

Animal rights groups exploit religion

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Summary

The animal rights movement, often characterized as a secular, liberal cause, is working with increasing intensity to appeal to religious organizations. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* published a Nov. 6, 2007 article titled “For all of God’s creatures; Activists for animals are finding a receptive audience in the faith community, including on the religious right.”

Background

According to the *Times*, animal rights activists have been lecturing in Quaker meetinghouses and Episcopal churches, setting up Web sites that post Scripture alongside recipes for vegan soup and using biblical language to promote political initiatives, such as laws mandating larger crates for gestating pigs.

A religious proclamation

The Best Friends Animal Society, an animal rights group based in Utah, hosted a summit Nov. 7, 2007 in Washington, D.C., to collect 1 million signatures on “A Religious Proclamation for Animal Compassion” from people of all faiths committed to making the world a kinder place for animals.

Of the five “calls to action” in the proclamation, No. 2 called upon people of faith to reduce meat consumption, refuse to wear fur, buy from local farms and actively support those who encourage humane treatment of animals. According to the proclamation, “...the increasing commercialization and commoditization of animals for the purpose of human consumption and comfort causes untold suffering upon animals each year in factory farms, the commercial fishing industry and the fur trade.” At press time, the Best Friends Animal and Religion team boasted 7,435 signatures for the proclamation, and they plan to reach more than 2,000 churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and faith organizations by the end of 2008 in preparation for the 2009 Summit of Animals and Religion.

Animal rights, evangelism and higher education

Karen Swallow Prior, an associate professor of English at Liberty University – a fundamentalist Baptist institution founded by the late Rev. Jerry Falwell – recently wrote an editorial for the university’s journal declaring animal welfare an evangelical concern. According to Prior, the

evangelical hero of the late 18th and 19th centuries, William Wiberforce, pushed for laws to protect animals from human cruelty. The *Los Angeles Times* commented that buzz on animal rights Web sites indicated to leaders in the animal rights movement that the religious right was a potential ally and resource contributor.

HSUS launches Animals and Religion program

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) launched a new Animals and Religion program at the end of September 2007, hosted on its Web site at <http://www.HSUS.org/religion>. HSUS’s Animals and Religion program, funded at \$400,000 a year, aims to persuade faith communities to take a series of small steps toward “animal welfare,” like offering a vegetarian entree at a fellowship meal or insisting that the coffee cake set out on Sundays is made with free-range eggs.

HSUS also is seeking to enlist religious leaders in its political campaigns. In California, the group is pushing a ballot measure to ban certain confinement systems for farm animals. Promotional advertisements for the campaign show photos of hens in crowded cages with the caption, “Is This Faithful Stewardship of God’s Creatures?”

HSUS’s Animals and Religion Web site gives various U.S. religions’ opinions about animals. According to the site, Seventh-day Adventists present a health message that recommends vegetarianism and expects abstinence from pork, shellfish and other foods proscribed as “unclean” in Leviticus 11. Additionally, the site quotes a section from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2003 Agricultural Pastoral, “Catholic teaching about the stewardship of creation leads us to question certain farming practices, such as the operation of massive confined animal feeding operations. We believe that these operations should be carefully regulated and monitored so that environmental risks are minimized and animals are treated as creatures of God.”

Campaigns not fully embraced

Some religious sectors are showing backlash against the recent trend in animal rights extremist campaigns, arguing the phrase “animal rights” subverts God’s plan for man to exert dominion over the rest of creation. For example, Evangelical Commentator Charles Colson suggested in a November radio broadcast animal-rights activism implies that “humans are ... just one of many living accidents roaming the planet.” In the broadcast, Colson said Christians must treat animals humanely, but that doesn’t mean granting them the legal right to live in bigger cages.

The goals of the vegan-driven animal rights activists, if realized, could devastate farmers, ranchers and the rural communities that rely upon them. History has proven that America's religious communities can greatly influence social causes in the nation.

The beef industry's Checkoff-funded issues management program supports the Animal Agriculture Alliance in its efforts to provide a united voice for those involved in the animal agriculture and food industries, communicating science-based information to a broad-based audience of consumers and media.

Key Points

- A Nov. 6, 2007 *Los Angeles Times* article reported the animal rights movement is working with increasing intensity to appeal to religious organizations.
- The Best Friends Animal Society recently hosted a summit to collect 1 million signatures on a proclamation that, among other things, called upon people of faith to reduce meat consumption, refuse to wear fur, buy from local farms and actively support those who encourage humane treatment of animals.
- The Humane Society of the United States launched an Animals and Religion program, funded at \$400,000 per year, aiming to persuade faith communities to take a series of small steps toward encouraging and adopting vegetarian and vegan lifestyles.