



# Animals in Islam: a Brief Review

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The topic of animals, their status, importance, and usefulness, are discussed in various Islamic texts, such as the Quran, the Hadith (or prophetic tradition), Islamic Fiqh (or jurisprudence), ethical and mystical texts, philosophical texts, and works of literature. I cannot discuss the whole issue here, so I will be selective and confine myself to some areas of this broad subject in Islamic thinking, beginning from the Quran as the most important text in Islamic thought.

## Animals in the Quran

The Quran mentions animals in different ways and various contexts. To be specific, I will refer to some of the Quranic views on animals. From the Quranic viewpoint, all animals are created by Allah, for some goal. So, no animal should be counted useless and meaningless. In fact, all animals, like humans, have purposeful lives, judgement day, and resurrection. According to the Quran:

*There is not a moving creature on earth, nor a bird that flies with its two wings, but are communities like you. We have neglected nothing in the Book, then to their Lord they shall be gathered. (Sūrah 6. Al-An'ām: 38)*

Based on the Quranic world view, all creatures, from the simplest to the most sophisticated animals or human-animals, are created to fulfil some purpose. So, there is nothing «vain» in the world. All creatures are signs of fine and wise design in the universe, and asserting this view the Quran asks:

*Do they not look at the camels, how they are created? (Sūrah 88. Al-Ghāshiyah: 17)*

All animals are intelligent to some degree and can reason properly. Furthermore, some of them think about

possible unconsciousness of humankind. For instance, when Solomon's army entered the territory of the ants, one of the ants cried:

*O ants! Enter your dwellings, lest Solaiman (Solomon) and his hosts should crush you, while they perceive not. (Sūrah 27. Al-Naml: 18)*

From the Quranic viewpoint, all animals worship God (Allah) and praise him in their languages, even though we do not understand them. Yet, some special people have the privilege to appreciate and understand birds' language, or - according to the Quran - «*Mantiq al-Tair*» (Sūrah 27. Al-Naml: 16). Indeed, Attar, the great Persian mystic and poet, borrowed the title of his masterpiece from the Quran. Some verses of the Quran narrate conversations that occurred between humankind and animals, for example, there is a detailed conversation between the prophet Solaiman (Solomon) and the hoopoe (*Hodhod*), his informer (Sūrah 27. Al-Naml: 20-28).

Regarding verses concerning animals, it seems that animals, in spite of some intellectual capacity, are subordinate to human beings. Humans seem to have the right to manipulate them according to Allah's commands. At the same time they have to treat animals in a human way. While this is the dominant interpretation of the Quranic verses, there is undoubtedly the possibility to give another, non-anthropocentric interpretation.

## Animals in Islamic Law

Islamic jurists (or *Foqahā'*) try to define what is lawful and what is forbidden in Islamic law, and prescribe this for Muslims. So, they approach Islamic texts solely from a legal point of view. Having this approach in mind, and due to the fact that Muslims are not allowed to eat flesh of all kinds of animals, the Muslim jurists attempt to answer mainly these questions: (1)



which animals may be eaten by Muslims in normal conditions and are there any criteria for distinction?; (2) which parts of these animals may be eaten?; and (3) in which way lawful animals should be killed for consuming? To answer these questions, the Muslim jurists discuss different aspects of these issues, present detailed replies and write volumes of books, and declare specific and particular decrees (or fatwas) that are compulsory for their followers or lay Muslims.

Even though meat eating in moderation is permitted from a legalistic point of view, it is regulated in many respects. For example, eating the flesh of some animals such as lions and tigers is forbidden restrictedly, some is undesirable, or *makrūh*, but not unlawful, and some is permissible and lawful, or *halāl* and *mobāh*. The most important criterion for distinguishing between eatable and non-eatable animals is being carnivore. According to this criterion, the flesh of all carnivore animals is forbidden to eat. To consider this criterion means that the flesh of any animal that is carnivore and meat-eater is considered forbidden to eat. Yet, there are some other herbivore animals, such as elephant or rabbit, which no Shiite Muslim is allowed to eat.

In fact, the variety of eatable animals is restricted to some domestic animals, like sheep, cow, camel, chicken, goose, some non-prey birds, like pigeons, and all kinds of fish. Conversely, all carnivore animals, such as dog and fox, all reptiles, such as snakes and lizards, all insects, and most aquatic creatures, including frogs, and all birds with talons, are forbidden and eating them is unlawful, or *harām*.

The second criterion for eating any lawful kind of animal is killing them properly and then eating them. So, no dead animal, i.e. carrion, can be eaten.

The third criterion can be called the cleanliness of food. According to this criterion, Muslims are permitted to eat just clean (or *ṭayyib*) food. So, eating the flesh of some animals is considered disgusting and undesirable, such as for the crow and all kinds of insects, worms, and small creatures.

To eat lawful meat, we have to consider some procedures, like watering the animals before killing them, using a sharp knife, and to avoid posing any unnecessary pain on them.

Using animals for food or other necessary uses is permitted, but destroying them by manipulating them in harmful activities is unlawful and against the goal of

their creation. All animals are created by Allah and are his servants, even though, supposedly, they are inferior to us. So, all kinds of using animals in violent sports such as bull fighting are forbidden. Hunting eatable wild animals, if not necessary, is undesirable and in some cases condemnable.

Besides these prohibitions, there are many prophetic sayings or Hadiths that insist on treating animals well. According to these Hadiths, any compassion to domestic or wild animals is praiseworthy and Allah will reward it. There is a very famous story which repeatedly appears in different texts, from prophetic tradition to literature, telling the readers that God forgave all sins of a sinner because of his mercy for a thirsty dog: according to this accepted story, which for the first time appeared in a prophetic tradition, a man travelling through the desert became very thirsty. He found a well, went into it, drank, and came out. Near the well he saw a very thirsty dog. The poor dog, who could not reach water, was eating earth because of its thirst. Out of compassion, the man returned to the well, went into it, filled his shoe with water, climbed out of well, and gave the dog water to drink. According to this story, because of this act of compassion only, that is, the man's mercy for the thirsty dog, Allah thanked him and forgave all his sins.

On the other hand, according to another Hadith, a woman was condemned to Hell, because she tortured a cat.

### The Narrow Path toward Vegetarianism

Nowadays, we are witnessing a new trend of vegetarianism in the Islamic world. Although we can trace a kind of vegetarianism among some Muslim mystics or Sufis for centuries, it differs in many aspects from modern Islamic vegetarianism. In principle, Islamic teachings allow meat consuming and there is not a single Quranic verse (or *Āyah*) or prophetic tradition that forbids meat eating totally. So, any Muslim, while obeying Islamic law in avoiding some kinds of meat and respecting the conditions of the right sacrificing or slaughtering of animals, can eat meat. Based on these facts, it is very difficult, from an Islamic point of view, to defend a whole vegetarian diet, let alone a vegan one.

Nevertheless, some contemporary thinkers, including me, try to open room for a kind of Islamic vegetarianism using Islamic arguments. Quitting meat eating as a personal choice is something, and avoiding meat as



an ethical decision is quite another. Any Muslim is permitted to quit meat consuming whenever he prefers, as a personal choice or because of some hygiene concerns. But the difficulty arises when he tries to defend his decision as a moral action. Indeed the majority of Muslim scholars conclude from the permissibility of meat consuming that it is to some degree obligatory. According to this interpretation, every Muslim is permitted to reduce consuming meat as food, but cannot quit it entirely and become an absolute vegetarian. Referring to a weak prophetic tradition (and even this attribution is disputable), and addressing some verses of the Quran, they argue that each Muslim should eat meat at least during one meal every forty days. So, some traditional Muslims who want to be faithful to this interpretation and at the same time do not want to eat meat, eat a very small portion of meat every forty days only.

In this sphere it is hard to advocate a total vegetarianism or veganism. In one of my recent attempts, I have argued for a moderate vegetarianism, limiting its scope to factory farming (Eslami Ardakani, 2012). My idea

and main arguments go like this: In our modern society, contrary to our past habits, we mainly consume industrial meat, or meat produced by factory farming, as a basic part of our eating regime, believing that it is necessary for our health. But accurate studies and valid information show that industrial meat-eating is harmful and not useful. Furthermore, consuming factory farming products, regardless of health issues, is unethical. We can put forward two moral arguments to prove this claim. The first one is the argument concerning evil treatment of animals in factory farming, and the second argument concerns the destroying of the environment. The factory farmers try to produce more industrial meat with low costs, using cruel methods that are ethically unacceptable. Furthermore, factory farming has huge negative impacts on the environment. So, to live responsibly and ethically, I have argued, we have to stop industrial meat eating and try to start a healthier and more ethical diet by being totally vegetarian or at least consuming the meat of free-range animals.

#### References

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