

## The Question of Atheism and Communism 1n the Animal Welfare/Rights Movement

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We believe that it may be more than just sheer coincidence 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 whole-sale 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 "one nation under 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 spokespersons 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 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 welfarists 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 McCarthyism and religious bigotry does not bode well for our democracy as a whole, or for those organizations whose humane 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 world 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 of foreign devils. Let us say that our enemies are poverty and hunger, unemployment and inflation; and let us say, as did the Disciples Peter and John, that we wish to live in a society where 'There was not a needy person among them, and distribution was made to each as any had need.'"

The truth is that we can only help ourselves and the rest of creation by becoming more responsible: responsible citizens, parents, children, teachers, consumers, pet owners, farmers, corporations, taxpayers, presidents, and other government employees, elected and otherwise.

The keys to this realm of moral responsibility, and of somehow getting beyond the barren sphere of corporate and totalitarian socialism, materialism, competitiveness, industrialism, and international paranoia, are to be found in such diverse, yet fundamental areas as religion, philosophy, ecology, and egalitarian economic and global democratic theory, all of which incorporate the concept of personal responsibility and self-determination. In essence, this ambivalence between personal self-interest and adult responsibility is the basic dialectical tension of life itself, and of human life in particular.

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, or 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 *hubris*, 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 mind-set 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 Cod" 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.