

A METHODIST STATEMENT ON

THE TREATMENT OF ANIMALS

Adopted by the Methodist Conference of 1980

There is no simple, satisfactory, comprehensive, definition of the behaviour of human beings towards animals. We care for them, love them, and enter into relationships with them that come close to partnership: the shepherd and his sheepdogs form a working team; the blind are guided by trained and intelligent dogs; many thousands of us find rewarding companionship with ponies, cats, dogs and other pets. Yet we also rear and slaughter animals for food, use them for laboratory experiments, hunt them for sport, admire them in zoos and safari parks, destroy them as pests and predators. From time to time, the Methodist Conference, through the Division of Social Responsibility, has expressed judgements on matters relating to animal welfare; for instance the use of animals in laboratory experiments, the conditions in which animals are exported, cruel sports, and intensive farming. There are pressing reasons for a re-examination.

Concern over the matters mentioned above has intensified rather than diminished. What is considered to be the normal Christian attitude has been challenged by the Buddhist doctrine of 'reverence for life' and by the moral and medical arguments of the vegetarians. The strongest challenge has come from the ecologists and conservationists, making us aware that the issues involved go far beyond appeals for more kindness. Within the biosphere – the total structure of life on and around the planet – life-forms are so intricately interdependent that the possible extinction or distortion of a species (e.g. the whale, the tiger) can have unforeseen effects on all the components of the structure, including the human.

The 'normal' Christian attitude is said to depend on the divine message given to mankind in the covenant with Noah. 'The fear and dread of you shall fall upon all wild animals on earth, on all the birds of heaven, on everything that moves upon the ground and all fish in the sea; they are given into your hands. Every creature that lives and moves shall be food for you; I give you them all, as once I gave you all green plants' (Genesis 9:2-3). Leading ecologists have asserted that reliance on this text has impregnated orthodox Christianity with deplorable arrogance towards nature; that Christian theology, uncritically accepted by orthodox science, must carry a large measure of responsibility for the ravaging of the environment and for dangerous disturbance to the harmonious balance of the natural creation.

If this is indeed the normal attitude of Christians it is founded on a dubious theology. In the Genesis narrative God makes his covenant with Noah, Noah's descendents, 'and with every living creature that is with you'. The inclusion of every living creature is twice more repeated. The psalms (c.f. Psalm 100) remind us that the earth is the Lord's. It is God, not man, who provides for the beasts of the forest and the fish of the sea. A man is worth more than many sparrows, but not one sparrow can die

unnoticed in God's world (Matthew 10:29-31). The scriptural message is quite plain. Man has dominion and responsibility, not absolute lordship. He is a steward, meant to care for God's creation according to God's will.

Theological analysis may have to dig even deeper. In the climax to his massive theological statement in the letter to the Romans Paul speaks of the redemption of all creation. The introduction to the letter to the Colossians proclaims the cosmic Christ. 'Through him God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself' (Colossians 1:20).

Theologians have not found it easy to come to grips with this aspect of the doctrine of creation. They suggest, as a question, not yet answered, that God may be beckoning on the whole inter-related complex of life. We are on the fringes of a mystery, reminded for our own good that there are levels of comprehension of the ultimate purpose of creation that we have not yet attained. But some things are definite. The theological basis for an attitude to the animal creation must rest on the concept of stewardship rather than lordship, must accept the implications of the reality of the interdependence of life on our planet, and must express the conviction that creation is good.

In the ideal world, where all things will be obedient to God's loving will, 'the wolf shall live with the sheep, and the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall grow up together, and a little child shall lead them. The lion shall eat straw like cattle; the infant shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the young child dance over the viper's nest' (Isaiah 11:6-8). But, as the prophecy implies, we are not in that sort of world. It would be foolish to pretend that we are. The animals themselves kill others for food. Somehow we must steer a middle course between the arrogance of lordship and the as yet unattainable ideal.

There are those who argue that we are in fact steering such a course reasonably well, and that much criticism of our attitude to animals is unjustified. The animals we rear for food, they say, are well cared for, and are protected against marauders and the ravages of hunger and disease. Breeds have been improved and made healthier by careful experienced husbandry. Species endangered by changes in the environment have been saved from extinction. It should be horrifying that millions of animals are killed every year in laboratory experiments, but most of them have been bred for the purpose and the outcome of the experimentation is valuable advance in both human and veterinary medicine.

The arguments provide a useful warning against purely emotional reactions, but are by no means wholly satisfying. It is true to observable fact that some of the ways in which we treat animals regard them as expendable and wholly subservient to presumed human needs. Some judgements on the situation as it now is can be made with confidence.

- a) Unnecessary or unjustifiable experimentation, as on the effect of cosmetics; the use of numbers of animals in an experiment far in excess of a reasonable control and check number; excessive duplication of experiments in different laboratories the use of animals when valid results could be secured from tissue cultures; all are to be condemned.

- b) Those aspects of the practices of intensive factory farming which do not consider the welfare of animals involved are to be condemned.
- c) Patently cruel sports, such as stag hunting and hare coursing, are to be condemned, not only for the suffering imposed on the animal but also for the effect on the human participant.
- d) The extinction or drastic reduction of animal species by over hunting is to be condemned.
- e) The preservation of species through the conservation of appropriate natural habitats is to be welcomed.
- f) In all his dealings with the creatures who share creation with him, the proper function of the Christian man or woman is to serve as a steward under God.