The morality of hunting with dogs

CPHA believes that hunting wild mammals with hounds is inherently cruel and unnecessary. Where it is necessary to control wild mammals, there are more humane alternatives, and the Burns Report concluded that hunting “seriously compromises the welfare” of the hunted mammal.

The issue of cruelty is central to the debate about hunting with dogs. “Cruelty” can be defined as the unnecessary suffering of a sentient creature. Animal cruelty causes distress to most people. If animal suffering caused by certain acts is shown to be “unnecessary”, and thus cruel, then individuals cannot expect society to sanction those acts.

In an open letter to the bishops that was printed in the Church Times on 20 December 2002, the Revd Professor Andrew Linzey addressed the “the important theological and ethical considerations that have yet to be articulated” on the hunting issue. He explained that, “humans are moral agents with the freedom to make moral decisions. That consideration is of central relevance to the debate about hunting. What is so objectionable is that moral beings, who should know better, choose to engage in an activity that results in cruelty.”

Professor Linzey argues that human beings have a duty of care towards animals, who are wholly in our power. There is, as Cardinal Newman indicated, “something so very dreadful, so satanic in tormenting those who have never harmed us, and who cannot defend themselves, who are utterly in our power [and] who have weapons neither of offence or defence...”.

Hunting is not undertaken as a regrettable but necessary act; rather, it is celebrated as a “sport”. People hunt because they enjoy it. In the words of Baroness Mallalieu, “hunting is our music, it is our poetry, it is our art, it is our pleasure...”.

Peter Carruthers, Professor of Philosophy at Sheffield University, states that animal cruelty has significance to us because it causes us distress and because of what it tells us about the moral fitness of the perpetrator(s). If acts that cause distress are carried out for trivial reasons, which offend public moral sentiments, then there are just grounds for prohibiting those acts. In respect of hunting, he states: “For those who hunt animals for sport rather than to feed themselves or to earn a living, do so from motives that must certainly count as trivial in comparison to the suffering they cause? While the pleasures of the hunt need not be directly sadistic – it need not be the suffering of the animal that is the object of enjoyment – they are inseparably bound up with the enjoyment of power and of violent domination.”

No freedom to be cruel

Lord Devlin, one of the great judges of the last century, put the issue of tolerance this way: “Not everything is to be tolerated. No society can do without intolerance, indignation, and disgust, they are the forces behind the moral law, and indeed it can be argued that if they or something like them are not present, the feelings of a society cannot be weighty enough to deprive the individual of freedom of choice. I suppose that there is hardly anyone nowadays who would not be disgusted by the thought of deliberate cruelty to animals. No one proposes to relegate that or any other form of sadism to the realm of private morality or to allow it to be practised in public or private.”

When he urged governments to legislate against cruelty to animals in 1848, one of the fathers of liberalism, John Stuart Mill, said: “The reasons for legal intervention in favour of children apply not
less strongly to the case of those unfortunate slaves and victims of the most brutal part of mankind – the lower animals. It is by the grossest misunderstanding of the principle of liberty that the infliction of exemplary punishment on ruffianism practised towards those defenceless creatures has been treated as meddling by government in things beyond its province; an interference with domestic life. The domestic life of domestic tyrants is one of the things which is the most imperative on the laws to interfere with.”

Perhaps the best argument to illustrate the absurdity of the claim that a ban on hunting is “illiberal” is to consider just how things would look if such logic had been accepted by earlier governments. If this were the case, bull, bear and badger baiting would never have been outlawed and people would be free to beat or starve their pets. In fact, the law would not have developed to stop many of the worst abuses against animals or humans and practices such as child labour or slavery would still be legal in Britain.

A ban on hunting would secure legislation that reflects the Christian duty to care for animals and our moral responsibility to abolish cruelty. Parliament has an historic opportunity to end the cruelty of hunting with dogs, just as it has outlawed bear baiting and other similar practices.

Only a complete ban will put an end to the cruelty, while proposals for the licensing of hunts would simply devolve the moral responsibility to a committee and would certainly not “resolve” the issue. What it would do is legitimise for the first time in law the acceptability of hunting and might even provide a basis for it to flourish in years to come.

1 The Revd Professor Andrew Linzey is a member of the Faculty of Theology in the University of Oxford, and holds the world’s first post in theology and animal welfare – the Bede Jarrett Senior Research Fellowship – at Blackfriars Hall, Oxford.

2 Morals and the Criminal Law, Patrick Devlin, 1965.