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Cows, Communities, and Religious Responses to the 1865–66 British Rinderpest Outbreak*

The devastating outbreak of rinderpest in the British Isles in 1865–66 — the so-called “cattle plague” — was a significant event in Victorian Britain, one that did much to shape British agriculture, animal disease control, and veterinary medicine. This article argues that the cattle plague also had long-term significance for the relationship between the Church of England and non-human animals. During eighteenth-century rinderpest outbreaks, Anglican clergy had rarely considered the suffering animals. In 1865–66 and afterwards, services in Anglican churches increasingly involved animal themes, issues, and presences. From this time, it became usual for Anglicans to mark moments of severe animal disease with special prayers and services. The crisis also encouraged changes in how Church of England clergy, and ministers in other Christian denominations, spoke about animals in sermons. During the outbreak of rinderpest, there was a sharpened awareness of the extent to which cows and humans had common interests and inhabited a shared community. A heightened appreciation of the bonds and interdependencies between people and farmed animals, the article suggests, had much significance for ecological thinking among nineteenth-century ministers of religion. The article argues for the distinctive status of cattle in modern Christianity.

In the mid-1860s Britain suffered a devastating outbreak of rinderpest cattle disease that claimed the lives of at least 400,000 cows, almost ten per cent of the national population. Rinderpest, a viral disease, was both highly contagious — it could be spread through direct contact between infected animals, as well as through breath and the exchange of bodily fluids — and deadly, with mortality rates reaching one hundred per cent in some infected herds.¹ Cheshire, the most badly affected county in 1865–66, lost over half its cattle.² At the severest moment of the disease, in early March 1866, William Jacobson, the bishop of Chester, delivered a sermon in his cathedral in which he reflected on the “sad” and “painful” sight of a county denuded of its most familiar and visible animals. “Our

* The author thanks Neil Murphy, Philip Williamson, and Rachael Wiseman for their comments on drafts of this article. The author thanks Arwel Davies for his assistance with the Welsh translations of the special prayer that was used in Anglican places of worship from October 1865.

1. Rinderpest is the first and only animal disease to have been eradicated globally, with the last case reported in 2001. Rinderpest symptoms included fever, discharges from the nose and eyes, rapid breathing, lesions in the mouth area, and diarrhoea. The disease spread rapidly through infected herds and most animals died between six and ten days after first exhibiting symptoms. The article uses the terms “cows” and “cattle” interchangeably. That said, the term cow (which should just refer to female cattle) is used in this paper when the author wishes to encourage the reader to develop a closer relationship with the suffering animals. “Cattle” has negative associations and can emphasise utilitarian and instrumentalist relations between people and cows.

2. S. Matthews, “The Cattle Plague in Cheshire, 1865–66,” *Northern History*, 38, no. 1 (2001): 107–08.

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green pastures, hill and dale,” were, he said, “all one melancholy blank, the landscape no longer pleasantly studded with cattle feeding or in repose, but absolutely void of animal life.”³ The distress that Jacobson tried to articulate — the feeling that a familiar environment had been harmed, perhaps lost — compares with what environmental philosophers have called “solastalgia:” a kind of melancholia and homesickness one feels when a familiar landscape has been desolated through ecological and climate change.⁴ Jacobson’s comments suggest, too, that cattle were more than commodities and sources of food; animals, specifically cows, could occupy an important place in regional senses of belonging and community.

This article argues that the cattle plague pushed many people in Victorian society to recognise their closeness too, and dependency on, farmed animals. Specifically, the disease encouraged much reflection on large ideas about the ways that humans, cows, and other animals formed parts of an interdependent and interspecies community, one tied together by needs, responsibilities and duties, and what have been called the “social bonds of trust, friendship, and care.”⁵ The philosopher, Mary Midgley, has used the term “mixed community” to describe such interspecies collectives.⁶ This is a new way to think about the cattle plague. Historians have, to date, concentrated on the effects of the outbreak for the veterinary profession, the development of germ theory, and animal disease control.⁷ Little has been written on how communities understood or reacted to the suffering of cows, or how far the crisis prompted Victorians to consider large questions about human–animal relationships.

Among the sections of Victorian society to reflect most deeply on these issues were ministers of religion. On two occasions, in October 1865 and August 1866, the Crown authorities instructed the clergy of the Church of England to read out special prayers to stay the spread of cattle disease.⁸ The reading of these prayers — this was done every day, in every church service, for thirteen months — did much to concentrate attention on the causes and meaning of a disease that affected the lives of so much of the population. A great many preachers, from all Christian churches and particularly in the Church of England, addressed the subject from their pulpits, notably on the “days of humiliation” that the leaders of the established and nonconformist churches set aside on dates in early 1866.⁹ Fifty-four sermons on cattle plague were published as pamphlets, and newspapers gave reports of many more.¹⁰ Historians have been drawn to what such sermons reveal about attitudes towards prayer and divine providence.¹¹ What has been missed is that

3. *Cheshire Observer*, 3 March 1866.

4. G. Albrecht, “‘Solastalgia’: A New Concept in Health and Identity,” *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature*, 3 (2005): 44–59.

5. C. Mac Cumhaill and R. Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2022), 278.

6. M. Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), ch. 10.

7. J. Fisher, “British Physicians, Medical Science, and the Cattle Plague, 1865–66,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 67, no. 4 (1993): 651–52.

8. P. Williamson, A. Raffé, S. Taylor and N. Mears, *National Prayers [NP]: Special Worship Since the Reformation. Volume 2: General Fast, Thanksgivings and Special Prayers in the British Isles, 1689–1870* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2017), 922–5, 929–31.

9. *NP*: 2, 926–29.

10. The fifty-four sermons that have been identified and which are considered in this article did one or more of the following: (1) mentioned the cattle plague in the title; (2) had been delivered on a day of humiliation called in response to the outbreak; or (3) made substantial reference to the disease while discussing the efficacy of prayer and the operations of divine providence.

11. F. Turner, “Rainfall, Plagues, and the Prince of Wales: A Chapter in the Conflict of Religion and Science,” *Journal of British Studies*, 13, no. 2 (1974): 53–59; S. Matthews, “Explanations for the Outbreak of Cattle Plague in Cheshire in 1865–66: ‘Fear the Wrath of the Lord,’” *Northern History*, 63, no. 1 (2006): 117–35; C. Spingale, *Cattle Plague: A History* (New York, NY: Kluwer, 2003), 389–93. M. Robinson, “Plague and Humiliation: The Ecclesiastical Response to Cattle Plague in Mid-Victorian Britain,” *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 29, no. 1 (2009): 52–71, pays more attention to the place of animals of worship in 1865–66, notably the blessing of animals among Roman Catholics.

ministers spoke on a range of social, medical, and animal issues that went beyond the narrowly religious. The sermon was not the only means by which clergymen discussed disease and animal world themes, but it was an important medium, both because it was a form of communication familiar to “all classes and conditions of people,” and because it allowed preachers to communicate messages to varied publics, especially if a sermon was printed or reported in newspapers. The importance of sermons also lies in their “miscellaneous” quality:¹² preachers delivered sermons that reflected on the importance of farmed animals for rural livelihoods, the place of animals in human communities and the emotional relationship that people had with their “livestock.” Some went further, and argued that the deaths of cows, animals that were particularly close to humans, signified that the human relationship with the natural world was somehow wrong and broken.

The article provides the first study of the varying ways in which cattle plague sermons represented non-human animals and human–cow relationships. The sermons discussed the place of cattle in human communities at various levels. Bishop Jacobson and others represented cows as familiar, ubiquitous, and essential to flourishing human communities, both locally and nationally. Such comments reflected the high status of cattle and the importance of livestock farming in mid-Victorian Britain. The dairy industry had grown in importance since the early 1800s as the population increased and as demand for milk expanded. It is reckoned that Britain’s cattle population numbered around five million in the mid-1860s, with large concentrations in northern and western counties and in southern Scotland.¹³ The use of draught oxen had revived in some places, such as south-western England,¹⁴ and cattle produced the manure that fertilised crops. Roast beef was associated with particular understandings of Britishness and the consumption of the foodstuff had come to be regarded as a staple of Christmas observances and essential for good health. And it was thanks to cows that in the 1790s humans had developed a vaccine to prevent smallpox.¹⁵

Other ministers explored animal-human interdependencies in a deeper sense, one that compares to a modern “ecological” awareness. For Mark Stoll, Protestant ecological thinking was based on the notion that humans and non-human animals were interdependent and worked together as part of a larger system or “moral community.” Another key idea, one usually associated with Protestants, was that a harmonious “balance of nature” could be disrupted and harmed by sinful humans.¹⁶ Although Stoll and others have identified an ecological concern among nineteenth-century Protestants in the English-speaking world, the literature on British clerical ecology focuses on prominent individuals,¹⁷ with little said about the way that the clergy more generally could in church services and sermons communicate ideas about interdependency to the wider public, particularly at crisis moments,

12. W. Gibson, “The British Sermon 1689–1901: Quantities, Performance, and Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689–1901*, ed. K. Francis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3, 26.

13. C. Orwin and E. Whetham, *History of British Agriculture 1846–1914* (London: Longmans, 1964), 121, 144–50; D. Taylor, “The British Dairy Industry, 1860–1930,” *The Economic History Review*, 29, no. 4 (1976): 585; T. Pratt, “The Cattle Plague of 1865–1867: A Comparative Study” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Winchester, 2022), 49.

14. E. J. T. Collins, “The Latter-Day History of the Draught Ox in England, 1770–1964,” *The Agricultural History Review*, 58, no. 2 (2010): 191–216.

15. N. Durbach, “Roast Beef, the New Poor Law, and the British Nation, 1834–63,” *Journal of British Studies*, 52, no. 4 (2013): 968–9. The story of Edward Jenner’s discovery and dissemination of a smallpox vaccine has been told many times. A recent account is R. Boddice, *Edward Jenner: The Vaccination Visionary* (Cheltenham: The History Press, 2023), ch. 3.

16. M. Stoll, “Creating Ecology: Protestants and the Moral Community of Creation,” in *Religion and the New Ecology: Environmental Responsibility in a World in Flux*, ed. D. Lodge and C. Hamlin (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 53–54. F. Egerton, “Changing Concepts of the Balance of Nature,” *Quarterly Review of Biology*, 48, no. 2 (1973): 322–50.

17. C. Hamlin, “Charles Kingsley: From Being Green to Green Being,” *Victorian Studies*, 54, no. 2 (2012): 255–81; K. Francis, “William Paley, Samuel Wilberforce, Charles Darwin and the Natural World: An Anglican Conversation,” *Studies in Church History*, 46 (2010): 353–65.

such as the cattle plague. The literature tends to assume, also, that early ecological thinking was primarily concerned with wildlife, birds particularly. James Turner has noted, for instance, that ideas about interdependence and reciprocity in nature were an important element in the bird protection movement that developed from the 1860s.¹⁸ This article shows that domestic animals, and not just wildlife, could prompt people to reflect on systems, communities, and interdependencies, as well as the human capacity to disturb nature's balance.¹⁹ It was because the lives of cows and humans were so close and entangled that cattle could make such an important contribution to early ecological thinking. The sermon literature points to the distinctive status of cattle in Christianity; indeed, Victorians could display the kind of reverential attitude towards cows that westerners have usually associated with pre- and non-Christian religions, and with supposedly "traditional" societies.²⁰

For centuries, of course, rural people had considered their relationships to the farm animals that they lived and worked alongside.²¹ But this nineteenth-century cattle plague was new and different. An intense national crisis in which many offered special prayers every day might prompt urban people to think about the significance of cows and the suffering of cattle. Importantly, much of the reflection took place communally and publicly; indeed, the state authorities and churches encouraged this when they invited people to collective acts of worship during the crisis, such as days of humiliation. The crisis also coincided with important intellectual developments, as Marie Robinson has pointed out.²² Charles Darwin focused attention on the continuities between humans and non-human animals, and the American George Perkins Marsh's warnings about the ecological and climatic impact of human activity had much relevance in an era when industrialised agriculture treated cows in supposedly "unnatural" ways.²³ Also important was that rinderpest preceded, and overlapped with, an outbreak of cholera, a fact that historians have largely not noticed.²⁴ Since at least the eighteenth century, coincidences in the outbreak of animal and human disease — such as overlapping outbreaks of rinderpest and bubonic plague in the early 1720s — had encouraged clergy, naturalists, and medical specialists to compare human and animal bodies and health, concerns that resemble the efforts made today to understand "the health of animals in relation to the health of humans and the environment" (sometimes called "one medicine" or "one health").²⁵ As Lucinda Cole has noted, the coincidence of rinderpest and cholera in 1865–66 generated further debate on the similarities between human and non-human bodies and constitutions, and how different species could be vulnerable to the same or similar diseases.²⁶ Church of England clergymen contributed to these debates. In this moment of shared disease, when different species seemed

18. J. Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast: Animals, Pain, and Humanity in the Victorian Mind* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 124–31.

19. Turner, in his discussion of nineteenth-century ideas about interconnections in nature, mentions anxieties about the danger that meat from ill-treated cows posed to human health: J. Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast*, 135.

20. L. Carlson, *Cattle: An Informal Social History* (Chicago, IL: Ivan Dee, 2001), 36–7, 47; C. Schwabe, *Cattle, Priests, and Progress in Medicine* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), ch. 1.

21. E. Fudge, *Quick Cattle and Dying Wishes: People and Their Animals in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

22. Robinson, 69.

23. C. Otter, *Diet For a Large Planet: Industrial Britain, Food Systems, World Ecology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), ch. 1.

24. An exception is L. Cole, "Cow-Doctors, Cholera, and the 'Animal Economy': British Cattle Politics, 1865–66," in *Animals and Epidemics: Interspecies Entanglements in Historical Perspective*, ed. A. Hüntelmann, C. Jaser, M. Roscher and N. Weber (Cologne: Böhlau, 2023), 95–113. Historians of "special worship" and "national prayer" have noticed the coincidence of rinderpest and cholera: *NP*, 2, 922–33.

25. L. Wilkinson, *Animals & Disease: An Introduction to Comparative Medicine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 46–47; A. Woods, "Doctors in the Zoo: Connecting Human and Animal Health in British Zoological Gardens, c. 1828–1890," in *Animals and the Shaping of Modern Medicine: One Health and its Histories*, ed. A. Woods, M. Bresalier, A. Cassidy and R. M. Dentinger (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 27–69.

26. Cole.

subject to the same threats, the traditional idea that humans stood above and apart from other animals — ideas that had long been promoted by orthodox Christian teaching — seemed less certain. In all these ways, the cattle plague encouraged reflection on themes of community, connection, and dependency, and what humans and non-human animals shared and had in common.

This article considers all British churches²⁷ but focuses primarily on the Church of England. The cattle plague, an agricultural issue, seems to have had special relevance for Anglican clergy because they belonged to a church that, through its tithe system, was peculiarly close to farming and the land. Anglican clergy had not always given animals such attention during disease outbreaks. The article's first part explores the historical precursors to 1865 and explains why, during eighteenth-century rinderpest outbreaks, Anglican preachers showed limited concern towards non-human sufferers. Part two explains why animals received more attention in 1865–66; it also surveys the various ways in which cattle plague sermons discussed the place of cows in human and ecological communities.

The final part turns to the more radical representations of animals in sermons and in other kinds of religious text, notably a cattle plague hymn that was widely used in 1866. The hymn is an early example of how prayer and worship in the Church of England increasingly recognised the contribution that animals made to communities and to rural livelihoods.²⁸ In the twentieth century, bishops routinely recommended their clergy and congregations to offer special prayers for suffering animals. Yet while the cattle plague represented the start of a period when Christian worship made more frequent reference to symbolic and living animals, events in 1865–66 also show how ecclesiastical leaders in the Church of England could be concerned about the inclusion of animals in worship. The epizootic is, then, a case study in how what have been called the “animal-friendly” traditions in Christianity — traditions that have challenged old assumptions about human distinctiveness and “dominion” over the natural world — have been, as one scholar has put it, “distorted, suppressed, or forgotten.”²⁹

Religious Responses to Rinderpest before 1865

The British Isles suffered three outbreaks of rinderpest in the eighteenth century and three more in the 1860s and 1870s. The first, in 1714–15, was centred on south-east England and was stamped out in six months through swift state intervention that combined slaughter, quarantine, and compensation payments to farmers.³⁰ The two sermons on the “distemper” listed in the *English Short Title Catalogue* from those years suggests that the outbreak was too brief and too localised to generate much response from the religious public, and not from the Church of England: both sermons were preached by dissenters.³¹ The second instance, which began in Essex in 1745, coincided with the Jacobite rebellion, and the failure of the distracted government to properly manage the early outbreak was, as John Broad explains, a reason why this outbreak spread further and lasted longer. In addition to reviving and extending the regulations used in 1714–15,³² the Crown authorities in

27. Although the Church of Ireland offered prayers for protection from cattle plague, Ireland largely avoided rinderpest in 1865–66 and so is not considered by this article.

28. J. Hardwick, “Animals, Anglicans, and Cultures of Prayer and Worship in England, c.1900–c.1950,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 75, no. 2 (2024): 1–25.

29. A. Gross, “The Inescapable Religious Dimension,” <https://www.rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/latest/essays/inescapablereigiousdimension> (accessed 25 July 2023).

30. J. Broad, “Cattle Plague in Eighteenth-Century England,” *The Agricultural History Review*, 31, no. 2 (1983): 106.

31. T. Simmons, *A Lesson from the Beasts, or Instructions from the Herds of Cattle* (London: E. Matthews, 1714); J. Bates, *A Fast Sermon Preach'd at Hackney, Novemb. the 3rd 1714* (London: M. Lawrence, 1714).

32. Broad, 107.

1748 issued a special prayer, composed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, which recognised that the nation's "manifold Vices and Impieties" had provoked the "contagious Distemper." This prayer was used for an extraordinarily long time. It was prescribed for daily use throughout the Church of England until the outbreak ended in 1759, an event marked by the issue of another prayer, this time of thanksgiving. The 1748 prayer represented the animals in utilitarian ways, as sources of "Provision and Nourishment" and as gifts given by God as a "great Bounty to Mankind."³³

Britain experienced outbreaks of diseases among other farm and working animals (a destructive "rot" in sheep and horse influenza occurred, for example, in the 1730s),³⁴ but only cattle disease prompted such an extraordinary response from the Church of England. The death of cattle elicited such concern because they were reared in all parts of the nation and because they provided the traction, manure and foodstuffs on which all types of British farming and various urban occupations depended. Cattle had a special religious significance for Christians: the infant Christ had been laid in a manger or trough for feeding cattle, and the fourth commandment, which prohibits work on the sabbath, makes special mention of cattle, and this commandment was written on the walls of many places of worship.³⁵ Yet cattle plague was an awkward and difficult subject for prayer and worship. Why would God punish innocent animals for human sins? Did cattle belong to humans or to God? How far should animals be the focus of prayer and worship? Could one pray for the preservation of the things that made life more comfortable, and was it appropriate to ask God to ease the suffering of animals?

Some Church of England clergy expressed these concerns. One London clergyman said he read the 1748 prayer with "reluctance" because it was "carnally minded" and only led to "an anxious Concern about a scarcity of Cattle" (interestingly, although the prayer was about the "scarcity and distress" caused by the plague, the clergyman called it the "prayer for the health of the Horned cattle").³⁶ Most Anglican clergy who preached on cattle disease treated the "distemper" as a public calamity much like an earthquake or storm, and rather than inquiring into its causes or the nature of animal suffering, instead focused on the human failings that had supposedly brought on God's punishment. In a 1748 sermon, a "country clergyman" told a congregation of "melancholy sufferers" that God had "poured down his light Afflictions to make us review our conduct."³⁷ The message was similar in town and countryside. In his sermon to a Bethnal Green congregation, Samuel Eccles connected the "general attack" on "so immediately an indispensably useful a Part of the Creation" to swearing, lying, and taking false oaths, as well as other sins that, to modern readers, seem unconnected with a disease among animals.³⁸

Sermons delivered by dissenters gave more consideration to suffering animals. Samuel King, a Northamptonshire dissenter, articulated ideas about the relationship between human sin and the animal world when he explained in a 1749 sermon that the "beasts of the field suffer for the sins of men" because "the sin of man has brought the animal creation under a curse." Citing a verse from the book of Proverbs about an ant teaching wisdom and industry, King noted that cattle taught humans lessons about dependence, obedience, and gratitude to God. Cattle, for King, were close to God and their suffering groans were a means by which

33. NP: 2, 472.

34. G. Fleming, *Animal Plagues: Their History, Nature, and Prevention* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1871), 257–9.

35. Luke chapter 2, verse 7; Exodus chapter 20, verse 10.

36. *The London Evening-Post*, 20–23 April 1754; NP: 2, 471.

37. "A Country Clergyman," *A Sermon Occasioned by the Distemper Now Raging Among the Horned Cattle* (Cambridge: J. Bentham, 1748), 3.

38. S. Eccles, *National Sins the Cause of National Judgements* (London: A. Strahan, 1750), 7–14.

God spoke to human communities to urge their repentance and reformation.³⁹ A 1714 sermon by a Hackney Congregational minister, which was reprinted when the distemper reappeared in 1745, similarly argued that although cattle were the objects of God's care, they suffered because of human sin, one of which, the preacher argued, was the failure of people to properly care for animals, as God had instructed. This preacher's interest in the special place of cows in creation led him to describe cows as "Creatures capable of Pleasure and Pain" and as having "Life, Perception and Sagacity." The sermon also cited verses from Joel and Exodus, as well as Psalm 144, to argue that the suffering and condition of animals might be the focus for prayer. Cattle, the preacher put it, "are the Objects of Prayer for Relief, as well as Men."⁴⁰ For the historian Philip Sampson, these "friendlier" ways of talking about animals are distinctively "nonconformist." There was a tendency among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century dissenters and evangelicals, Sampson argues, to regard animals as "fellow creatures" with a "moral standing" that God had created as part of a pure and innocent creation that had been spoiled by human sin. Dissenters recognised, too, that animals might even have a religious quality in the sense that they taught humans the "wisdom, power, and goodness of God."⁴¹

Such ways of speaking appeared in some Anglican sermons. Morgan Powell told his Cambridgeshire congregation that God had a special relationship with cows, and like King spoke of the groans of suffering animals as "the Voice of God speaking to us." A distemper among the animals closest to humans might even be God's means of punishing people who had been "cruel to their beasts and unmerciful in using them."⁴² This sermon was the exception in the published sermons preached by Anglicans. That most other Church of England preachers represented animals in more practical ways or ignored them entirely is unsurprising. It was widely assumed that the pulpit was not an appropriate place for discourses on animal subjects,⁴³ and this attitude — the view that preaching on the welfare of animals might even be a "desecration of the ministerial office" — continued, as Chien-hui Li notes, well into the nineteenth century.⁴⁴

Sermons and the Representation of Cattle in 1865–66

Rinderpest was an ever-present hazard in continental Europe and the threat posed by the disease increased as demand for meat grew and as market integration with cattle-rearing centres in eastern Europe thickened. Britain, however, was largely insulated from the disease.⁴⁵ Rinderpest returned in the late 1760s and early 1780s, but these were minor local events, and not until 1865 would the religious public take much notice of diseases among animals. Foot-and-mouth and bovine pleuro-pneumonia, diseases that first appeared in Britain in 1839 and 1842 respectively, were regarded by the farming community as "mild, self-limiting, and unpreventable" ailments, and just as there were few efforts to control outbreaks, so the churches had little reason to reflect on the causes and meaning of what were considered "occupational hazards" of the farming sector.⁴⁶ The rinderpest outbreak

39. S. King, *The Hand of the Lord Upon the Cattle, Considered and Improved, in a Sermon Preached at Northampton, December 7, 1749* (London: J. Buckland, 1750), 10–12.

40. J. Bates, *A Fast Sermon Preached at Hackney, November the Third, 1714* (London: R. Hett, 1745).

41. P. Sampson, *Animal Ethics and the Nonconformist Conscience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), ch. 5. Also, Stoll, "Creating Ecology," 58–59.

42. M. Powell, *The Hand of the Lord Upon the Cattle* (London: S. Austen, 1747), 21, 24, 31.

43. J. Morillo, *The Rise of Animals and the Descent of Man, 1660–1800* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2018), 80–81, 94.

44. C. Li, "A Union of Christianity, Humanity, and Tradition: The Christian Tradition and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Nineteenth-Century England," *Society & Animals*, 8, no. 3 (2000): 275.

45. K. Harper, *Plagues upon the Earth: Disease and the Course of Human History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 452.

46. Woods, "The Construction of an Animal Plague: Foot and Mouth Disease in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Social History of Medicine*, 17, no. 1 (2004): 24, 27.

that followed the arrival of sick animals at Hull in May 1865 was different and was frequently cast, with much justification, as a national issue. Rinderpest destroyed a large portion of the British cattle industry, endangered livelihoods, and raised meat and milk prices.⁴⁷

In October 1865 Queen Victoria and her Privy Council issued an order that instructed Anglican clergy to read a single prayer, two paragraphs long, that, in the first part, appealed to God to remove the cattle plague and, in the second part, and as a secondary matter, to protect the country from cholera, a disease which had struck Britain three times before, and which was now spreading in continental Europe. This prayer, which was used in every church service for eight months, resembled the 1748 prayer in that it represented the cows in practical ways, as a “provision” and a source of human “sustenance.” The prayer also asked God to “look down ... in compassion” only on the human sufferers of the calamity. Another state order, issued in August 1866 after cholera had arrived in Britain, instructed clergy to use two prayers: the first, and longer (two paragraphs), appealed to God to withdraw cholera; the second prayer — one paragraph long — was a shortened version of the October 1865 cattle plague prayer. This time, however, the human disease was prioritised, and the prayer to withdraw cholera appeared first.⁴⁸ This tendency to present the cattle in practical ways, and to prioritise human suffering, reflected wider attitudes. Many people only commented on animal suffering when rinderpest struck the most prized herds. The notices that other churches issued for special prayers and days of humiliation also ignored animal suffering. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, for example, described the cows as “property” and “articles of daily food” when in March 1866 it issued an order recommending its members to join in “solemn public humiliation and prayer.” Some Anglican bishops likewise referred to the threat to the food supply when they invited their dioceses to observe days of humiliation in spring 1866.⁴⁹

The orders for special prayers and the appointment of special days of humiliation encouraged clergy in all the Protestant churches to preach on disease and the efficacy of prayer. Many more sermons were published on the cattle plague than cholera (perhaps because the latter was a familiar disease), although a small number addressed both diseases, and some followed the example of the special prayers and linked the two.⁵⁰ Most of the fifty-four sermons on cattle plague (forty-two were delivered by Anglicans) concentrated on what the cattle plague revealed about human sin and salvation. Old ideas about divine judgements, “special providences,” and “national sins” appeared regularly.⁵¹ Congregations heard how their failings had contributed to the national crisis, and clergy identified sins that were seemingly unconnected to agriculture or to human relationships with animals, such as sabbath desecration, drunkenness, and greed.⁵² Benjamin Smith delivered a particularly human-centred sermon in rural Kent in October 1865. Cows died and suffered for man’s instruction and benefit, and it was through rinderpest that God taught lessons to humans about charity, neighbourliness, and sanitation.⁵³

47. A. Erickson, “The Cattle Plague in England, 1865–1867,” *Agricultural History*, 35, no. 2 (1961): 102.

48. *NP*: 2, 925, 931.

49. *NP*: 2, 929. E.g. the Bishop of Manchester: *Manchester Weekly Times*, 24 March 1866.

50. Seven sermons on cholera appeared as pamphlets in 1865 and 1866, and three more referenced both diseases in the title.

51. P. Williamson, “State Prayers, Fasts and Thanksgivings: Public Worship in Britain, 1830–1897,” *Past & Present*, 200, no. 1 (2008): 159–61.

52. M. Cragoe, “‘The Hand of the Lord is Upon the Cattle’: Religious Reactions to the Cattle Plague 1865–67,” in *The Age of Equipoise? Reassessing Mid-Victorian Britain*, ed. M. Hewitt (Aldershot: Routledge, 2000), 199–200.

53. B. Smith, *Prayer and Cattle Plague* (London: Macmillan, 1866), 5–8.

Nine of the fifty-four printed sermons made substantial reference to human–animal relationships and the suffering of cows. Although rural preachers seem to have reflected on animal issues more than their urban counterparts (country clergymen delivered six of the nine sermons), ministers in urban areas could reflect on animal suffering, and urban and rural sermons communicated comparable messages. Cattle plague was, after all, not a distant or irrelevant issue for urban communities. Matthew Cragoe might be correct that northern cities “remained indifferent” to the days of humiliation appointed by Anglican bishops, but this reflected a hostility towards Anglican leadership in religion, not a fundamental disinterest in the issue.⁵⁴ Townspeople felt the effects of the cattle plague in expensive meat. Many, too, continued to live in proximity to live cattle. The technology that might have distanced urban populations from the transport and slaughter of animals — refrigeration, freezing, and canning — either did not exist or had not been developed to any extent, and cities still had many slaughterhouses and dairy farms.⁵⁵ The growing appeal of organised animal protection — which was particularly noticeable in large cities — also ensured that cattle plague had relevance for urban communities.

When rinderpest struck, preaching on animal protection was becoming more accepted and routine. A good example of this is the sermon that Arthur Stanley, the dean of Westminster and an eminent theologian and Darwinist, preached in June 1865 for the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) at the Chapel Royal in Whitehall Palace on the fourth Sunday after Trinity. This sermon, which was concerned with the “common origin of man and of the brute creation,” reflected Stanley’s interest in Darwinism and his concern for animal welfare generally, and did not mention the cattle plague that had broken out the previous month.⁵⁶ Stanley’s congregation, which apparently included “several members of the nobility,” points to the rising status of animal protection and suggests why Victorian clergy were more willing to preach on animal topics than their eighteenth-century predecessors. Stanley’s sermon demonstrated, too, how animal protection might be made compatible with prescribed Anglican doctrines and forms of worship. Stanley’s sermon established a tradition, and in subsequent years the RSPCA asked Anglican and other Protestant clergy to give special attention to this special “Animal Sunday” on the fourth Sunday after Trinity.⁵⁷

Clergymen in both town and countryside thought the cattle plague taught lessons about the mistreatment of animals. A verse from 1 Corinthians 9:9, “Doth God take care for oxen?” provided the text for several sermons, with the conclusion that God took special care for cattle, and He passed this responsibility on when He gifted these animals to humans. A Kent clergyman said humans should use animals “tenderly and as if they believed in their capacity to feel,” and numerous other preachers hoped that the cattle plague would awaken people to the cruel treatment of farmed animals.⁵⁸ Anglicans spoke much like the eighteenth-century dissenters considered earlier when they described animals as pure and “innocent creatures” that suffered because of man’s sin.⁵⁹ Humans had a duty to steward and to treat God’s creations with care.

Several sermons point to changes in livestock farming and concerns about changing human–animal relationships. Chris Otter has written that after mid-century “the relationship between humans and livestock became increasingly marked by distance, technological

54. Cragoe, 200–02.

55. Pratt, 56–64; Otter, 36.

56. A. Stanley, *The Creation of Man* (Oxford: Parker, 1865), 5, 9.

57. Hardwick, 6–10.

58. J. Watkin, *The Cattle-Plague. A Sermon* (London: Rivingtons, 1865), 5, 14.

59. E. Harman, *The Cattle Plague: Its Warnings and Its Lessons* (London: W. Macintosh, 1866), 10; H. Hill, *A Sermon, Preached in Felton Church, on Friday, March 23rd, 1866* (Hereford: E. Jakeman, 1866), 9.

mediation, and transience.”⁶⁰ Selective breeding produced heavier and fleshier animals. Changes to animal feed, notably the increasing use of man-made “artificial,” coupled with a growing tendency to house cattle in heated buildings over winter, accelerated the growth and maturity of animals. The turn to free trade in the 1840s opened Britain to imports of live animals from northern European ports. The spread of railways meant that animals could be transported frequently and over longer distances, usually in poor conditions. The sermons reveal an early Christian opposition to what would later become known as “factory farming.” A Leith Presbyterian said “there is usually a greater proneness to disease than is found among that same class of animals not under human control,” and that the “unnatural state” in which cattle were kept “rendered them an easy prey to the contagion.” Humans, it followed, should live in “fullest harmony with the laws of the animal economy.” Another Presbyterian said “God’s creatures have been abused, and consumed upon men’s lusts.”⁶¹ Scottish ministers seem to have been preoccupied by the harm caused by “unnatural” forms of farming. A writer to the *Aberdeen Journal* perhaps offered an explanation when they argued that Scotland was “less favoured” than other places in terms of “soil and climate.” Scottish farmers had, as a result, departed further than others from “nature’s laws” and had succumbed to the temptation to “pamper the bestial with artificial food and confinement.”⁶²

Sermons delivered to English congregations by Anglican clergy expressed anxieties about industrialised livestock production too, although for whatever reason English preachers said less about artificial feed and focused more on cruel treatment and transport conditions.⁶³ Many sermons expressed the idea, identified by the historian James Turner, that “abuse of animals was followed by retribution.”⁶⁴ Newton Smart, a rural dean in hard-hit Kent, told his clergy that rinderpest was a “punishment” and that there was a “direct connexion” between the visitation and the “unnecessary suffering” that so many farmed animals experienced on ships, trains, and farms.⁶⁵ A Cheshire minister similarly argued that the plague was a “chastisement” for “the overcrowding, the ill-ventilation, the uncleanness of many of our cow-houses.”⁶⁶ The Archbishop of York — who lost all the cows on his Bishopthorpe estate — thought the plague had “some purpose” as “it might restrain the common cruelty which existed in removing animals from place to place.”⁶⁷ The comments of some preachers point to what Otter calls the persistence of “affective and empathetic relations” between humans and livestock.⁶⁸ In Droxford, Hampshire, the Anglican preacher appealed to his congregation’s sense of “attachment” to farm animals when he asked his hearers to have “pity” for the “sorrows” of the animal sufferers, and invited them to reflect on what it would be to see animals “dying around you” that “you have watched over, which have done your bidding or supplied your need” and which “know your every look and word.”⁶⁹

Nineteenth-century sermons about the plague differed from those delivered in the eighteenth in the sense that the former might place heavier emphasis on the interrelationships,

60. Otter, 35.

61. R. Hunter, *Divine Providence in Relation to Rinderpest and Other Plagues* (Edinburgh: Seton and Mackenzie, 1866), 11, 16; M. Martin, *The Cattle Plague: Its Cause and Cure* (Glasgow: G. Gallie, 1866), 7. Robinson, 59, briefly mentions these themes in her study of the same sermons.

62. *Aberdeen Journal*, 21 February 1866.

63. See e.g., W. Herringham, *A Sermon Without a Text on the Cattle Plague* (London: W. Macintosh, 1865), 8–9.

64. J. Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast*, 135.

65. N. Smart, *The Cattle Plague a Divine Visitation* (London: Rivingtons, 1866), 7–8.

66. *The Guardian*, 10 March 1866.

67. *Leeds Mercury*, 16 March 1866; *York Herald*, 27 January 1866; E. Thomson, *The Life and Letters of William Thomson, Archbishop of York* (London: Bodley Head, 1909), 72–73.

68. Otter, 35.

69. Harman, 8–9.

dependencies, and community of interests that connected cows and humans. In earlier times, such as following Edward Jenner's 1796 discovery that a cowpox vaccine could prevent smallpox, clergy had celebrated the qualities of an "innocuous," "useful," "healthy," "clean-feeding" animal, "to whose salubrious juices" humans were "indebted for the most grateful nourishment of life."⁷⁰ During the plague, many sermons referenced Old Testament texts that referred to the special place the cow occupied in ancient pastoral societies (such as Exodus chapter 9, verses 3–6), and rural preachers pointed out that modern human societies also could not function without cattle. Cows were "the constant companions of man's rural life."⁷¹ One Cheshire minister noted that a "daily familiarity" bred an "interest" and "attachment" between people and cattle. "We cannot part altogether with our beasts," the Kent clergyman J. Watkin said, "for they are so linked to our necessities, that life would be intolerable without their services."⁷² While most preachers considered the cattle plague harmful because of its economic effects, and because it removed a source of labour and food on which sections of the community depended, some commentators predicted that the epizootic, and the deficiency of animal food in diets, would have a deeper, nutritional, effects on human health. A Congregationalist said rinderpest would "affect the health and vigour of our life" and an Anglican asserted that "our natural life depends largely for its support on animal food."⁷³ A nonconformist revived old ideas about meat and good health and about beef-eating and national identity when he said the shift from grain-based to meat-based diets was a sign of advancing "refinement" and necessitous in "such a changeable and moist climate."⁷⁴

Francis Pigou, a London clergyman who was much interested in natural history, and who in later life preached on the commonalities between humans and animals for the RSPCA, made a larger argument about the web of relations (the "mutual law of dependence," as he put it) that bound together living beings. Pigou noted that "so closely connected are the relationships between the lowest and highest forms of life in the graduate scale of the Universe ... no one portion can thus be injuriously affected without its direct and immediate effects upon some other portion." The cattle plague, therefore, demonstrated how mankind's mistreatment of one part of nature would have harmful effects on people, and was God's way of "silently" and "persistently" calling humans to "remembrance" of their duties to observe "sanitary laws and principles" and to keep animals in more humane conditions.⁷⁵ Pigou's discussion of webs, relationships, interdependencies, and the importance of the most insignificant species, was a restatement of the ideas that underpinned Charles Darwin's thought, as well as the natural theology of the eighteenth-century Anglican, William Paley.⁷⁶ But there was an ecological and environmental element to Pigou's sermon, too. The "primeval harmonies of nature" were, Pigou said, "liable to constant derangements by the interference of man."⁷⁷ Here, Pigou referenced the book *Man and Nature*, published the year before by the American diplomat, George Perkins

70. L. Booker, *A Discourse (Addressed Chiefly to Parents) On the Duty and Advantage of Inoculating Children with the Cow-Pock* (London: J. Hatchard, 1802), 5; J. Plumtre, *The Plague Stayed: A Scriptural View of Pestilence* (Cambridge: F. Hodson, 1805), 24, 76.

71. J. Mitchinson, *Thanksgiving a Feature in Humiliation* (Canterbury: Ginder, 1866), 5.

72. R. Greenall, *The Cattle Plague. Two Sermons Preached in Stretton Church, Cheshire* (Warrington: G. Powlson, 1866), 10, 22. Watkin, 8.

73. J. French, *The Cattle Plague Distinguished from a Judgement* (London: J. Snow, 1866), 3; F. Pigou, *Is the Cattle Plague of God?* (London: Rivingtons, 1866), 5.

74. S. Sears, *The Cattle Plague: God's Uplifted Hand!* (London: Houlton and Wright, 1866), 6.

75. Pigou, 4–5. Pigou's later RSPCA sermon was *Kindness to Dumb Animals. A Sermon Preached at Bristol Cathedral, 6th May, 1906 (Labour Sunday)* (London: RSPCA, 1906).

76. J. Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast, 125–7*; D. Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 156.

77. Pigou, 18–19.

Marsh. Marsh's book used evidence from Europe and North America to show those that failed to conserve forests and work with God's natural laws faced ecological ruin.⁷⁸

Other clergymen agreed that the exploitation of cattle harmed humans, and that the lesson of the cattle plague was that humans should recognise that they were part of nature, rather than above or outside it. Watkin, the Kent clergyman, made an ecological point about interrelationships when, in concluding his sermon, he said "God has put all as closely together as He has put the members of the body." Watkin continued:

The clouds are tied to earth, descending there to make grass and cattle grow; and man is tied to cattle, wanting their food and services. The many features of the bond are to be seen, and man should mark the obligations, and never interfere with their full and harmonious play.⁷⁹

The key thoughts in this passage — that man was part of the animal world and that there was a natural harmony between humans and animals, and that people punished themselves when they broke God's laws — bear striking resemblance to the ideas about the human place in nature and "environmental sin" that Christopher Hamlin finds in the stories and sermons that Charles Kingsley, the nature writer and Anglican clergyman, published before 1865.⁸⁰ They also recalled the comments of clergymen gardeners who, in earlier decades, had warned that the destruction of sparrows encouraged the proliferation of insects and had harmful consequences for crops.⁸¹ Perhaps the most strikingly ecological sermon was offered by a nonconformist, W. Rosevear, in the Baptist chapel in Abingdon, Oxfordshire in March 1866. "Human responsibilities," Rosevear said, extended "to the use we make of the several parts of the great gift from the Hands of God — 'The Earth'." Humans had "far reaching power over Nature," and the cattle plague, Rosevear speculated, was evidence that people had forced "the powers of the soil, the processes of growth in the wondrous plant world, and the processes of life in the still more complex animal world, beyond the limit of nature." Such misuse would "rebound upon himself in the form of subtle and widespread chastisement."⁸²

Some religious observers considered it significant that the cattle plague coincided with an outbreak of cholera. The special prayers used in 1865–66 may have represented animals in practical terms and communicated a sense of human distinction, but they also helped contemporaries to regard human and animal diseases as connected and similar. The collect that Henry Manning, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Westminster, ordered his clergy to use, the *pro quacumque tribulatione* (a prayer in time of trouble), had commonly been used during plagues among humans in previous centuries.⁸³ The Anglican prayer used daily from October 1865 invited worshippers to regard rinderpest and cholera as elements in a combined divine punishment, and although the August 1866 order instructed clergy to use separate prayers for cholera and cattle plague, the thanksgiving prayer used in November 1866 combined the two diseases, and thanked God for withdrawing "from us this Plague and grievous Sickness."⁸⁴ Some Anglican commentators went on and argued that rinderpest and cholera, despite being different diseases, had similar causes and taught the same lessons about the need to understand and work with the natural laws of sanitation

78. Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 87–88.

79. Watkin, 17.

80. Hamlin, "Charles Kingsley".

81. "Sparrow War," *The Times*, 25 December 1855; Egerton, 334.

82. W. Rosevear, *Temporal Calamities, Not Divine Judgements* (London: E. Stock, 1866), 13–14.

83. Cardinal Henry Manning to the Roman Catholic clergy, 22 August 1865, Archives of the Archbishop of Westminster [AAW], London, Printed Circulars to the Clergy, volume 1. The author thanks Philip Williamson for this reference.

84. *NP*: 2, 933.

and health. Lucinda Cole has shown how the coincidence of cattle plague and cholera in 1865–66 confirmed to many secular observers that humans and non-humans inhabited a “shared animal economy:” animal life was subject to the same laws of sanitation, there were similarities between the bodies and constitutions of humans and cows, and the violation of sanitation laws made both species susceptible to disease.⁸⁵ Clergy communicated the idea of an “animal economy” too, but the ecological sermons considered above suggest that clergy emphasised the more neighbourly concept of community, as well as economy. Humans and cows were so interdependent that the members of an inter-species “mixed community” might suffer sickness together.

Such thinking was particularly clearly expressed in the leader articles that three Anglican clergymen — Thomas Mozley, Henry Annesley Woodham, and Henry Wace — wrote for *The Times* early in the plague. John Fisher’s description of these writers as “anti-contagionists” is misleading because they all believed that the disease could be spread through contact, infected air, and the exchange of fluids.⁸⁶ The term is, however, useful in the sense that each believed the disease had been “spontaneously generated” in Britain, as opposed to imported for overseas. Just as insanitary conditions in human inhabitations explained the virulence of cholera in humans, so these writers argued that the practice of taking cows from their “natural environments” in “green fields” and enclosing them in cramped urban cowsheds and railway trucks had made the animals particularly susceptible to disease. The notion that cattle had been “prepared” for plague by decades of “artificial culture” and “unnatural feeding” received much publicity in 1865–66.⁸⁷ Abigail Woods, in her work on veterinary medicine in mid-Victorian zoos, notes that zoologists and others concerned with animal health could perceive incarcerated animals as “victims of unhealthy environments,” and as suffering similar diseases to those experienced by humans that inhabited overcrowded slums.⁸⁸ “The susceptibilities of cattle resemble those of men,” Woodham wrote in *The Times*, and both humans and animals, when weakened, could be vulnerable to the same threats in the atmosphere. The hot summer of 1865 had created an “atmospheric element” that acted upon weakened cattle, and “some destructive element” in the air had given “vigour, fatality, and range to the epidemic poison.”⁸⁹ While the same conditions might explain the origins and spread of cattle plague and cholera, the leader writers also introduced the idea — one that was commonly discussed in 1865 and 1866 — that rinderpest might be the same or analogous to human diseases, such as smallpox or typhus.⁹⁰

The leader writers also revived the old idea that diseases in animals preceded disease among humans. “Murrains,” Woodham said in August 1865, “have often been the precursors of epidemics among men.”⁹¹ Although this idea was not new (preachers referred to it during rinderpest in the 1740s and 1750s),⁹² the events of 1865 and 1866 encouraged much reflection on the phenomenon.⁹³ Some medical writers used historical records to demonstrate that sickness among “lower animals” had always portended diseases in

85. Cole, 96–7, 106–07.

86. Fisher, 654.

87. “Denaturalization,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, 8 March 1866.

88. Woods, “Doctors in the Zoo,” 35–9, 53–58.

89. *The Times*, 19 August and 4 and 25 September 1865. The author thanks staff at the News UK Archive, London, for providing the identity of the leader writers from *The Times* leader diaries.

90. *The Times*, 15 August and 4 and 14 September 1865; Fisher, 656.

91. *The Times*, 23 August 1865.

92. “A Fellow of St. John’s,” *Royal Folly: Or, David’s Sin in Numbering of the People* (London: M. Cooper, 1753), 26; E. Arrowsmith, *God’s Judgements Considered, As to Their Nature, and End* (London: E. Comyns, 1745), 12; J. Allen, *Rejoice with Trembling* (London: J. Noon, 1746), 26.

93. T. Baker (ed.), *The Common Nature of Epidemics, and Their Relation to Climate and Civilization* (London: N. Trübner, 1866), iii.

humans. These chroniclers seemed uncertain on what the link was and whether it was simply the case that dearth caused by the deaths of farm animals weakened human bodies.⁹⁴ The notion that plagues of beasts preceded plagues of men appears in many religious texts in 1865 and 1866, although few religious commentators explained whether this was a case of natural law, or if God first sent diseases among cattle to warn humans, in the same way that Egypt endured a gradation of punishments, as described in Exodus. The evangelical Anglican periodical, the *Christian Observer*, thought murrain was the “herald” of cholera, and a clergyman on the Isle of Wight thought the October 1865 special prayer “was evidently framed on the supposition that man could scarcely escape the influences that are so fatal to the beasts,” presumably because the prayer addressed cattle plague first, cholera second. Another Anglican, preaching on cholera in 1866, said “it often happens that disease amongst cattle goes before, causes, and renders more vehement, pestilence among men.”⁹⁵ Manning, the Catholic archbishop, referred to natural law and a special intervening providence when he told his clergy that cattle disease might be the “forerunner and warning of a still graver and more afflicting visitation.”⁹⁶ The coincidence of disease in animals and humans illustrated, in striking terms, how far people and domesticated animals lived close and interdependent lives. As Mozley wrote in a *Times* leader in November 1865, the cattle plague demonstrated that there was “rather more community of condition and interests between the human and the brute than the former is apt to suppose.”⁹⁷

The cattle plague communicated, in dramatic terms, ideas about the connectedness of nature, and humanity’s capacity to disrupt. It is true that not all the preachers reflected on animal suffering or interconnections in the natural world. Some even considered cattle plague to be God’s punishment on a society that cared more for animals than the poor.⁹⁸ Others, at the opposite end of opinion, criticised the churches for representing the suffering cattle as things, and not doing more to make animals central to church services. As one writer to the *York Herald* put it, “horses, cows, and sheep, are not machines constructed on mechanical principles for the purpose of affording to man so much strength, or so much material for his benefit.”⁹⁹

Cattle and Anglican Worship after 1865

The final part of this article considers the small number of Anglican clergymen who made the striking, and radical, suggestion that animals that inhabited human communities could be both the focus of church services, and perhaps even the subject of prayer. These efforts elicited a reaction from others who worried that such innovations might have troubling implications for the place of animals in Christian worship. This reaction provides an understanding of why, despite a growing concern for the natural world in Anglican worship, many Anglicans continued to oppose the inclusion of animal references in prayer and worship.

The October 1865 special prayer attracted much criticism. For the historian Frank Turner, the criticism of the cattle plague, especially that which came from scientists, was part of a longer controversy over the nature and efficacy of prayer that dated from at least

94. T. Madden, *The Rinderpest of the Present Time, and the Contagious Cattle Distempers of Former Ages* (Dublin: C. Cooper, 1866), 40.

95. *Christian Observer*, 333 (September 1865), 726; G. Prothero, *A Sermon Preached in Whippingham Church, on the Day of Humiliation* (Isle of Wight: S. Joyce, 1866), 7; P. Moore, *Prevention is Better than Cure* (Stockport: Claye, 1868), 21.

96. Manning to clergy, 22 August 1865, AAW, Printed Circulars to the Clergy, volume 1.

97. *The Times*, 7 November 1865.

98. Archbishop Paul Cullen of Dublin called the cattle plague God’s punishment for a contemporary “cattle worship,” characterised by an “excessive attachment to the beasts of the field.” *The Times*, 11 October 1865.

99. “K,” *York Herald*, 7 October 1865.

the 1850s.¹⁰⁰ What has not been noticed is that the prayer was also criticised because it said little about animal suffering. One of the most striking critiques appeared in a sermon that Charles Craufurd, rector of Oldswinford, Worcestershire, preached on Sunday, 4 March 1866. In this widely read sermon (ten editions were published), Craufurd took issue with the special prayer because it only appealed to God to “spare the lives” of cows so “that upon their bodies our carnivorous appetite may be more fully gorged.” Importantly, too, Anglicans had not been invited to ask God to “relieve the sufferings” of the “poor beasts.” Craufurd said he would not “pray for beef” and would “eat my dinner of herbs with gladness and singleness of heart.”¹⁰¹

The notion that humans might pray for animals or intercede with God on their behalf, appeared in other kinds of religious text. The distressing sight of dying cattle, witnessed during a visit to Cheshire, prompted John Mason Neale — a prominent Anglo-Catholic who did much to restore hymnody to the Church of England — to compose a hymn in early 1866 that included the lines “Pity ... Thy guiltless creatures” and “let them profit by our prayer.” The hymn also suggested animal feeling and emotion when it asked that oxen “may not know nor fear decay.”¹⁰² Neale’s hymn was widely used in 1866 and would appear in the 1869 edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* with the subtitle, taken from the *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) version of Psalm 36, “Thou, Lord, shalt save both man and beast.”¹⁰³ Yet the hymn was criticised because it pleaded “for the brute creation, which have no sins to confess or be humbled for.” Another commentator considered the hymn a, “strange jumble of earthly and heavenly things, of cattle and immortal souls.” Even some of those who approved of the hymn agreed that humans, not animals, should be the focus of the appeal.¹⁰⁴ The hymn was omitted from a revised edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1875.

These negative responses to Neale’s hymn should be understood as aspects of a wider effort among Anglican clergy — at all levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy — to limit references to animals in prayer and worship. Several Anglican clergy, among them the Archbishop of York, used verses from Psalm 36 for the texts of their cattle plague sermon, although it is revealing that some preachers, such as G. Austen from Nottingham, entirely omitted the line “Thou Lord, shalt save both man and beast.”¹⁰⁵ Others that drew their text from the psalm — the Archbishop included — substituted the BCP translation of the line, which might be interpreted as offering the hope of salvation for animals, for the less eye-catching King James Bible version, which, when it said God “preservest man and beast,” seemed to focus on bodies as opposed to souls.¹⁰⁶ Elsewhere clergy tried to avoid giving the impression that the pain or future state of the cattle would be the focus for prayer and worship. York Minster altered the music for the church services for the day of humiliation when a newspaper reported that the choir had planned to sing the anthem “Blest are the departed” from Louis Spohr’s “The Last Judgement” oratorio.¹⁰⁷ Welsh clergymen who could not make sense of the official Welsh translation of the 1865 prayer had trouble avoiding the issue of animal pain when they composed their own versions for reading out to their congregations. A writer to the *North Wales Chronicle* took issue with a clergyman

100. F. Turner, “Rainfall, Plagues, and the Prince of Wales,” 48.

101. C. Craufurd, *How About a Day of Humiliation* (Stourbridge: R. Broomhall, 1866), 11.

102. M. Lawson, *Letters of John Mason Neale* (London: Longmans, 1910), 363–4; *Hymns for Use During the Cattle Plague* (London: SPCK, 1866).

103. W. Monk, *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (London: W. Clowes, 1869), 378–79.

104. *Derby Mercury*, 7 and 14 March 1866; *Berrow’s Worcester Journal*, 14 April 1866.

105. *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 9 March 1866.

106. *Yorkshire Gazette*, 27 January 1866; G. Blomfield, *Divine Providence in Its Relation to the Cattle Plague and Prayer* (London: Rivingtons, 1866), 3.

107. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 5 and 7 March 1866; *York Herald*, 10 March 1866.

who had provided a translation that described the murrain as “painful” and “distressing,” and, in so doing, apparently concentrated too much on animal suffering. Defending himself, the translator said his intention was not “to refer to the sufferings of the animals, but to the virulence of the Plague, and the consequent *distress to the minds of men*.”¹⁰⁸

These examples show that despite the growing concern for animal protection and the popularity of animal-themed sermons, many Anglican clergy believed church services should concentrate on the salvation of human souls. The 1865 and 1866 cattle plague prayers, and the nature of the references to animals in the sermon literature, indicate that the clergy who wished to restrict the animal presence in prayer and worship had much success. Yet the cattle plague marked the beginning of a period when, in the Church of England, animals could become the focus in prayer and worship in ways that were new.¹⁰⁹ Important here was that in the era of agricultural depression that developed from the 1870s, agricultural services, notably harvest thanksgivings, became increasingly popular. The cattle plague was a short crisis that encouraged some to reflect on the place of cattle in regional and national economies and communities. The agricultural depression lasted longer. It too focused attention on the critical contributions that animals made to increasingly precarious rural livelihoods and communities.

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century Anglo-Catholics helped institute harvest festivals that mixed religious thanksgivings with feasts, dancing, and games. In 1862, a special service for harvest thanksgivings was authorised by the Convocation of Canterbury. The popular taste for decorating churches with harvest symbols, such as sheaves and fruits, demonstrates that these occasions were primarily intended to celebrate arable agriculture, presumably because arable farming provided feed for livestock, and so seemed more fundamental.¹¹⁰ Apart from the animal-centred Psalm 104 and a mention of God’s blessing on “the fruit of thy cattle” in Deuteronomy 28:4, the special service made little mention of cows and sheep, or the horses that helped humans gather the crops.¹¹¹ But in unexpected ways harvest services encouraged animals into churches. Haydock, Merseyside, achieved national notoriety in September 1868 after a farmer brought a pig’s head to a harvest thanksgiving.¹¹² Defending the action, the sexton said such offerings were appropriate because they reflected the economic life of the parish. And, the sexton added, the Benedicite — a canticle used for the *BCP* service of morning prayer — taught that all creation joined in praise to God: “if flowers and fruit may be used in the praise of God in His House,” he said, there was no reason “why the other good things of creation should be shut out as common or unclean, good or bad.”¹¹³

Another rural ritual that returned around this time, “rogationtide” services, could also encourage intimacies between human and animals. Since Anglo-Saxon times the three rogation days that fell before Ascension Thursday had been a time when parishioners marked the bounds of a parish and asked for God’s blessing on the growing crops.¹¹⁴ Rogation ceremonies declined as enclosures spread and liturgical fashions changed, but they revived

108. *North Wales Chronicle*, 21 and 28 October and 4 November 1865; *NP*: 2, 923. The translated form provided by the royal printers in London was regarded as incomprehensible.

109. Hardwick, 1–25.

110. R. Hutton, *Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 345–7.

111. *A Form of Prayer with Thanksgiving to Almighty God, for the Blessings of the Harvest* (London: Rivingtons, 1863).

112. *The Times*, 12 September 1868.

113. *Church Times* [CT], 19 September 1868. The pig’s head incident is mentioned in a wider consideration of Protestant opposition to the introduction of flower decorations in churches, something associated with Anglo-Catholics: D. Janes, “The Catholic Florist: Flowers and Deviance in the Mid-Nineteenth Century Church of England,” *Visual Culture in Britain*, 12, no. 1 (2011): 77–96.

114. Hutton, 275–7.

in some places in the late nineteenth century, partly because appeals to God for fruitful harvests had relevance in a period of falling grain prices, international competition, and rural poverty. In the 1880s and 1890s it was widely accepted that bishops might compose new prayers and services, in addition to those prescribed in the *BCP*, and to order their use in their dioceses, and during the late nineteenth century rogation liturgies were issued by Convocation (1881), and by the bishops of Ely (1894) and Truro (1897). These services focused on the character and qualities of agricultural workers (and, in Cornwall, miners and fishermen).¹¹⁵ Although the liturgies only mentioned animals as things to be harvested from fields and seas, the emphasis on cooperation, and labour, allowed for non-human co-workers to be brought into the ceremonies. After 1900 rogation processions increasingly included cattle blessings at fields, sheds, and farmers' markets.¹¹⁶ Although most Protestants opposed the blessing of material things, cattle blessings attracted favourable comment, and religious rituals that brought together cattle and humans sat well with a common tendency to represent animals as "sentient and emotional beings."¹¹⁷ Descriptions of rogation processions, authored by local clergy and laypeople, depicted instances of supposed animal piety. Horses, cows, sheep, and birds apparently accompanied one Warwickshire procession, while elsewhere, the singing of hymns was said to have affected "some young heifers."¹¹⁸ Such stories echoed older ways of thinking about animals, as creatures that had a religious sense.

Agricultural services could, then, emphasise the place of animals in the communal and economic life of Anglican parishes and rural communities. In subsequent decades, the use of special prayers in times of animal disease, coupled with the proliferation of agricultural services and "Animal Sundays" in the twentieth century, gave Anglican clergymen further opportunities to reflect on the treatment of cattle, the place of non-humans in human communities, and the many interdependencies that bound together people and animals.¹¹⁹ Moments of severe animal suffering continued to be marked with special services in the Church of England. Prayers issued by the bishops of Lincoln and Chester during rinderpest outbreaks in 1877 (the last in Britain) followed the 1865 prayer and focused on human sins and the threat to human livelihoods. Although the 1877 outbreak did not inspire the level of preaching witnessed in 1865–66, clergy that commented on the cattle plague repeated similar messages: at least one, for instance, described the 1877 cattle plague as God's judgement on man's cruelty towards animals.¹²⁰ Prayers issued in later decades represented animals in neighbourly and friendlier ways, reminiscent of Neale's 1866 hymn. Foot-and-mouth — an old endemic disease that was now regarded as a threat to agriculture — prompted special prayers in the diocese of Chester in 1923–4 and Salisbury in 1938. The animals in these prayers appeared as subjects for compassion. The Chester prayer used in 1923–4 appealed to God to "have pity on our cattle in Cheshire," while the Salisbury prayer said the "loving Father" was "willing to save both man and beast."¹²¹ Neale's hymn was sung in Cheshire churches during foot-and-mouth in

115. *Form of Prayer for the Rogation Days* (London: Rivingtons, 1881); *Open Air Service for Rogationtide* (London: SPCK, 1894); *The Office for Rogationtide for Blessing upon the Fields and Fisheries and Mines* (London: SPCK, 1897).

116. *CT*, 25 May 1917, 13 May 1921. *NP*, xcix–c notes the emphasis on cooperation in agricultural prayers from the late nineteenth century.

117. See Robinson, 68, for Protestant opposition. H. Kean, "The Moment of Greyfriars Bobby: The Changing Cultural Position of Animals," in *A Cultural History of Animals in the Age of Empire*, ed. K. Kete (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 27, 39.

118. *CT*, 2 June 1905.

119. Hardwick, 1–25.

120. *Notts Guardian*, 30 March 1877; *Essex Standard*, 27 April 1877. B. Bushaway, *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England 1700–1880* (London: Junction Books, 1982), 270.

121. *The Times*, 29 December 1923; *CT*, 25 February 1938.

1924 and featured at a celebration of “Cheshire songs and folklore” broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1933. Such uses point to the growing visibility of animals in church services, as well as the ways that the cattle plague was not — as has been suggested — quickly forgotten, nor did it leave “few traces in public consciousness.”¹²² The hymn, as a kind of “disaster memorial,” illustrates how environmental crises, such as epizootics, could enter the memory and tradition of a region.¹²³ The hymn and the prayers suggest, too, that animals, and animal welfare, could be more directly the subject of prayer and worship.

Conclusion

The 1865–66 cattle plague encouraged many in Victorian society, both in town and country, to recognise the many ways in which the lives of humans and non-human animals, cattle especially, were close and entangled. Ministers of religion were one of the professional groups to reflect most deeply on the connections between humans and non-humans. In their sermons and special prayers, clergy in the largest Christian churches communicated a series of ideas about human–animal relations. Livelihoods depended on animal labour and food. Human communities were mixed communities or interspecies collectives, in which different animals were bound together by ties of affection, work, responsibility, and duty. Although different species, people and cows had things in common, both could suffer together, and, as the coincidence of rinderpest and cholera suggested, both could be harmed by “unnatural” environments. Clergy articulated the idea, too, that disease in both humans and non-humans could be avoided if humans worked with the laws of sanitation and took proper care of both people and cattle. A Victorian concern for the unfortunate was important here, and in terms of non-human animals, such ideas connected to the development of compassionate attitudes towards animals, and the growing appeal of organised animal protection.

The disappearance of cattle from communities and landscapes was traumatic for Victorians. A Norfolk clergyman who, like Bishop Jacobson, was struck by the “solemn stillness” of the countryside, thought the “missing herds silently proclaim God a destroyer.” The death of cattle, the “emblems of health and strength,” showed that the “order of nature” had been “reversed.”¹²⁴ For this preacher and others, the deaths of animals and the coinciding sickness among people suggested that something was wrong in the human relation with nature. Terence Ranger, writing on the southern African context, suggests that moments of “ecological crisis” — moments of “mixed” or “general crisis” when “plagues of beasts and men” overlapped — could expose the most harmful aspects of a society’s “relationship both to people and the natural world.”¹²⁵ The sermons from 1865 to 1866 suggest that “mixed crises” had similar effects in Britain. Concurrent outbreaks of rinderpest and cholera concentrated attention on the similarities between human and non-human bodies: similarities that had tended to be ignored or denied by conventional Christian teaching. For some preachers, the cattle plague demonstrated that the exploitation and abuse of animals might disturb nature’s harmony and balance, and cholera

122. H. Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 168.

123. A. Sundberg, *Natural Disaster at the Closing of the Dutch Golden Age: Floods, Worms, and Cattle Plague* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 265.

124. *A Sermon Preached by the Rev. E. Locke, Curate of South Runcton and Holme, on Wednesday, 7th March 1866* (King’s Lynn: Thew and Son, 1866), 8.

125. T. Ranger, “Plagues of Beasts and Men: Prophetic Responses to Epidemic in Eastern and Southern Africa,” in *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence*, ed. T. Ranger and P. Slack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 246, 268.

seemed to provide evidence that human mismanagement of cattle would rebound and have harmful effects on people. Ideas about the “balance of nature” and the “natural order” would inform the ways that later Anglicans responded to environmental crises in the inter-war period, an era when many parts of the world, and not just North America, experienced “dust bowls.”¹²⁶ In the 1930s and 1940s Anglican clergy associated with the organic farming movement developed an interest in a healthy agriculture that was founded on humility, an appreciation of limits, and a more sensitive relationship between humans, soils, and animals.¹²⁷

126. H. Holleman, *Dust Bowls of Empire: Imperialism, Environmental Politics, and the Injustice of “Green” Capitalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

127. R. Moore-Colyer, “Rolf Gardiner, English Patriot and the Council for the Church and Countryside,” *Agricultural History*, 49, no. 2 (2001): 187–209; P. Conford, *The Origins of the Organic Movement* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2001).