

A Theology of Deer Hunting

A Theological Analysis by Jim Conley

Introduction

“Bambi” is usually a word used in the first sentence of response to my mention that I’m a deer hunter. Usually the sentence is, “Oh, so you are going out to kill Bambi!” This is, of course, a reference to the Disney Animated Film Classic from 1942 about a white tailed deer fawn, whose mother was shot by a hunter. Bambi went on to survive a terrible forest fire and grow to adulthood. The “Bambi” shouters’ point is very clear. Their point



is that I am a cruel and heartless man with a rifle who gets his kicks out of shooting poor, defenseless, and beautiful animals. Augustine wrote, “Yet a man makes bad use of his hands who uses them to do cruel or base deeds.” My picture should be next to that quote for some who know that I hunt deer. In this discussion, I will explore why I hunt, discuss some aspects of deer hunting with a rifle, and look at the moral issues surrounding the sport. This will lead to a theological analysis of deer hunting (attached picture is from <http://www.ginevra2000.it/Disney/Bambi>).

Why I Hunt

I live in Eastern Massachusetts. I have lived in this area most of my life. I grew up in the suburbs of Boston and own a home there today. I have enjoyed many comforts of life in my 52 years. A trip to India in 1986 showed me how comfortable my life really is. By exploring a world with open sewers, searing heat, and abject poverty, I could more clearly see my own. I live in a world of temperature control, antibacterial soaps, and plumbing that whisks away my waste. My food is either wrapped in plastic when it enters my home or served to me already prepared. If I am hurt or ill, I can receive medical treatment in minutes. The world that I live in is as about as far from nature as a human can be and still live on this planet. Like most people, I enjoy a walk in the woods. I love the sights, sounds, and smells of nature. When the psalmist wrote, “He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me besides still waters, He restores my soul” he was celebrating the solace of nature. What a walk in the woods does, though, is treat nature like it’s a museum. Yes, we see, hear, smell and touch, but we don’t engage nature. We appreciate but don’t participate. Hunting and fishing brings me into the ongoing competitive environment that is nature. It brings me back to a time when mankind needed to compete in nature in order to have meat or fish to eat. Intelligence, wits, stealth, and knowledge along with some luck were required for a successful hunt. They still are.

My father was not a sportsman. Therefore, I did not grow up as a hunter. I was never around guns and was not interested in being around guns. There was a danger about them, a violence, with which I didn’t want to be associated. Then I had a life changing event when I was 40 years old. I am a member of what is called a ‘found family’. I grew up with two older sisters. We never knew that our mother had a baby out of wedlock

before she met and married my father. She gave the baby up for adoption and kept it a secret. My brother, his name is Joe, knew he was adopted from age 14. As an adult, he conducted a search for his birth family and found us on January 2, 1992 when I was 40 years old. Both my parents were long past at that point. We got along beautifully. Joe and his family melded wonderfully with our family. He and I quickly became very close. He invited me to the annual deer hunt with him and his adopted family. I resisted for six years. Much of my resistance was my reluctance to get involved with guns. After much soul searching, I took a gun safety course, and learned from Joe how to properly handle, shoot, care for, and safely store firearms. I learned what I could about the white tailed deer. I decided to join the hunt for a number of reasons. The primary reason for going was my new brother. He wanted to share with me a very important aspect of his life. Also, my research told me that the North American deer are more abundant than ever and need hunting for population control. I also understood that firearms are dangerous if they are in the hands of dangerous or careless people. Like cars, knives or alcohol, if firearms are used properly, the risk of a poor outcome is minimized.

The White Tailed Deer

So I became a hunter at age 46. I would like to describe the sport and some of the issues around the sport. The genus and species of the white tailed deer is *Odocoileus Virginianus*. It is one of five major deer species in North America. The other four are the mule deer, the moose, the caribou, and the elk. The white tailed deer ranges throughout North America, Central America, and into South America as far as Bolivia. It lives in mixed wooded areas, open land, swamps, on mountains and northern tundras. Although rare, they have been found in deserts. Deer are mammals that browse for food of leaves, twigs, fruits of trees and shrubs, and the foliage of herbaceous plants. They are ruminants; they have four stomachs and regurgitate food from the stomach for thorough chewing (called “chewing the cud”). Although primarily nocturnal, the white tailed deer can be active at any time. Deer can run up to 35 miles per hour and are excellent swimmers. Their senses of sight, hearing, and particularly smell are highly developed. The reproductive period, or rut, runs from September to December. November is the peak. The adult males, or bucks, grow antlers for the rut period and shed them in winter. The adult females, called does, usually birth twins, although singles and triplets are not uncommon. Bucks weigh between 150-300 pounds and does weigh between 90 and 200 pounds. The deer’s home range is usually less than a square mile. They have scent glands in all four feet and inside of their rear legs for use in marking territory during the rut. As mentioned previously, the deer is over-populated in North America, particularly in human population areas where hunting is restricted. They are considered pests in many regions because they raid farms, gardens and orchards. They are also carriers of the ticks that cause Lyme disease and are now viewed as a public health hazard. The over-population of deer has caused disease and starvation in the North American herd.

The Hunt

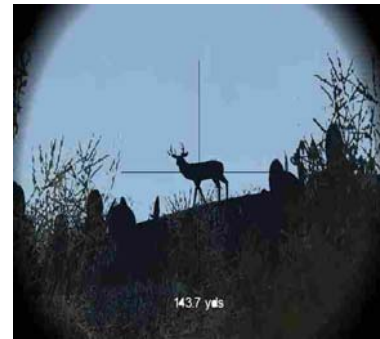
Of the lower 48 states, the state where hunters are least likely to bag a deer is Maine. It is also the state where if you get one, it's most likely to be a trophy. Maine, on the Canadian border, is where we hunt. Our hunting ground is a small part of an area that is roughly 2500 square miles of northern woods. This vast, mountainous woodland is partially in Maine and partially in Canada. The immediate area of our hunting grounds is owned by a logging company. The only roads are rough, unpaved logging roads. The only people in this track of land are hunters and there are not many of us. The area is wooded with lots of fallen trees. It is very difficult for a hunter to move around. It is unlike deer hunting in some other areas where there are so many deer that hunters can push them around (called drives). Where we hunt, we are in the deer's territory. Deer can see, hear and particularly smell danger extremely well. Their red/brown coat provides incredibly good camouflage. The deer hunter goes into the deer's environment to pit his skill against the animal's skill at survival. The hunter must be always attuned to the wind conditions. Because of its highly developed sense of smell, any deer that is down wind from a hunter will be long gone before the hunter has a chance to see it. Because of the vastness of the woods the hunter must have proper compass use, topographical map reading, equipment and clothing at all times. Almost every year a hunter is lost and never found in those woods. Utmost care must always be taken to avoid injury or getting lost (attached picture is from www.actionadventures.net/hunting_home.htm).



I have found that the most effective hunting tactic for me is what is called 'hunting on stand'. This is when the hunter finds a spot with good visibility and stays there with hopes that the deer will come to him. Dawn and dusk are the times when the deer move the most, so I am in my spot before dawn. Hunting season is during the rut period because that is when the deer are out of their patterns in order to mate. The first week in November is our typical hunting week. The weather is usually in the freezing range with snow not unusual. In order to effectively hunt on stand the hunter must stay perfectly still, moving literally only the eyes to scan the woods. This takes great concentration and discipline. I try to create stillness in myself during this time. I can usually hold the stillness for a half hour. I'll stand for a half hour, and then sit for a half hour. Typically, I'll be 'on stand' for around four hours at a time. It becomes obvious to me when I am being properly still. It is like I disappear. The woods become active right up to me. I have had a ruffed grouse (called "partridge") walk close enough for me to reach out and grab it. Woodland mice scurry between my legs. Red squirrels have run over my boot. This activity surrounding me helps me to stay alert. When I move my eyes, I memorize the woods. I try to see every twig and branch as I scan the sight lines. If a deer appears, it is usually just as a shadow. Memorizing the woods allows me to pick up the slightest

change. Cold winter mornings while the light emerges in the dark wood; I am there, still and focused. For me, it is a time of transcendence.

My state issued hunting permit allows me to hunt for bucks. Although doe permits are issued on a limited basis according to herd control statistics, I've never had a doe permit. I see many more deer than I've shot. Bucks are much more cagy than does possibly because does are more protected from hunters. If you have a permit to hunt deer, you can hunt every buck. I've watched many does nibble twigs while I hoped that a rutting buck would join her. I have also passed up many shots at bucks. I want to make sure that I kill the deer immediately with one bullet. A bullet to the head, chest or shoulder area will instantly kill a deer. A bullet into any other part of the deer will not likely be a kill shot. If I don't have a kill shot, I don't have a shot. Also, my confidence is high up to around 150 yards distance. Beyond that, I'm not sure I'll kill the deer. So, many details must come together before the trigger is pulled (attached picture is from



www.oconeebaitandtackle.com/Hunting/Hunting.htm).

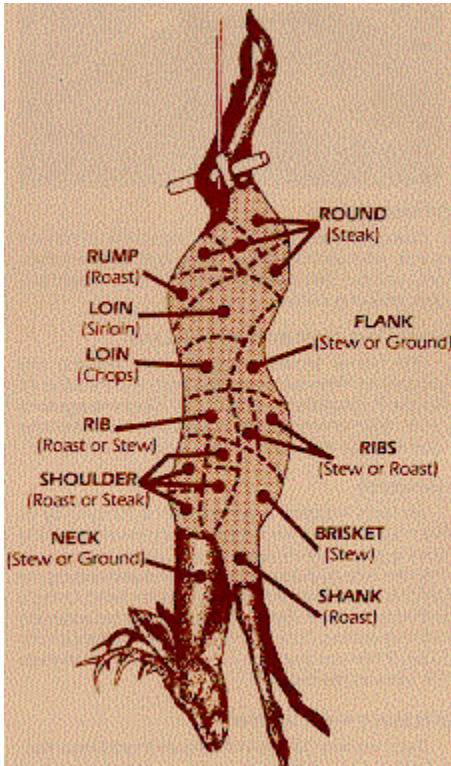
Deer hunting is a sport. The hunter is competing not against other humans, but against nature and an animal that is much better equipped to detect and avoid the hunter than the hunter is to detect and kill it. I have competed against humans in school, on playing fields, and in business. It is far more difficult and complicated to compete in nature. I love to leave my comfortable, antiseptic world and go out to match wits against those wonderful animals and lose, which is what I usually do. Most every hunting season, the only time I have fired my Remington 308 caliber rifle is on the target range. Rest assured, I very much want to get a deer, but I'm thankful for the experience in nature no matter what.

The group that I hunt with is usually four to six men, all family, in the woods for a week a year. We usually arrive home empty handed much to the delight of the women in the family. For one short week we enjoy the company of other men. At camp, after the light fades and the guns are unloaded and put away, we'll eat dinner and discuss the hunt. We'll discuss where the deer might be. If it's sunny and still, they'll likely be up on the mountain. If it's rainy and windy, they are likely to be in the swamps. There are ballistics discussions about the speed of the bullet when it leaves the nozzle of the rifle as opposed to the speed 100 yards down range. As the evening advances, stories of earlier hunts are told with humor and nostalgia. Kidding and ribbing becomes more imaginative as the week advances. There is a richness to the woodland experience that makes me feel alive in this world that just does not happen in the world of buildings and comfort.

Theological Analysis

The implicit (sometime explicit) moral judgment of others (The Bambies!) gives me an opportunity to reflect on the morality of deer hunting. Anyone who did not eat the meat or use the animal in any way; and just went out for the fun of the kill, I would have a

moral problem with. The herd still needs to be thinned, but killing for fun is disturbing to me. I have never known a hunter who does not eat the meat, by the way. The actual killing of the animal is not the part that makes the experience pleasurable or meaningful. In fact, I have pain and sadness in killing that heightens my appreciation for the animal. It is an appreciation that I do not connect with when I sit down to eat meat in my normal world. In modern society, I believe that we deny, somehow, that our meat was an animal



that was killed for our benefit. In fact, more and more, we hear now even greater levels of denial when meat is referred to as ‘protein’. We wear leather shoes and clothes without a thought about the animal that was killed. I will posit that there is moral obtuseness in eating meat and wearing animal hides while pointing an accusing finger at hunters. These people don’t mind animals being killed for their use as long as they don’t have to do the killing. *Genesis 1:28* states, “God blessed them and God said to them, ‘Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep upon the earth.’” People have definitely taken that advice to heart. We should accept who we are and what we do upon this earth. I also have great respect for vegetarians and vegans who adjusted their diets so an animal will not die. Surely, there are hunters who enjoy the kill part. There are hunters who are irresponsible in their use of the weapons. Every year, many hunters are killed by other

hunters. There are hunters that will shoot at an animal without confidence that it will be an immediate kill shot, thereby letting the wounded animal run and die without being recovered. I suppose that I, and my family, are lumped into the negative view of hunters that bad behavior engenders. I am also a Christian. There are people who give Christianity a bad name, as well. I don’t plan to stop being a Christian. Upon reflection, I do not have moral conflict with my brand of hunting or my brand of Christianity (attached picture is from www.askthemeatman.com/deer_cutting_diagram_2.htm).

I am a human male. For the most part the food I eat is the product of someone else’s effort. Other than making enough money to buy it, I’ve done nothing to get that food to table. When I hunt, I get in touch with my heritage as a species. I learn how difficult it is to successfully acquire meat. Fishing is as difficult and in some ways more difficult than hunting. I’m a better fisherman than a hunter, but they are the same experience, really. I also enjoy gardening. The first tomato, eaten like an apple in the garden, is a rich experience in much the same way. If you are responsible for bringing the food to the table, the enjoyment and appreciation increases exponentially. To do is to be.

If everything works and a deer is shot, there is a sadness for a beautiful animal that is felled. There is also the exhilaration of a victorious hunt. 57% of the deer’s weight is

edible meat. The meat should cure before it is eaten. The first meal is the heart and the liver. They will spoil quickly and they need not cure. I surely cannot speak for other hunters, but I eat that meal with reverence. To be sure, there is celebration as well. In tribal warfare, a warrior chief is killed and the victorious chief eats the heart of the fallen foe in order to gain his courage, strength, and wisdom. I eat the heart of a vanquished deer with much the same reverence. As a Christian, when I receive communion, I also feel the power and goodness of Christ enter me. In *A Theology Primer* Robert Cummings Neville writes, “The Eucharist is the sacramental rite that focuses membership in the cult of Jesus Christ.” Both meals I eat with reverence. The reverence differs, but it is real in both settings.

In his *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Karl Rahner states, “In our transcendental experience, which necessarily and inescapably orients us towards the ineffable and holy mystery, we experience what creatureliness is and we experience it immediately.” (p76) Rahner describes salvation not as a future that befalls someone from the outside or something bestowed by moral judgment. He writes, “It means rather the final and definitive validity of a person’s true self-understanding and true self realization in freedom before God by the fact that he accepts his own self as it is disclosed and offered to him in the choice of transcendence as interpreted in freedom.” (p36)

Hunting allows me for one short week a year to experience my own creatureliness. It helps me to fathom myself as a man. Whether in the woods alone or back at camp enjoying the company of my fellow hunters who are also my family, I reconnect with my own history and the history of my species. Rahner’s idea of salvation is to understand one’s true self as standing before God. There are surly other aspects of my being that I bring before God, but the self-understanding, the transcendence finds a doorway in hunting.

When leaving the hunt to return to life, the words of Robert Frost come to me:

“The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.”



(Attached picture from www.e-tutor.com/lessons_sample).