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Animal Rights

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For the Christian, all four Gospels provide a constant challenge, which is nothing less than imitatio Christi. Whether we choose to view Our Lord as the Eternal Wisdom of God who created the Cosmos or focus on Him as a man, born within a particular historical context (and I am sure we should do both), He challenges us to forsake the comfort of the majority-view and to follow Him in siding with the powerless. Many people who have called themselves Christians have, at least, paid lip-service to this ideal, though curiously they have normally thought entirely in anthropocentric terms. Even then, despite the Beatitudes, history tells us that standing by those outside the circle of power has always been limited, and full rights all too often have been denied to women and children. It is not surprising then that animals have lost out even more.

From the moment I became a Christian, I realised that meant trying to live up to a commitment to speak out against what I perceived to be wrong, just as Jesus did and regardless of pressures from the State, the University or anyone else. It has involved for me a spiritual journey, exploring what practitioners of other faiths believe and learning from them (and when it comes to feeling an affinity with nature some of them may have done rather better). Nevertheless the Judeo-Christian heritage has a great deal to offer. I see the oft quoted (and much misunderstood) passage in Genesis 1,26 as referring to the prelapsarian state when 'dominion' implies Adam's gentle stewardship over his fellow creatures. Death comes in with the Fall and all changes, and after the Flood God's covenant (Genesis 9, 8) is with all living creatures, though in a world of exploitative pressures it is only partial. The Isaiac vision of the restoration of the Golden Age, one of my favourite passages in the whole of scripture, sees man and the animals again living together:

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11,9)

Mankind has never had the right to exploit the animal creation or the environment, made by God for the benefit of all.

'Animal Rights' have acquired an undeservedly bad name over the past few years thanks to acts of terrorism by a few extremists, but there should be nothing shameful in demonstrating against injustice, even with noisy demonstrations as does SPEAK The Voice for the Animals (www.speakcampaigns.org), without which we would not know about a great many painful and brutal experiments going on in our laboratories. And we should remember that Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple rather than sending in a letter of complaint to the Chief Scribe! If I am not a member it is simply because I can do more good by countering black propaganda by fostering academic argument. Thus I have become associated with two other organisations, founded in Oxford over the past year, which strive to give animals a voice through argument. The Rev. Professor Andrew Linzey of Blackfriars has just set up a new international body, the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics (www.oxfordanimaethics.com) which seeks to enhance the ethical status of animals through research teaching and publication. I am an advisor to this, but much more actively involved as one of the founder members of Voice for Ethical Research at Oxford (VERO) (www.vero.org.uk) which was set up specifically to oppose the construction of a new animal research laboratory in Oxford, by Sharon Howe, a brave and forthright graduate from St Hilda's, who tore up her degree in protest at what she (and others such as myself) believe is not an ethical line of research for Oxford University to pursue. Although VERO is in the first instance only concerned with banning vivisection, a laudable aim with a distinguished pedigree in Oxford, all of us in the organisation are, I think, just as exercised by factory farming and the carnivorous lifestyle (most of us are vegetarians or vegans), as well as by hunting and shooting or, indeed, by any cruel or exploitative activity. We are united in believing that ends do not justify means and that there can be no ethical excuse for harming another creature even if, in the case of the Animal Lab, one is aiming to secure a notional good (which is often a delusion, as human-based research and computer modelling have not been funded to anything like the same extent and the Dr Hadwen Trust (www.endeuanimaltests.org) provides good reason to think they would yield much more satisfactory, and entirely ethical, results.

Because some of the formative Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas have denied that animals possess souls there has been less stress on cruelty to animals than on other forms of exploitation, despite the campaigning of some very eloquent Christian thinkers of the past, amongst them C.S. Lewis, and very thoughtful and compassionate attitudes expressed by a number of present-

day Christians, not only Andrew Linzey, but Keith Ward, Richard Harries and Ann Widdecombe amongst others. Nevertheless, I do observe a lack of priority when it comes to Animal Rights issues, as is apparent from our weekly and daily intercessions (which lay too much stress on the human environment). Correspondence in the religious press, for instance the Church Times, shows considerable passion on both sides of the debates about gay issues, which I regard as important, though less so than the way we treat our fellow creatures; certainly I had considerably more response when I wrote about the former than the latter.

I suspect it is because our Festivals are celebrated with meat-feasts (the Christmas turkey; the Easter lamb). As the meat produced is often 'Factory Farmed' our Christian celebrations of the life and resurrection of Christ take place at the expense of Creation downgraded to the level of mere commodity. The recent exposé of how a turkey farm in Suffolk operates and the chilling mechanics of an industry based on mass slaughter should leave all of us who call ourselves Christians deeply uneasy. Not one of us has the excuse of not knowing what goes on. Dare I suggest, if you are normally a carnivore, at least follow custom and desist from eating meat during Lent, and spend the season of penitence and reflection thinking about and praying for all our suffering and persecuted fellow creatures, animals as well as humans. That will at least save some animals. And I would urge everyone to join an animal rights organisation of some sort.

Loving animals is not a substitute for loving our fellow women and men. Cruelty to and abuse of animals is known to be a long step towards callous disregard of human life. Those who torture animals find it much easier to torture members of their own species. By contrast, I have found amongst my Animal Rights friends some of the gentlest and most concerned people I have ever met. Whether or not they are formally Christians, they would certainly be recognised by Christ as amongst those who are truly doing his will.