



Global Conference on Animal Welfare: an OIE initiative

TOPIC: The way forward

TITLE: Cultural, Religious and ethical issues associated with animal

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ABSTRACT:

Domestication of animals for food was a major event in the civilisation of humankind. It facilitated the hunter-gatherers to become pastoral nomads and eventually establish stable and sedentary communities. This dramatic change in lifestyle brought with it the need for tribal customs, laws, values and beliefs. Therefore, we could infer that domestication of animals was indeed the origin of cultures (customs), religions (beliefs) and ethics (values). A synonym of culture is civilisation. Literature suggests that farming of crops and animals contributed to the wealth and well-being of our ancestors and played key roles in the advancement of civilisations and creation of monuments. Owing to this, animals had a special place in human civilisation. Many of the deities of gods and goddesses of these great civilisations were envisioned to have the heads or bodies of animals and birds. Even today, there isn't a culture in the world in which intentional harm or cruelty to animals is tolerated.

Religions evolved in different parts of the world to strengthen or provide new moral guidelines, values or codes. There is no religion without compassion to animals and cruelty to animals is strictly prohibited. In today's society some people just obey the teachings of their religion and some others accept the conventional wisdom of the day. However, regardless of our differences, we consider animals as sentient beings. Humanists therefore argue that if human civilisation were to develop all over again, it is highly unlikely that exactly the same religions would develop. But it is very likely that our basic moral principles (ethics) would be the same, because humans, who evolved to live in groups, need the kinds of rules which enables us to live together co-operatively and harmoniously.

Ethics is science of morals. It evolved with humankind and it will continue to do so because individuals and society as a whole require value and meaning of their actions. Ethicists argue that farm animals that tended them to be domesticated by humankind probably trust, or genetically imprinted over thousands of years to do so, that humans will take good care of them, and therefore, we have a moral obligation. Our true cultural and religious attitudes to animals have been gradually eroded over the years from the family farming systems that were based on compassion to animals to intensive or industrial farming systems based on productivity and profitability. Some of the ways in which we

farm, transport and slaughter animals for food are not conducive to ensuring their welfare and they also appear to be in contradiction with our true cultural and religious values.

In view of the fact that domestication of animals was the origin of our cultures, religions and ethics, and animals continue to be important to the wealth and well-being of humankind, our attitudes to animals should be positive towards their welfare. Existing scientific evidence suggest that improving animal welfare would contribute to improving the quality and safety of food we derive from them. Animal welfare education is vital to improving our knowledge and understanding and such an educational programme should be based on sound science. Commitment to improving animal welfare should become a 'universal culture' and I believe this is the way forward.

"Yesterday is but a dream, tomorrow is but a vision. But today well lived makes every yesterday dream of happiness, and every tomorrow a vision of hope. Look well, therefore, to This Day" – Sanskrit Proverb.