

*Animal Theology*

Andrew Linzey (1994). SCM Press Ltd: London. 214pp. Paperback. Obtainable from the publishers, 26-30 Tottenham Road, London N1 4BZ, UK (ISBN 0 334 00005 X) Price £15.

This book arrived on my desk at about the right moment as I had only a few days before posed the question, rather light-heartedly I confess, to a group of some 50 village people whether animals had souls. The great majority voted yes without hesitation, two voted no, one asked 'what about slugs?' and another, of course, said it all depended on what I meant by souls. A quite lively debate continued over coffee but it lacked substance and a point of reference, hence the nicety of timing of this book.

As I read it, I could not help but recall a past case-conference with a group of final year veterinary students. We were alongside a sheep which was showing severe central nervous symptoms, suggesting Gid. When I asked what they proposed doing, the group, without dissension, prescribed euthanasia on the grounds that 'it was not worth anything'. I am now quite sure that Andrew Linzey would have promoted a much more informed debate on that occasion than I managed, but hopefully I will be able to do better next time now I have his book to hand.

It is a book based on a series of lectures entitled 'The Theology of Animal Rights' given to the Faculty of Theology at Oxford in 1993, and is a culmination and reworking of many previous papers. It is not a particularly easy read, nor a comfortable one. I had to take a lot of time over it and will need to re-read it now and again. It is persistent and dense in its arguments and references and tacitly assumes a theological base. In so doing it challenges many sacred cows, in particular the long-held view of Western Christianity that man is absolutely different to animals and has absolute rights over them.

The author's main contrasting thrust is to propose a 'theos-rights' for animals, arising out of a conviction that we need a theocentric view of creation and that all life has some kind of value precisely because it is given by God. Whilst he accepts that not all beings have the same value and that there are morally relevant distinctions between one kind of being and another, there is a hidden agenda in the book which persistently asks 'who do we think we are?' So throughout he argues the case for widening the circle of concern, and for drawing the line further down or along the scale of beings. All this reminded me of the reply I was given when I asked a friendly clergyman, who was fondling our much loved labrador bitch at the time, whether she (the Labrador) had a soul. 'Three-quarters of one' came the reply and I suspect Andrew Linzey would empathise with that.

In challenging head-on the notion that man had dominion, in its traditional interpretation, over animals, the author develops a very demanding moral stance which he terms 'the Generosity Paradigm'. In essence I understand this to mean that those at the top, so to speak, have a particular obligation to look after those below; in fact to put them first, and the obligation increases the further down one looks. This sacrificial upside-down morality is, of course, very demanding both intellectually and emotionally but then Andrew Linzey declared a very high view of man's responsibility and redemptive power.

The theology of all this is worked out in the first five chapters of the book under the headings: 1. Reverence, Responsibility and Rights; 2. The Moral Priority of the Weak; 3.

Humans as the Servant Species; 4. Liberation Theology for Animals, and 5. Animal Rights and Parasitical Nature.

The second half of the book is given over to the working out of this theology in some of the more controversial areas of animal welfare such as animal experiments, hunting, vegetarianism and genetic engineering.

I found the chapter on animal experimentation for the most part both reasonable and searching, and sense that most of us would gain by reference to it. However, although the author does not at first appear to take a morally absolute position 'I do not conclude that animals may never be used in any way that betters human kind' (page 107), he then, and quite characteristically I think, puts the boot in by later stating 'the subjugation of any being, human, foetal or animal, to experimental procedures against its own interests must be morally wrong' (page 111). That leaves me wondering how to resolve these two apparently conflicting points of view.

Having developed the case that animals have intrinsic value in themselves and that they are therefore not just for our use, the author then argues with consistency that wanton killing can only be judged deplorable. This leads him to take the absolute moral high ground that 'hunting constitutes nothing less than an offence to God' (page 118) and goes as far as arguing that the predator/prey relations seen in nature generally, and therefore often cited to be the acceptable natural universal model, are in the long run unacceptable for 'the biblical orientation is not to baptise "the laws of the universe" as the purposes of God but rather to look to their transformation and fulfilment!' (page 123). I am tempted to add Discuss!

Vegetarianism is dealt with in a similar and challenging vein. The premise is made that when we have to kill to live we may do so, but when we do not we should live otherwise. 'To opt for a vegetarian lifestyle is to take one practical step towards living in peace with the rest of creation' and then the characteristic crunch, 'one less chicken eaten is one less chicken killed' (page 132). As a life-long farm animal veterinarian as well as more recently an ordained Minister of the Church of England, I am not at all sure of the full implications of all of this, either for me or for the farming industry. It is perhaps some relief to read the author conceding that there is 'no pure land if we embark on vegetarianism, as I think we should, we must do so on the understanding that for all its compelling hope, it is one very small step towards the vision of a peaceful world' (page 132).

The final chapter concerns genetic engineering and appears to trouble the author the most, in part if not mainly, because of the potential as he sees it for such technology spilling over into the human field. This risk becomes more apparent if one removes, as the author does, the traditional moral divide between man and animals, and I am not entirely clear how genetic engineering differs in moral principle from the manipulation exerted by traditional animal breeding work. It will be interesting to see what the committee, set up by the General Synod of the Church of England under the watchful eye of the Reverend Dr John Polkingborne, will make of this issue.

I commend this book to all interested parties but would add a 'health-warning'. Besides its serious and rational content there are some stories and reference points which I found less helpful. These were often accompanied by extreme language which was off-putting and distracting. It made me feel that there was a basic, serious theological divide between the

author and others like myself: he is inclined to recognize the 'utter sinfulness of humankind' based on what I regard as a pre-Christian Doctrine of the Fall, whilst others of us are inclined to recognize that there are lots of kind humans about which is more in keeping with the Doctrine of the Incarnation. But do not let all this put you off reading this valuable book which, as expected, contains excellent Notes and a Literature Guide.

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