

Animal Rights and "Religious Politics"

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Animal rights philosophy and the animal welfare movement have recently been vehemently attacked by religious fundamentalist organizations and also by non-religious organizations with fundamentalist beliefs, such as the American Farm Bureau.

Fundamentalists have mounted a campaign against the teaching of evolutionary theory in schools, contending that their creationist view is more in line with what they believe to be the correct interpretation of the scriptures. The political motives behind this quasi-religious movement become clearer when their attacks on the environmental/conservation and humane movements are scrutinized. The claim that God has given man dominion over the rest of creation, with the implied belief that "dominion" means the freedom to dominate and exploit rather than merely function as a steward, is an obvious political ploy to undermine the tenets of sound conservation and environmental protection.

Likewise, it is claimed that man is superior to all creatures and is a special form of creation, created in the "image of God," and who, unlike animals, also has a soul. Thus, they argue, it is heretical to consider giving animals rights and to give them standing and recognition as objects of moral concern. Even the distinction between equal rights and equal and fair consideration is overlooked because they claim man is superior and can, therefore, in all good conscience, exploit animals as he chooses.

The political and economic implications of this blatant misrepresentation of Judeo-Christian teachings are obvious. Furthermore, this attitude absolves us of any guilt due to a sense of responsibility, giving us free license to exploit animals (and nature) without any twinge of conscience, thereby furnishing a pseudo-religious respectability to all forms of animal exploitation. It provides a self-serving, hubristic basis for placing economic values ahead of ethical values and concerns, in order to further self-interest and to justify the status quo of unconditional (and de-regulated) exploitation of animals and environment alike.

Such *hubris* conveniently ignores many biblical injunctions that man act compassionately toward all creatures and to serve as a steward of the earth's resources. Ecclesiastes (3:19), for example, states that "man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity" [to contend otherwise].

While fundamentalists admit that it is wrong to treat animals inhumanely, their reasons for this conclusion are human-centered rather than animal-centered. This represents a judgment that is not based upon a recognition that animals can suffer and have intrinsic worth, and that they have needs and rights that we should respect and uphold, but rather upon the simplistic belief that inhumane treatment is morally wrong. Such moralizing and human-centered ethics make it very convenient, then, in the absence of animal-centered values and

perceptions, to simply give lip-service to humane principles but then quickly put them aside whenever animal exploitation and suffering are deemed essential or unavoidable for the "greater good of humanity" (which usually means the vested interests of a few).

Fundamentalists now opposing the teaching of evolution in classrooms may soon oppose the teaching of animal behavior, ecology, conservation, humane education and animal rights philosophy

in schools and colleges. Such simplistic opposition, much of which is a product of the *angst* generated by life in such complex and stressful times, may well do us a service in the end, by accelerating the ethical and spiritual transformation of society, through exposure of these human-centered, self-serving values — which are responsible for so much unnecessary animal exploitation, suffering, and environmental destruction — to the public eye.