarianism and non-violence to animals is entirely overlooked.