

Religion Dispatches ¹

August 29, 2011

Ritual Killing v. Factory Farming, Or, Are There Roosters in Heaven?

By Meera Subramanian

On August 16, city inspectors closed down William Camacho's barbershop on Pleasant Street in New Bedford, Massachusetts after they discovered three chickens, two pigeons, and four roosters in the basement. Votive candles and saint statues surrounded the birds, one of which was dead and placed neatly in a box. Black and white markings of arrows and lightning bolts and the words "El Palo Congo" were boldly inscribed on the walls.

The 41-year-old owner of Bad Boyz Cutz is a Bronx native, an unabashed Yankees fan in Red Sox territory, and a follower of the Afro-Caribbean religion Palo Mayombe. It is a hybrid faith similar to Santeria and, like it, is derived from Yoruba, a West African religion that sailed over with slaves to places like Brazil and Cuba, infusing its animism into the Roman Catholicism of the colonialists.

This is clearly a First Amendment-rights story, a question of religious liberties. Camacho was the first to point this out when he spoke to the paper South Coast Today, which broke the news. "They had no right to shut me down," he said, explaining that he planned to take the birds out of the city and ritually sacrifice them in his religious tradition, releasing the powerful life force he believed was contained within their blood. He would then eat them.

Within the borders of the United States, most of the remnants of animal sacrifice that once infused the world's religions have fallen away. In 1987, the Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye in Florida's Dade County banned animal sacrifice after it began plans to build a church where religious rites including animal sacrifice would take place. Six years later, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the city ban violated the church's religious freedoms. It was the same year that Congress passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which prevents laws that place an undue burden on people's ability to express their religion.

The religious methods of slaughter such as the Jewish shechita and the Islamic dhabh remain in most countries, though that is slowly changing. The Dutch parliament recently passed a bill requiring an animal to be stunned before slaughter, following in the footsteps of New Zealand and Switzerland, effectively eliminating the procedures that make meat kosher for Jews or halal for Muslims.

As for the sacrificial taking of human life, every Sunday, millions of mainstream partake in a symbolic ingestion of blood and body that is so common in the Christian world that one forgets to use the word "cannibalism." For the Catholics if not the Protestants, the magical process of transubstantiation makes the wafers and wine truly become the Body and Blood of Christ, and the symbol becomes, on the tongue of the beholder, quite literal. But the remainders of truly ritualistic killings of the Palo Mayombe variety still linger on the fringe of the bounds of faith.

There are other considerations at play here besides religious freedom. Which brings us back to the blunt reality of those chickens. Setting aside legitimate animal cruelty and public health and safety concerns, could it be that people who use animals in their religious practices, even when they kill them, might just be kinder than the millions who are enjoying the last of their factoryfarmed summer evening barbecues?

Last year alone, about eight billion chickens were slaughtered in the U.S., according to the USDA. So why does the idea of animal sacrifice so easily fall into the realm of heebie jeebies? Why do stories about people like Camacho and their doomed animals get picked up so quickly, not just by ABC, but also sites with names like Wacky Bastards?

The fact that there are that many slaughtered chickens, and only about 50,000 chicken and egg farms, indicates that the carnivorous portion of our population is quite satisfied with other forms of animal sacrifice. Most of those birds were raised under conditions that are undeniably miserable, their beaks often cut off when they're young to keep them from cannibalizing their neighbors. Their short lives are then ended with little ritual. Implicitly, people are fine with letting someone else chop the head, drain the blood, and scrape out the entrails of our favorite fowl, as long as they do not utter a prayer.

Camacho broke the rules. No chickens within city limits. But what shutting down his barber-shop and the initial talk of throwing animal cruelty charges at him reveals is really our discomfort and alienation from the animals at the heart of the New Bedford controversy. It lays bare our preference that animal killings, whether as a part of a religious ritual or not, stay hidden out of view. It asks that any connection that animals might have to the spirit world remain tamely leashed to our household pets.

There is a growing movement of people who are not farmers but are trying to get more in touch with their food, a la Michael Pollan, moving toward experiencing the death throes of the creatures they consume. They raise chickens in their urban backyards before butchering them and inviting their friends over to share. This is generally seen in a fashionable light, which means it is okay (even hip and cool) to raise your own chickens before you kill them and eat them, but not okay (and considered downright weird) to raise your own chickens, kill them in religious rituals . . . and then eat them.

What happened behind the doors of Bad Boyz Cutz offers us a moment of reflection on the First Amendment, sure, but it is also a chance to think about what we eat, what we kill, and how we kill. And more expansively, it reveals something about how we recognize life in the world. Who or what has power, and when and how can it be tapped? When is religious ritual a way to honor the positive powers of good, and when is it devil-worshipping, occult, black magic? Why is transubstantiation of a cracker less wacky than the wringing of a chicken's neck that was bound for a dinner plate already?

"The roosters go to heaven after the sacrifice. It's the traditional way," Camacho told his local paper. Maybe that is the root of discomfort for Westerners who have long ago left the animals, two by two, out of their vision of Heaven. We want our burgers with no blood, we want our body of Christ wafer-thin, and we'd prefer if Heaven posted a "No Chickens Allowed" sign. But what will those who pass the pearly gates eat, and will they say a blessing? Oh, and Bad Boyz Cutz? Back open for business as of last Monday, all charges dropped.

Notes

¹http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/5025/ritual_killing_v._factory_farming