

Evangelical Spirituality and Hunting

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This article examines the current indifference of British evangelicals towards the ethical issues raised by hunting for sport. It calls for a retrieval of an older, Reformation tradition in which such hunting was seen as not only unethical but also spiritually dangerous.

Introduction

Christian attitudes to wild animals vary. Saint Francis is well known for preaching to birds and rebuking the wolf of Gubbio, and similar stories are a common feature of medieval hagiography.¹ After Saint Cuthbert had waded into the sea to pray, otters came to 'warm and dry his feet with their breath and fur'.² But there is another, less irenic, Christian tradition about our dominion over the wild beasts.

The hunting priest was a familiar character in pre-modern literature; indeed, John 'Jack' Russell, the 'sporting vicar', was such an enthusiastic hunter that he bred the eponymous terrier for the purpose. In 1963 Gavin Maxwell, author of *Tarka the Otter*, described a Minister of the Church of Scotland who did not share Cuthbert's delight in otters. He spotted two cubs playing on the seashore, and shot them; one was killed immediately, the other died of her wounds. Maxwell protested, but the Minister reminded him that the 'Lord' gave man dominion over animals.³ Now this was more than fifty years ago, and times have changed. Admittedly, the current Archbishop of Canterbury has been bird-shooting for fun, but the hunting priest has largely had his day. However, if few clergymen in Britain now defend sport hunting as 'dominion', it is also true that few criticise it biblically. The hunting law debate in Britain has seen few Christian contributions, one way or the other.⁴ British Christians simply do not see sport hunting as an ethical matter, let alone a spiritual one.

Modern American evangelicals and hunting

Things are different in the USA where hunting is popular among evangelical Christians, many considering it authorised by the Bible, especially by the doctrine of dominion. Moreover, some find an ethical value in hunting, praising the bonding experience between fathers and sons, and the transmission of Christian wisdom to the next generation. For example, evangelical leader James Dobson speaks warmly of hunting trips with his father, and Doug Phillips, a former conservative evangelical leader, believes that teaching a boy to hunt prepares him 'to be a better man'. But Phillips emphasises that this is a spiritual, not just an ethical matter. When we train a boy to hunt, he says, 'we advance the Kingdom of God because we are obeying the dominion mandate of Genesis ... we strike a blow against the Devil!'⁵ Such views are not restricted to the conservative fringe. Hunting, says Southern Baptist Gary Ledbetter, is part of the evangelical culture.⁶ In 2007, Mike Huckabee, former Southern Baptist minister and prospective Presidential candidate, described his hunting success to an NRA conference: 'And somehow, by the grace of God, when I squeezed the trigger, my Weatherby .300 Mag ... did its work, and somehow the angels took that bullet and went right to the antelope, and my hunt was over in a wonderful way.' Huckabee explicitly narrated his hunting as a spiritual experience, and commentators saw this as enhancing his appeal to the evangelical constituency whose political support he sought.⁷

This American view assumes, firstly, that hunting can play an important ethical role in bringing up children, specifically boys; and secondly, that hunting itself is a spiritual matter. This now sounds strange to UK ears, but it has a good evangelical pedigree, and was once common among the British also. However, our evangelical forebears had a quite different understanding of the ethical and spiritual meaning of hunting.

Hunting and raising children

The view that hunting has ethical worth in bringing up boys is not new. From the classical world of Greece and Rome to the Darwinism of the early twentieth century, hunting was valued for preparing a boy for a competitive world, and for inculcating 'fighting, masterful virtues' and 'vigorous manliness' as President Theodore Roosevelt put it.⁸ In particular, hunting was valued to prepare the warrior for the battlefield by encouraging what Siegfried Sassoon called 'the angry, eager feeling a huntsman ought to have that's out for blood, and means his hounds to get it'.⁹ As Plutarch observed, it inures men to the sight of 'wounds and blood of slaughtered beasts', hardening the heart against pity.¹⁰ Indeed, when William Wilberforce supported a bill to outlaw blood sports in 1802, military-minded Parliamentarians claimed that such a ban threatened the 'martial ardour of the nation' and British success in war.¹¹ As recently as 2011, the language of hunting was used by Calvin Gibbs, a US soldier convicted of killing Afghan villagers 'for sport and taking...trophies'. He admitted cutting the fingers off the bodies of the dead and yanking out a tooth, saying it was 'like keeping the antlers of a deer you'd shot...'¹²

However, from the days of the early Church, Christians had pioneered a different vision which certainly recognised sport hunting as an ethical issue, but they concluded that Christians should avoid it. By the medieval period, hunting by the laity was discouraged, and it was forbidden to the clergy except for the military orders whose lion hunts maintained their warrior skills. But the most outspoken opposition to hunting emerged from the magisterial Reformation, and was championed by the predecessors of today's evangelicals. If hunting hardened the heart, they did not regard this as a virtue. Hunting, lamented the seventeenth-century Puritans John Dod and Robert Cleaver, 'maketh not the heart pitiful and mercifull; but it hardeneth the heart, and infecteth it with crueltie'.¹³ They thought this a poor way to bring up children, and not just on ethical grounds.

The spirituality of hunting

The fact is that, from Martin Luther to William Wilberforce, the forebears of today's evangelicals regarded hunting as, at best a waste of time, and at worst a spiritual peril. Dod and Cleaver call it a 'vaine sport', 'slaverie to his lust, and serving sin'. John Gill says hunters are 'more rustic and brutish' than others.¹⁴ In fact, hard-heartedness is a spiritual not just a moral fault, just as pity and mercy are spiritual, not simply ethical, virtues. As the great nineteenth-century Baptist preacher C. H. Spurgeon declared, 'in gentleness and kindness our great Redeemer is our model'. John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, tells us that his evangelical conversion was accompanied by 'a very great softness and tenderness of heart', nurtured by a sermon on the love of God.¹⁵ Such tenderness of heart finds nothing to admire in what William Cowper called the '[d]etestest sport, that owes its pleasure to another's pain, that feeds upon the sobs and dying shrieks of harmless nature'.¹⁶

The love of God and the example of Jesus are to guide Christian spiritual experience; and this guidance is to begin with Christian leaders who should educate their flock about our relationship with wild animals. Cowper was very outspoken about clergy who failed to do so, and joined the hunt themselves. The 'cassock'd huntsman', he says, is a 'designing knave, a mere church juggler, hypocrite, and slave' who leads his flock or congregation astray and seeks the approval of his social 'superiors' such as the 'master of the pack' who

Cries, "Well done, Saint!" and claps him on the back.
Is this the path of sanctity? Is this
To stand a waymark in the road to bliss?
Himself a wanderer from the narrow way,
His silly sheep, what wonder if they stray?¹⁷

Doubtless, Cowper would have had something to say about the silence of today's British Christians about hunting.

This view of hunting stemmed from a deep familiarity with the Bible where, as Thomas Adams remarked in 1630, 'hunting is for the most part taken ... in the worst sense. So ... *Nimrod was a Hunter*, even to a Proverbe: and that *Before the Lord*, as without feare of his Majestie'.¹⁸ As Philip Stubbes had observed in 1583, there are many hunters found in the Bible but none is *righteous*.¹⁹ Indeed the list of biblical hunters is formidable, including Cain, Nimrod, Ishmael, Esau and the rider of the white horse (Rev. 6). It comes as no surprise to read that Herod was a keen hunter.²⁰ But the most prominent biblical hunter is the Devil who is renowned for setting traps, nets and snares, and for digging pits for the righteous. The devils, says William Gurnall, 'will hunt thee to thy grave'.²¹

None of these biblical hunters advance the Kingdom of God; quite the opposite. Thus, before the nineteenth century, evangelicals often identified the hunted animal of Psalm 22 with Jesus, and the hunters with his persecutors. John Flavel tells us that the psalm 'contains a most exact description of Christ's sufferings.... the Hunter rouses betides in the morning, and singles out [the deer] to hunt down that day;... "Dogs have compassed me, the assembly of the wicked have enclosed me." ... Thus was Christ hunted....'²² Ironically, the evangelical Christian Sportsmen's Fellowship, an organisation promoting deer hunting, has as its vision text: 'As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God' (Ps. 42:1).²³

It was the shepherd, not the hunter, that should point us to God. John Owen contrasts Nimrod 'the great hunter' with Christ 'the great shepherd': the first founded the kingdom of Babel, the second the kingdom of Zion.²⁴ Indeed, the biblical list of shepherds is as distinguished as that of hunters is notorious: Abraham, Abel, Jacob, Joseph, Rachel, Moses, David, Amos, Jesus and, according to Psalm 23 and elsewhere, God himself. The good shepherd, says Jesus, has a kindly heart towards his sheep, is their sanctuary, and even gives his life for them (John 10). As Spurgeon put it: 'See that poor soul hunted by the dogs of hell. It flies swift as the wind, but faster far do the hunters pursue.... till Jesus Christ shall open his bosom for that poor hunted thing to hide itself within, it shall have no peace.'²⁵ Only the wicked shepherds of Ezekiel 34 hunt and eat the sheep.

As Daniel Herman has shown, this biblical view of hunting was taken to North America by the Puritan settlers, and was commonplace there for nearly two hundred years. The hunting myth beloved of today's North American evangelicals emerged only in the late eighteenth century, when hunting became a useful skill in the conflict with the English Crown. It was subsequently reinforced by Darwinism in the early twentieth century, and now dominates evangelical opinion.²⁶ This myth has even seen the rehabilitation of Nimrod, whom John Calvin called a 'tyrant'²⁷. The very figure that, for pre-twentieth-century evangelicals, exemplified opposition to God (Rev. 12; Micah 5.6) has now become a role model for evangelical hunters.

To mourn rather than rejoice

This evangelical view of hunting was anticipated by an earlier medieval tradition, whose ethical objections are still apparent in Thomas More: '... you ought rather to be moved to pity when you see a poor little hare torn to bits by a dog, the weak slain by the stronger, the fearful by the fierce, the innocent by the cruel and merciless'.²⁸ But the evangelicals found the cause of such 'pity' in Scripture, not in human virtue. They enquired into the very conditions for hunting: the fierceness of predators and hunters, and the vulnerability of the prey. In Scripture, they found that these are the results of human sin. 'Whence', asks Calvin, 'comes the cruelty of brutes, which prompts the stronger to seize and rend and devour with dreadful violence the weaker animals? There would certainly have been no discord among the creatures of God, if they had remained in their first and original condition. When they exercise cruelty towards each other, and the weak need to be protected against the strong, it is an evidence of the disorder which has sprung from the sinfulness of man.'

This should, said William Perkins in 1596, 'rather move us to mourne, than to rejoice'.²⁹ Thomas Draxe emphasises that our sin should cause us to *grieve* for the suffering animal: 'if the poor dumbe creature, (bird or beast) bee in any paine and miserie, let us not joy, nor sport ourselves in its paines and torments, but rather be sorry for it, and be greeved for our own sinnes, which the silly and sinlesse creature smarteth for'.³⁰ Where survival required killing a wild animal, Matthew Henry emphasises that the hunter must not gratify 'the sensual appetite'.³¹ Thomas Wilson reproves 'the cruelty of such, as sport themselves in the mutuall murdering of the creature; the death and destruction whereof, being a part of the curse for our sins, wee may not make our recreation; Gods curse may not be sported with'.³² To exploit the disorder sprung from sin for pleasure in hunting animals or shooting birds is egregious wickedness.

Conclusion: hunting and the Kingdom

The indifference towards hunting among British evangelicals is a recent attitude; the earlier generation saw kindness and gentleness towards animals as a fruit of the Spirit, and rejected pleasure in their suffering and death as wickedness (Prov. 12.10; Gal. 5.22f). In the Kingdom, not even wolves will hunt (Is. 11). If God has compassion on all he has made (Ps. 145.9), how can his servants do less? Philip Stubbes was blunt: 'Is he a Christian man, or rather a pseudo-Christian, that delights in blood?'³³

For further reading

- Matt Cartmill, *A View to a Death in the Morning* (Harvard University Press, 1996).
- Philip Sampson, 'Lord of Creation or animal among animals?', in Andrew Linzey, ed., *A Handbook of Animal Ethics* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
- Matthew Scully, *Dominion* (St. Martin's, 2002).

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- ¹ Ugolino Brunforte (att.), *Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, edited by Raphael Brown (Doubleday, 1958 [14th century]), chs. 21, 22.
- ² Bede, *Life of St Cuthbert* [Durham, 4th quarter of the 12th century], Yates Thompson MS 26. Ch. 10 f. 24r.
- ³ C. F. D. Moule, *Man and Nature in the New Testament* (Athlone Press, 1964), 3.
- ⁴ For one contribution, see Philip Sampson, 'Foxed for a witness?... try hunting', *Evangelicals Now* (March 2005), <http://www.e-n.org.uk/2005/03/features/foxed-for-a-witness-try-hunting/>.
- ⁵ Doug Phillips, 'Is it Un-Christian to Hunt and Sell Fluffy Animal Pelts?', *Vision Forum* website, which closed in November 2013 due to Phillips' marital infidelity. Available at <http://www.kifaruforums.net/archive/index.php/t-2054.html>.
- ⁶ <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUSN0725100420080313>.
- ⁷ Mike Huckabee speech at 'Celebration of American Values' NRA conference, 21 Sep 2017, <https://www.nra.org/articles/20070921/remarks-by-former-governor-mike-huckabee-r-ar-at-nras-celebration-of-american-values-conference-in-washington-dc-92107>. For comment, see e.g. <http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2007/12/does-huckabee-believe-angels-intervene-hunting-contests>.
- ⁸ Matt Cartmill, *A View to a Death in the Morning* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 153.
- ⁹ Siegfried Sassoon, 'The Old Huntsman' in *The Old Huntsman and other poems* (New York: E P Dutton & Co, 1928), 10.
- ¹⁰ Plutarch, *De Sollertia Animalium*, in *Works* vol. 2 (Kelmescott Society, 1909), 959 c-e.
- ¹¹ *The Parliamentary Register*, vol. 3, 295ff, 311, House of Commons, 24 May 1802.
- ¹² Patrick Cockburn, 'Soldier who killed and mutilated Afghan villagers is jailed for life', *The Independent* 12 Nov 2011, 30, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/soldier-who-killed-and-mutilated-afghan-villagers-is-jailed-for-life-6261035.html>.
- ¹³ John Dod and Robert Cleaver, *A plain and familiar exposition of the ten commandments* (Thomas Man, 1635), 293.
- ¹⁴ For Luther's view, see Scott Ickert, 'Luther and Animals: subject to Adam's fall?' in Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto, eds., *Animals on the Agenda* (SCM, 1998), 90-99 at 98. Dod and Cleaver, *A plain and familiar exposition of the ten commandments*, 293. John Gill, *Exposition of the Entire Bible* (Amazon reprint, 2012 [1746-1763]), Leviticus 17:13.
- ¹⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, 'A Word for Brutes against Brutes', in *The Sword & Trowel* vol. 3, June 1873 (Pilgrim, 1975), 333. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Clarendon, 1962), 15, 29.
- ¹⁶ William Cowper, 'The Task', in *The Task and Select Other Poems*, edited by James Sambrook (London: Routledge, 2013 [1785]), Book III, 121-2, lines 326-329.
- ¹⁷ William Cowper, 'The Progress of Error', in *Table Talk and Other Poems*, edited by John Sharpe (London, 1825 [1782]), 29-50 at 33.
- ¹⁸ Thomas Adams, 'Politicke Hunting', in *The Workes of Thomas Adams* (Thomas Harper, 1630), 104-121 at 116.
- ¹⁹ See Philip Sampson, *Six Modern Myths* (IVP, 2001), 84.
- ²⁰ See Galatians 4:22-31; Malachi 1:2-3; Hebrews 12:16; Romans 9:8-13. Cain was reduced to hunting after the murder of his brother when he became a wanderer, not a farmer. For Herod, see Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, edited by William Whiston (Digireads, 2010 [1737]), Book 1, 21.13.
- ²¹ William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour* (Ralph Smith, 1669), 95, col. 2.
- ²² John Flavel, 'Sermon 19. Of Christ's Humiliation in his Life', in *The Works of John Flavel* vol. I (Banner of Truth, 1982), 149.
- ²³ <http://www.christiansportsman.com/mens-ministry/about/>.
- ²⁴ John Owen, 'Sermon 9. "Christ's Kingdom and the Magistrate's Power"', in *Works* vol. 8 (London, 1652), 418-9.
- ²⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, 'Sermon 3472. A Solemn Deprivation' (London, 1915), <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/3472.php>.
- ²⁶ D. J. Herman, 'From Farmers to Hunters', in K. Kete, ed., *A Cultural History of Animals in the Age of Empire* (Berg, 2007), 47-72.
- ²⁷ John Calvin, *Genesis* (London: Banner of Truth, 1965 [1578]), 317.
- ²⁸ Thomas More, *Utopia* vol. 4, edited by E. Surtz and J. H. Hexter, (Yale University Press, 1965 [1516]), 151-2. For an example of the earlier tradition, see John of Salisbury, *Policraticus* (c1159), 1.1-4.
- ²⁹ William Perkins, 'The whole treatise of the cases of conscience', in *Works* vol. II (London 1617 [1596]), 141.
- ³⁰ Thomas Draxe *The Earnest of our inheritance* (London: F K for George Norten, 1613), 26-7.
- ³¹ Matthew Henry, *Complete Bible Commentary* (London, 1708-1710), Leviticus 17:13.
- ³² Thomas Wilson, *A Commentarie upon the most divine epistle of St Paul to the Romanes* (London: W. Jaggard, 1614), 591. He exempts hunting for food, with 'the least cruelty'.
- ³³ Phillip Stubbes, *Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakspeare's Youth* (London: Furnival, Turner & Co, 1877-1879 [1583]), 182.