

An Inclusive Theology

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The Reverend Professor Andrew Linzey can only be complimented and applauded for his outspoken stance on the relationship that the Church has with animals. (Cruelty should not be tolerated, Comment, Church Times, September 29, 2011 and Westminster Abbey Address, <http://www.oxfordanimaethics.com/home/>). It is high time that someone spoke out against the neglect that is afforded our fellow Earthlings by the Church. Further, it is high time that the Church started to respect animals and afford them the dignity that they deserve.

For too long, anthropocentricity has been the message of the Church which seems to forget that there are other inhabitants who share this planet with us. It appears that the Church has taken the *Imago Dei* (made in the image of God) concept too far, and has placed mankind on a pedestal, and afforded him almost deific status. Granted, humans have been given a somewhat elevated status over all of creation, but this does not give them *carte blanche* to exploit, abuse, destroy and cause immense suffering to those with whom we share our God-given home. According to Genesis, animals arrived here first, and whether the reader believes implicitly in the creation story or supports the theory of evolution, the fact remains that animals arrived here first and *Homo sapiens* (human beings) was the final and triumphant climax of that creative process. Like it or not, biologically, humans are also animals!

Humans have a Divine responsibility to protect Creation – ALL of creation! This includes the terrestrial environment, the marine environment, the aerial environment, and all of the ecosystems within them. Animals cannot be left out of this. They are an integral part of the whole.

Yet, it seems apparent that the Church condones the abuse of animals and has done so throughout the centuries. St. Thomas Aquinas, often quoted by modern-day clergy, deemed animals to be automatons and not quite capable of feeling. As a specialist in Ethology, I can't get my mind around this, because especially within the last two decades, sentience in animals has been a very hot topic and has been the subject of great scientific debate. Animals are not the “dumb and stupid” creatures that humans have thought them to be. Indeed, they are capable of various, almost human-like, emotions and abilities. They can feel pain, suffering, fear and loss. They can reason, are capable of metacognition, have a sense of self, live in orderly and peacefully cohesive group structures and have a sense of humour. There is much in the scientific literature to qualify this.

Yes, the Church has condoned animal exploitation. Matadors in Spain are blessed by the priest before the bullfight. Harvest suppers are full of the flesh of slaughtered animals. Few churches would even entertain the thought of having a vegan harvest supper to thank God for His blessings. Nowadays, only a fraction of churches hold animal blessing services. What Social Responsibilities Committee includes the plight of animals? Very few, I believe. They are, however, quick to support projects such as “Send a Cow” and “Recycle a Goat”. Such projects imply that animals are not sentient beings, but rather commercial goods. It is not only the social responsibility of the Church to help humans in need, but also animals in need. And this need is great. With the economic climate being what it is, hundreds and thousands of companion animals are being

abandoned. Animal shelters worldwide, are being inundated with unwanted companions whose ultimate fate is most often euthanasia. Not only that, statistics from the RSPCA clearly demonstrate that the incidence of animal cruelty and abuse is rising. It is a well-known fact that violence toward animals breeds violence towards humans, particularly the vulnerable of society. It would behove the Church to address these issues, not only financially, but also in its message in the sermons that its clergy preaches. Humans have domesticated animals and have subdued them; we owe them a debt of responsibility and compassion.

Years ago, racism, sexism and even sexual orientation were not dealt with by the Church very effectively and were brushed aside. Females, blacks and those people who did not fit in with the “norms” of society were marginalised. More latterly, such issues have not been seen in a very favourable light by the Church and there have been vigorous campaigns to remove them. Although being initially controversial, we now have female priests, black bishops, and even gay clergy. There is now much debate on whether to consecrate females as bishops. Would that the Church started to deal with the issue of speciesism!

Let’s face it; animals are here to stay. They are part of our lives. As Christians who follow the gentle teachings of Christ, humans have a long way to go to approximate His ideals. It is indeed idolatry if we exclude animals from our practices and our liturgy. Animals are our fellow Earthlings. Christ Himself, spoke favourably about the birds of the air. The Psalmist mentions animals in his songs, saying that all of creation (presumably including animals) praises God’s name. Job even says to “ask the animals and they will tell you”. St. John the Divine mentions animals in his Revelation. When God created animals, He pronounced them good. Indeed, if one believes only in the creation story, one sees that the original diet for all of creation was a vegan one. There are innumerable references to animals in the Holy Scriptures.

Why then, does the Church exclude them? It would be a move in the right direction to practise an inclusive Theology and embrace all of creation in its worship and teachings, not only some of it. Christianity preaches the Kingdom of God. God created animals as well; they are thus part of His Kingdom. They deserve not to be excluded. As St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals and ecology so wisely said: “Not to hurt our humble brethren is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not good enough. We have a higher mission: to be of service to them whenever they require it.” And: “If you have men who will exclude any of God’s creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men.”

Once we include animals in our Christian liturgy, message, practices and life, and are of service to them as we would be of service to our fellow humans, we will have finally learned what it is to be human, and what it is to be like Christ. Perhaps then, we can truly take on the *Imago Dei*, having learned what it is like to be compassionate and morally responsible. Having done that, the world might be a better and more peaceful place to live in.