The Question of Atheism and Communism in the Animal Welfare/Rights Movement

Michael W. Fox

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Responsive Chord on Pets and Therapy

I just received my January-March 1983 issue of the *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*. Thank you for the wonderful editorial! What you are saying is so true! For the last 3 years or so I have worked in a nursing home as an “Animal Facilitated Therapist.” I started there on a volunteer basis, bringing my own animals into visit. The home decided to purchase animals of its own. None of the staff was knowledgeable concerning animals or their care. Also, most felt that their job was with the residents, and not the animals. Little did they realize how much the residents suffered when the animals suffered. Consequently, the guinea pigs had maggots in their cage, the rabbits either starved or froze to death, birds passed away etc., etc. Once the home had animals of its own, I no longer made visits with mine. At that time we did not have a local humane society. I contacted the state society as well as a nearby society concerning the condition of the animals. They did nothing.

After the demise of so many animals, the nursing home hired me to care for them and to set up a “therapy” program. Once I started working at the nursing home, I was appalled by the lack of concern toward the animals that was shown by the staff. The prevailing attitude was that they were disposable—not living, feeling beings. Most of the residents, though, were very concerned about the animals, but were afraid to voice it. One resident confided her anxiety to me by stating that if she were to voice her concern for the animals, she might become labeled as a complainer. And companions’ call lights were answered last.

I am not a scientific person, but I do know that animals help people. With the help of the animals, I “reached” many residents that did not respond otherwise. Very simply, friendship and trust arose from our mutual interest and concern for the animals. And what really surprised me is that this improved climate has continued over the months, even though I no longer work there. From what the residents tell me, the care of the animals, however, is still questionable. But we now have a humane society, and they are supposed to be keeping an eye on the welfare of the animals.

I don’t know what the answer is. I could see how much happiness and joy the animals brought to the residents—but at what price to the animals? I have gone back to school to obtain a degree in “Animal Facilitated Therapy.” This summer I would like to start an outreach program on my farm, working with my own animals. Then, I would at least know that the animals are receiving good care and are not being abused. Residents of such places as nursing homes suffer enough without having to shoulder the added burden of worrying about the care (or lack of it) of the animals that visit or live with them.

Jean Grover
Affinity Farm
Buffalo, MN 55313

I just read your editorial on “animal-facilitated therapy” in the new issue of the Journal, and I wanted to applaud your efforts! The pet therapy bandwagon has become so crowded and filled with sentimental supporters that it’s hard to get anyone to discuss the issue rationally. We’ve been facing the added frustration of dealing with local shelters that are shifting funds and personnel from their humane education programs to begin or expand “pet therapy” programs. Not to mention all the shelter puppies that are being dragged from nursing homes to nursing homes!

Good to hear another voice crying in the wilderness.

Kathy Savesky
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Michael W. Fox

We believe that it may be more than just sheer coinci-dence that, as the recent political winds have changed quite dramatically, environmentalists have been judged as “extremists,” and liberals labeled “un-American.” To be pro-conservation is now equated with being unpatriotic and opposing the free-enterprise system. To question the wholesale exploitation of animals by concerns like agribusiness or the biomedical industry is considered atheistic, since many believe that the word “dominion,” as used in Genesis, means that God has given us the unconditional right to exploit all creatures, for whatever purpose. And since we are “made in the image of God,” to question practices that some regard as promoting the nation’s best interests (such as the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the desecration of the environment in the name of corporate profit and national security) is seen by some as questioning God’s word and His divine sanction, and as opening the door to those most potent forces of evil: communism and atheism.

Just as economics has increasingly been employed as a political weapon, so religion is now being used to further self-serving goals. Agribusiness spokesmen, for example, do not only use fallacious economic arguments to justify the “factory” farming of animals; they have also stated that any questioning about man’s God-given right to exploit animals is atheistic, and perhaps an actual affront to God’s will. Furthermore, taking an egalitarian or socialist approach to environmentalism, and perhaps an actual affront to God’s will. Furthermore, taking an egalitarian attitude toward animals, and proposing that they have rights or should be given equal and fair consideration, is regarded as the inspiration of some covert communist conspiracy that is constantly working to restructure and thereby destroy U.S. agriculture.

In short, environmentalists, conservationists, and animal welfare activists are all being tarred with the same brush by those who consider any challenge to their economic and political values and self-serving religious beliefs as communism. Yet the fundamental issues addressed by these groups focus on moral responsibility, a concept that causes great discomfort to those who advocate industrialism, and both corporate and totalitarian socialism. The fact that the animal welfare/animal rights movement is evoking such pernicious and paranoid opposition is perhaps, in actuality, a positive sign of its progress and growing influence. However, an apparent new wave of McCarthism and religious bigotry does not bode well for our democracy as a whole, or for those organizations whose human and egalitarian views are currently being discounted and misperceived as a communist threat to God and country.

Religion, Politics, and Personal Responsibility

With true maturity, there comes a time when the anxiety, insecurity, bigotry, violence, ignorance, and indifference in the world come to be understood, not as the works of the devil, of some anti-Christ, or of communist or imperialist ideology, but rather as simple facts of human existence. The reality of human nature can be accepted as something that is not intrinsically evil, but as a structure that is insecure and vulnerable, and so driven to control the way by force. We have
trouble coping with the fact that we are vulnerable; that life can hurt us and that we will eventually die; and that no amount of power and attempted control over life (a force that so often does violence to the rights of others less powerful, as well as to animals and the environment) can help us.

The Reverend Philip Zwerling (Washington Post, March 16, 1983) urges us not to blame communism or other foreign devils, but rather to assume responsibility for our own lives, and on that basis to build an egalitarian society. He states: “Who are the demons? Let us ask questions. Who built and used the first atomic weapon? Who built the first hydrogen bomb? The answer, we did. Let us not be distracted any more by theories. Mies are poverty and hunger, stagnation and distribution was made to each as if to the state, taxpayers, presidents, and other government officials. As a case in point, let’s take a look at one way two researchers looked at how people think about dogs and cats. An earlier issue of the Journal of Animal Behavior published an article on the survey results compiled by two Missouri researchers, who queried over 900 individuals on their opinions on companion animals. Their analysis of the data showed that, among other things, “women become more emotionally involved with their animals and derive a greater sense of security from pet ownership (with both dogs and cats) than do men.” This is the sort of result that you might have expected. But it is well recognized as unavoidable incorporating a sizeable dose of the interviewee’s own bias; in other words, people tend to an-

But some judgmental and moralizing organizations are now using religion to further their purely political ends. They would have the teaching of evolution, of ecology, and of egalitarian animal rights philosophy banished from our schools. And they would replace thought­ful enquiry into society’s religious and political values with a simplistic and moralizing conformity, which is promoted under the guise of religious instruction.

Nevertheless, there are some religious groups that are comprised of legitimately spiritual individuals. They do not use their tenets to further some gratuitous political ideology, nor do they invoke bogeymen such as the devil, the communist or capitalist threat. They do not speak exclusively to God and country but, instead, of God, nature, and humanity. These people perceive God as love, not as some moralistic judge, or a patriarch remote and above us, and we, correspondingly, above nature and the animals. For they recognize that God created us as much in His image, as in theirs (Genesis 1:26): to consider otherwise is an un-Christian form of the Greek anthropomorphism, or sheer vanity (Ecclesiastes 3:19). And to stand in moral judgment of others is un-Christian arrogance.

Yet when the ethical fabric of society is being frayed by the supposed forces of “evil” (ignorance, insensitivity, and indifference) and we begin to feel threatened by such political ideologies as totalitarian communism and corporate socialism or, on the other hand, by the potentially atheistic, amoral, and secular mindset of pure scientific empiricism and technologically based imperialism, then all religious and spiritually enlightened people of the world should feel morally impelled to act responsibly and with enlightened self-interest to oppose such forces. Not by casting stones, or by judging others, but by living courageously, lovingly, and ethically serving the greater good of society only when such good is consonant with the rights of other peoples, nations, and animals, as well as the environment as a whole. But when the good of any nation (or interest group) violates such rights, its claim to unquestioned righteousness under the “one nation under God” principle is invalidated. Those persons who purport to be religious are surely right only when they use religion to further the politics of an ecological, racial, and species egalitarianism that is based upon cooperation, a sharing of resources and respect for each other’s interests and rights; and a reverence for the sanctity and dignity of all life, animal and human alike; in brief, a co-creative stewardship of the planet Earth.

Sex Roles, Companion Animals—and Something More

D.H. Murphy

One of the fundamental convictions that motivates our publication of the Journal is that science, and the scientific method, can furnish animal welfare advocates and activists with the exact kind of testable, empirical data that must remain the primary tools of persuasion in a rational society. Precisely because animals cannot speak for themselves, and cannot tell us whether, for example, they prefer a solid concrete or a slatted floor, we can make good use of the carefully controlled techniques of classical science to derive “best guesses” about what kinds of environments foster their well-being. These may include direct methods such as structured observation and choice tests, or indirect methods such as monitoring of blood levels of stress-induced hormones like adrenocorticoids.

What’s fascinating about these kinds of well-controlled scientific studies is that more than our preconceptions about animals may fall by the wayside once we perceive the results; other standard myths about, for example, sex roles, may come into question as well.

As a case in point, several recent articles about how men and women relate to dogs and cats furnish us with some basic lessons about how we interact with our animal companions. But, in the process, they also shed some interesting light on the precariousness of our beliefs about differences in the sexes. Finally, they provide vital instruction concerning some of the classic foibles that are inherent in the use of some kinds of scientific methods.

First, let’s take a look at one way two researchers looked at how people think about dogs and cats. An earlier issue of the Journal of Animal Behavior published an article on the survey results compiled by two Missouri researchers, who queried over 900 individuals on their opinions on companion animals. Their analysis of the data showed that, among other things, “women become more emotionally involved with their animals and derive a greater sense of security from pet ownership (with both dogs and cats) than do men.” Now, this is the sort of result that you might have expected yourself, if you simply walked around the room at a party and queried the attendees about their emotions vis-a-vis dogs and cats. In either case, this method, self-reporting, is well recognized as unavoidably incorporating a sizeable dose of the interviewee’s own bias; in other words, people tend to an-
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