

First hit the pets, then the people

By Andrew Linzey

[The Rev. Andrew Linzey, PhD, DD, a licensed priest in the Diocese of Bethlehem, is a theologian at Oxford. He has organized a conference on the Relationship between Animal Abuse and Human Violence on September 18 at Keble College, Oxford. It will explore the link between animal abuse and child abuse, domestic violence, and violence against women, especially useful for pastors, counselors, psychologists, and law enforcement personnel. There are various US academics coming to speak: details [here](#). The column below was published in the August 17 edition of [The Church Times](#).]



Slippery slope: an image designed for the conference on violence next month

“If any passages in holy scripture seem to forbid us to be cruel to brute animals,” wrote St Thomas Aquinas, “this is . . . to remove man’s thoughts from being cruel to other men, lest through being cruel to animals one becomes cruel to human beings.”

Leaving aside Aquinas’s questionable interpretation of scripture, the assumed link between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence has found wide resonance in Western society. Thinkers as diverse as Pythagoras, St Augustine, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and many others have all advanced similar views.

Such thoughts served the emergence of the animal-protection movement. The preamble to Lord Erskine’s landmark Cruelty to Animals Bill in 1809 maintained that abuse was “pernicious in its example, having an evident tendency to harden the heart against the natural feelings of humanity”.

Erskine, like Aquinas, sensed that there must be a connection, and assumed that it was so. But is there any evidence to support this link?

There are two principal kinds of evidence. The first comes from criminal profiling. A high proportion of people convicted of violent crimes have histories of animal abuse. Research in the United States by the FBI has led the field. In the late 1970s, interviews with 38 multiple murderers revealed that 36 per cent had killed or tortured animals as children, and 46 per cent as adolescents.

In a control-group study by the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA) and Northeastern University, 153 individuals prosecuted by the MSPCA between 1975 and 1986 were tracked for 20 years — ten years before the abuse, and ten after. Seventy per cent who had committed violent crimes against animals also had — or went on to have — criminal records for violent, drug, or disorder crimes.

Compared with their next-door neighbours, those who abused animals were five times more likely to commit violent crimes against people. The FBI now places animal cruelty on its list of risk indicators and warning signs for future violence.

The second piece of evidence comes from research on domestic violence. In situations where women or children were abused, so, invariably, were their animals. In 1981, a study by the RSPCA reported that 83 per cent of families with a history of animal abuse had also been identified by social services as at risk from child abuse or neglect.

In 1983, a study of those receiving services for child abuse from the New Jersey child-protection agency found that animals had also been abused in 88 per cent of pet-owning families. Extensive “triangling” took place within families, whereby pets were mistreated as a means of hurting another member of the family. Further US research in 1995 suggested that 71 per cent of battered women in a shelter asserted that their violent partner had harmed, or threatened to harm, the family pet.

Two pioneers in the field, Frank Ascione and Phil Arkow, argue that “Violence directed against animals is often a coercion device and an early indicator of violence that may escalate in range and severity against other victims.”

None of this shows that people who are cruel to animals will always be violent to humans. There is no simple cause and effect. Rather, cruelty to animals is one of a cluster of potential or actual characteristics held in common by those who commit violence or seriously anti-social acts. The American Psychiatric Association, for example, identifies animal cruelty as one of the diagnostic criteria for conduct disorders.

In the light of this accumulating evidence, what should be done? The first course of action should be humane education by parents and teachers. Macho acts of violence to other creatures are not a normal phase of development, and, unless checked, can form pathological traits. Teaching young children respect for living creatures is a large

civilising task, but, lamentably, it has no place in the National Curriculum, and is seldom undertaken by schools. By their example, or lack of it, parents crucially influence children's propensity to violence.

The second point is the need to address and report incidents of abuse. Clergy are now well aware of this obligation in relation to children, but are reluctant to act in relation to animals. Yet, since clergy are one of the few professional groups whose work involves home visits, they are often (like it or not) in key front-line positions. Cross-reporting among professionals is now increasingly common, and it is a mistake to leave any case of abuse, child or animal, unreported. Under the 2006 Animal Welfare Act, all who keep animals have a "duty of care".

The third course of action concerns our theological vision of our place in creation. The idea of the interdependence of creation is now commonplace, but when it comes to articulating its practical significance, theologians and preachers are often mute. It is as if we can speak of creation only in generalities, always emphasising the differences between "them" and "us". One result of this split thinking is that we fail to see the common patterns of violence in which we are caught — both as abusers and the abused.

A beleaguered animal protectionist was once confronted by an angry person wanting to know how she dared work for animals while there was still cruelty to children. "I'm working at the roots," she replied.

[The Revd Professor Andrew Linzey is Director of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, and the author of *Creatures of the Same God* (Winchester University Press, 2007). A conference on animal abuse and human violence is being held on 18 September in Oxford (www.oxfordanimaethics.com).]

Posted by

Bill Lewellis, Communication Minister/Editor (1986), Canon Theologian (1998)
Diocese of Bethlehem, 333 Wyandotte St., Bethlehem, PA 18015 www.diobeth.org
(Cell) 610-216-2726 (W)610-691-5655 x229 (H)610-820-7673 blewellis@diobeth.org
Be attentive. Be intelligent. Be reasonable. Be responsible.
Be in Love. And, if necessary, change. --Bernard Lonergan