

PART I

CONTEXT

Introduction

Islamic civilization has been markedly attentive to the well-being of animals, acknowledging their interests and extending legal rights and protection to a large number of species, an attitude that is to a large extent the result of the special attention one of the two textual sources of the Islamic religion, the Ḥadith, pays to them. Although the welfare of animals, human and nonhuman, received ample attention, issues connected with the natures and status of nonhuman species did not benefit from the same level of consideration despite the fact that both the Qur'an and the Ḥadith contain a wealth of material and offer remarkable perspectives on this dimension of the animal question. Muslims – regardless of how immersed they are in Islamic knowledge, what Islamic disciplines they master, and what form of Islam they embrace – often hold ambivalent views about the psychological natures of nonhuman animals and generally share the idea that the latter are inferior to humans. Muslims perceive this hierarchical scheme both in nature and in the Qur'an and generally believe that it reflects the will of God, who is assumed to favor humans over many or all other creatures. This perception is not, however, supported by a close reading of the Qur'an, which not only presents nonhuman animals as psychologically complex beings, but also values all species far more than is usually conceded. This book sets out to explore the Qur'an's approach to the nature and status of animals, both human and nonhuman.

THE ANIMAL QUESTION

Although questions about the natures, status, and welfare of nonhuman animals have existed since time immemorial, in the last few decades they

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have gained an unprecedented momentum, noticeable not only in the establishment of numerous animal-rights movements and the proliferation of philosophical, ethical, and legal literature discussing animals, but also in the types of questions that are asked and the propositions that are made about the rights, natures, and status of many species. The inferior status to which most – if not all – human societies have traditionally consigned other animals is now being contested. Many traditional uses of a large number of animal species are now characterized as abuses and consequently challenged. By analogy with racism and sexism, giving priority to humans' interests over the interests of other animals is sometimes labeled as "speciesism," an attitude which many ethicists consider morally untenable. The very use of the word *animal* to refer to nonhuman animals only is deemed objectionable, not only because it presupposes that humans are intrinsically distinct from other species, but also because it lumps all other species together, as if there are no or hardly any significant differences between them.

There is a clear correlation between this unprecedented interest in other animals' status and welfare and the abuses perpetrated on a number of species, equally unprecedented in their brutality and magnitude. The two fields in which a large number of nonhuman animal species have come to suffer the worst types of cruelty, on a massive scale, are biomedical research and agribusiness. Using animals as tools for scientific research is an old phenomenon, practiced at the time of the Greek doctor Galen and much earlier.¹ What are new about the current situation are the diversification of its methods and the intensity of its practice. In addition to the old phenomenon of vivisection, testing on nonhuman animals now includes electrical shocks, exposure to toxic chemicals, intentional infliction of diseases and psychological trauma, long-term (usually lifetime) confinement, and genetic engineering. The number of nonhuman animals undergoing such experiments in the different governmental, medical, and academic institutions in the United States alone is estimated at tens of millions per year.² Furthermore, many animal-rights advocates believe that most of these experiments can be easily dispensed with because many of them are repetitive, and many others are undertaken for sheer curiosity. Many experiments are also done for reasons deemed trivial, such as research in the field of cosmetics.

¹ R. J. Hankinson, "Le phénomène et l'obscur: Galien et les animaux," in *L'Animal dans l'antiquité*, ed. B. Cassin and J. L. Labarrière (Paris: J. Vrin, 1997), 75–93.

² Paul Waldau, *Animal Rights: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 28–32.

Unlike biomedical research, agribusiness is a relatively new phenomenon, which emerged in England in the late eighteenth century and became widespread in Western societies only after the Second World War.³ The main criticism directed against the method of intensive rearing of certain animal species consists of the confinement system, in which the concerned animals are removed from the relatively natural conditions of traditional farms and exposed to stressful conditions, involving restricted space, lack of natural social interaction with other species members, manipulation of light, unnatural feeding methods, deprivation of preferred food substances, physical exhaustion by keeping the females of certain species in a perpetual state of pregnancy, and frustration of basic needs, such as scratching the ground, and stretching wings in the case of poultry, or grazing in the case of cattle. When certain problems (such as cannibalism) emerge as a result of these stressful conditions, they are usually addressed in even more cruel ways, by resorting, for example, to debeaking of poultry and dehorning of cattle and sheep. At the root of this problem, some argue, lies the corporate mentality in which other animals are considered mere commodities, the appropriate treatment of which is determined by considerations of handling efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

Although scientific inquisitiveness and financial gain are the main motivations for these practices, some thinkers maintain that they find their roots in old cultural and, more importantly, religious attitudes toward other animals. In *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer states that “Western attitudes to animals have two roots: Judaism and Ancient Greece” which “unite in Christianity.”⁴ While Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Judaism have been portrayed by some as the major culprits, other faith traditions, including Indian ones, which are traditionally famed for their promotion of vegetarianism and other forms of what is considered compassion toward other animals, have not been immune to the charge of speciesism. This charge is usually made on two grounds. On a concrete level, from the standpoint of many animal-rights advocates, major world religions are found blameworthy for condoning, or even endorsing, what is considered cruelty toward other animals because they allow, and sometimes even require, certain animals to be killed for food and for religious sacrifice and to compromise the well-being of other animals in a number

³ Andrew Linzey, Jonathan Webber, and Paul Waldau, “Farming” in *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society*, ed. Paul Barry Clarke and Andrew Linzey (London: Routledge, 1996), 375.

⁴ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics For Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Avon Books 1977), 193.

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of other ways.⁵ On a more abstract level, world religions are believed to be guilty of anthropocentrism because they place humans at the pinnacle of the physical world and relegate other animals to an inferior status.

Reactions to these views may be classified into two major categories. Some champions of certain religious traditions have unapologetically endorsed and justified the so-called speciesist religious attitudes, whereas others adopted a rather apologetic attitude. Apologists generally endeavor to emphasize the non-monolithic nature of the religious tradition that they represent. Often, also, they propose certain interpretations of religious texts and practices that reflect more favorable attitudes toward nonhuman animals. Nonetheless, in both types of work the superiority of humans to other animal species usually remains uncontested. For the holders of the unapologetic attitude, this superiority frequently translates into guiltless entitlement to use other animals for human needs, albeit sometimes within certain limits. Apologists, on the other hand, understand humans' superiority to other animals as a form of stewardship in which the former would ideally become the caretakers of the latter and abstain from causing them any harm.

A number of modern ethicists and philosophers have challenged the notion of humans' superiority to other animals. In the first chapter of *Animal Liberation*, titled "All Animals Are Equal," Singer argues that the differences between species, just as the differences between races and sexes, do not form an ethically valid ground for inequality. In the case of humans, he maintains, there is "no compelling reason for assuming that a factual difference in ability between two people justifies any difference in the amount of consideration we give to their needs and interests."⁶ The same principle, in his opinion, should apply to nonhuman animals. The fact that the latter lack the intelligence, complexity, or capabilities which most humans have, does not justify the disregard of their interests. Therefore, without challenging the overall perception of the nature of other animals, Singer establishes the moral principle of "equal consideration," in which the interests of sentient beings, human or nonhuman, should be given the same weight.

Tom Regan, although similarly advocating equality between humans and a number of other animal species (mammals one year of age or older),

⁵ Jordan Paper, "Humans and Animals: The History from a Religio-Ecological Perspective," in *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics*, ed. Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 325–32.

⁶ Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 5.

bases his argument on the inherent value of the animals in question. The animals whose rights he defends are, in his view, equal to humans not only because their interests, especially those related to the element of sentience, matter, but also because they have enough features comparable to those of humans (such as a certain degree of self-consciousness) to warrant their equality to humans. Therefore, unlike Singer, Regan's egalitarian attitude takes into consideration what he perceives as a certain degree of complexity in the animals whose rights he seeks to defend.

In the religious sphere, opinions regarding humans' superiority to other animals are believed to apply in Islam as well. G. H. Bousquet, discussing the attitudes toward nonhuman animals shared by the three Abrahamic religions, states, "l'homme règne sur les animaux qui sont livrés entre ses mains et qui le craignent... c'est la conception anthropocentrique du monde," thus maintaining not only that Islam is anthropocentric, but also that, like Judaism and Christianity, it gives humans dominion over other animals.⁷ Basheer Masri, who states that "[b]oth science and religion assert that man is the apex of creation," maintains that "Islam, too, declares man as the best of God's creation."⁸ Likewise, Richard Foltz affirms that "Islam is what contemporary animal rights activists would probably call a strongly anthropocentric religion, although Muslims themselves might prefer to see their worldview as 'theocentric.'" Foltz also argues that "[w]ithin the hierarchy of Creation, the Qur'an depicts humans as occupying a special and privileged status,"⁹ and concludes that "it would appear to remain undisputed that the Islamic view of the world is a hierarchical one, in which the human community occupies a higher rank than those of all other animal communities."¹⁰

While Bousquet's, Masri's, and Foltz's statements do reflect the dominant views of Muslims concerning nonhuman animals, there are other plausible interpretations of Islamic, and more particularly, Qur'anic views of other animals. Muslims, of course, like the members of any other faith tradition, hold a wide range of views and attitudes toward animals. Nonetheless, it is generally recognized that authority in this religion lies with two primary textual sources, the Prophetic Tradition (Hadith) and, more importantly, the Qur'an. To my knowledge, however, animal

⁷ G. H. Bousquet, "Des Animaux et de leur traitement selon le Judaïsme, le Christianisme et l'Islam," *Studia Islamica*, 9 (1958): 33.

⁸ Basheer Masri, *Animal Welfare in Islam* (Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2007), 4.

⁹ Richard Foltz, *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 145; see also p. 49.

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themes in these two texts have rarely benefited from a close and thorough reading. Moreover, even if one would have been able to regard the full spectrum of views about nonhuman animals in Islamic tradition as representative of what Islam has to say about other animals, these views would probably still be more nuanced than what the earlier quotations seem to suggest. For, even though Muslims (much like non-Muslims) generally consider nonhuman animals to be inferior to humans, this attitude has many shades. In any case, the Qur'an cannot only be read in ways that are consonant with modern views on nonhuman animals, but also a non-anthropocentric reading of this text, in my opinion, seems even more plausible than anthropocentric ones.

Two factors have, however, contributed to obscure non-anthropocentric ideas found in the Qur'an. First, some passages of the text seem to suggest the inferiority of other animals to humans. The Qur'an explicitly permits humans to consume the flesh of many animal species and allows some instrumental uses of certain animals, all of which seem to point to a servile status, and presumably to the inferiority, of these species, and by extrapolation of all nonhuman animals, vis-à-vis humans. The Qur'an also portrays the punishment of a group of humans who violated their covenant with God as consisting of their transformation into apes and pigs, thus seemingly implying their demotion from a higher status, that of humans, to a lower one, that of certain other animal species (*S/al-Mā'ida*). Moreover, certain livestock (*an'ām*) are sometimes presented in the Qur'an as if they lack understanding and consequently as being astray. More generally, the Qur'an repeatedly asserts that all creatures, obviously including nonhuman animals, are *musakhkhar* (subjugated?) to humans, which has been taken as one of the clearest indication of humans' superior status. As I will argue, however, these themes do not necessarily convey inferiority in the way they are usually thought to do. In any case they represent only one among many other dimensions of the Qur'anic portrayal of other animals. When considered together with the rest of the animal themes in the Qur'an, it will – I hope – become clear that nonhuman animals are prized far more than the preceding themes would suggest.

The second factor consists of anthropocentric ideas that have been (and continue to be) projected on to the Qur'an. The fact that interpreters' presumptions about other animals' nature and status have to a certain extent shaped what they emphasize as Qur'anic animal portrayal is surely to be anticipated. After all, the same phenomenon has been discerned in the interpretation of other Qur'anic themes, particularly gender-related

ones. Anthropocentric readings are perhaps to be anticipated even more than other readings. Unlike other possible readings of the Qur'an, those whose interests run counter to anthropocentric attitudes (nonhuman animals) differ from the holders of these attitudes in major ways, including mental and linguistic ones. As a consequence, challenges to anthropocentric attitudes cannot be expected to come from the parties that may have a personal interest in contesting them. This, of course, does not mean that anthropocentric attitudes cannot be possibly questioned. After all, even in the case of patriarchal readings, criticism of prejudiced views is not stimulated only by personal or immediate interests. However, the inability of nonhuman animals to actively influence anthropocentric discourses probably plays some role in the limited awareness of such attitudes.

It is also important to point out that the great interest in humans clearly displayed in the Qur'an in fact seems to foster or at least encourage anthropocentric readings. However, this interest is not necessarily an indication either of a privileged status or of a particular divine preference for humans. The Qur'an may be read as indeed presenting "a decidedly anthropocentric view of God's creativity,"¹¹ as Daniel Madigan observes, however, the reason behind this attitude could simply be that this text, which is addressed primarily or even exclusively to humans, discusses its addressees extensively because its main goal is to convey a message of special relevance to them. In fact, to achieve the desired impact on the target audience, God, who is the main speaker in the Qur'an and who, according to Muslims, is the one who "sent down" this Qur'anic message to the Prophet Muḥammad in order that he relay it to humankind, not only emphasizes what is relevant to humans, but sometimes even seems to espouse their outlook and to consider certain matters from their standpoints. Likewise, the Qur'anic message seems to be mostly situated within the realm of what is known to, or at least imaginable and thinkable by, humans. Attentiveness to the addressees' nature and God's deliberate restriction of materials to those that are known and meaningful to humans have already been discerned at the level of the Meccan or Arabian audience, the latter being the earliest recipients of the Qur'an's message. For example, the seventh/thirteenth century exegete al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) notices that God "speaks [in the Qur'an] about wool, fur, and fleece but not cotton nor linen, because the latter items were not available in the lands of the Arabs." Al-Qurṭubī concludes that

¹¹ Daniel A. Madigan, "Themes and Topics," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 81.

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“God spoke to them [people of Arabia] about the items they knew well in a way that made sense to them.”¹² Another example with which this exegete illustrates the same point is that in the Qur’an hail is mentioned but not snow (24/al-Nūr: 43). He comments: “[God] spoke to them about hail because they knew it well, while He kept silent about snow because they were not familiar with it.”¹³ In an animal-related context, al-Qurṭubī resolves a difficulty presented by a Qur’anic passage in the same way. In this passage, it is stated that “There is not an animal in the earth, or a flying creature flying on two wings, but they are peoples like you” (6/al-An‘ām: 38).¹⁴ Among the questions raised in the discussion of this verse is: Why are a large number of animals omitted from this comparison, notable among them sea animals? In his attempt to account for this difficulty, another exegete, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) tries to fit sea animals in one of the two categories mentioned in the verse. He says, “It is reasonable to describe sea animals as creeping creatures, since they creep in water, or to consider their movement as a type of flying; since they swim in water the way flying creatures ‘swim’ in the open air.”¹⁵ In contrast with this apologetic attitude, al-Qurṭubī simply accounts for the mention of “earthly” animals to the exclusion of heavenly ones by saying that “these are the animals [humans] know and witness.”¹⁶ In fact, if the Qur’an were to give an exhaustive list of all creatures that it considers animals, this list would have also included spiritual beings, such as angels and jinn,¹⁷ and possibly many other species about which humans know nothing. This, however, does not seem to be the Qur’anic intention, and therefore, the list of animals mentioned is limited to what is in the immediate visual field of humans. Therefore, in al-Qurṭubī’s opinion, certain aspects of the Qur’an’s statements are formulated in accordance with the scope of knowledge and experience of its audience, which points to the importance of the audience as a factor in this respect. It needs to be pointed out, however, that in spite of the clear emphasis on humans,

¹² Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-ahkām al-Qur’an*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2000), 10: 101.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Unless otherwise stated, all translations of the Qur’an are from Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall’s *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, with some modifications. All other translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

¹⁵ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2000), 12: 175.

¹⁶ Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘*, 6: 270.

¹⁷ According to Islamic tradition Jinn are spiritual beings endowed with freewill.

the Qur'an still contains ample references to other beings, ranging from angels to inanimate things, occasionally going so far as to espouse their views and to present their perspectives as well.

It may still be argued that the fact that humans have been chosen as God's addressees can in itself be regarded as a sign of special favor. Although this may be a valid point, the equation of this favor with superiority is an unsustainable leap, especially when the Qur'an itself resists precisely this conclusion and repeatedly emphasizes that God's favors in this life are not necessarily indicative of His preference to their recipients. In fact, although the Qur'an never fails to recommend to humans what it considers right and to try to dissuade them from what it considers wrong, whenever it describes their actual state it makes it clear that, more often than not, they grievously fail to comply with divine injunctions and recommendations. However, the sheer emphasis on human beings likely contributed at least in part to feelings of self-importance among this text's human audience.

In this book, I wish to examine the status and nature of animals, human and nonhuman, mainly as portrayed in the Qur'an and to point to new possible ways of reading the Qur'an's animal themes. My main premise is that, although a non-speciesist reading of the Qur'an is surprisingly well-founded, the Muslim tradition has not always read it in this way. Therefore, this study will endeavor primarily to offer an alternative reading of Qur'anic animal themes, but at the same time to assess the extent to which this scripture has shaped Muslims' views of and attitudes toward nonhuman animals. To this end, I propose to undertake a contextual reading of the Qur'an, wherein the study of its animal themes is undertaken in conjunction with the study of interpretations offered in selected works from the Islamic exegetical tradition (*tafsīr*). This approach will at once provide valuable insights into the Qur'an's animal themes and familiarize readers with some of the different ways they were received by commentators.

To place this discussion within larger contexts, the first chapter of the book surveys a number of views about other animals held by some major world faith traditions and philosophical trends. This will introduce various pertinent questions that have been raised in this context. The second chapter introduces the discipline of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), some important notions that are relevant to the discussion of the book, and the four exegetes who will be examined in this book, namely, ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), Abū 'Abd