

ACCOUNTING FOR FIDO'S RIGHTS

The Catholic Church regards animals to be part of God's creation, and are therefore deserving of respect. But only men and women are made in the image and likeness of God. Moreover, animals do not share the same dignity as human beings. Nor are they capable of being held morally responsible for their behavior. As such, while animal welfare is imperative, in no way can animals be said to possess rights.

However, a new Gallup poll on morality reveals that Democrats and young people appear to be more concerned about the rights of Fido than his owner, Freddy.

When asked if abortion is "morally acceptable," 78 percent of Democrats and 59 percent of those 18-34 agree; this compares to 20 percent of Republicans and 43 percent of those 55 and over. But when it comes to medical testing on animals, only 45 percent of Democrats and 35 percent of young people agree; the majority of Republicans (69 percent) and the oldest generation (52 percent) agree.

In other words, while nearly 8- in-10 Democrats are okay with abortion, less than half are okay with medical testing for animals. The majority of young people are also okay with abortion, but they draw a hard line when it comes to medical testing of animals.

Why are Democrats and young people showing more respect for the rights of Fido than Freddy?

From a wealth of survey data we know that Democrats and young people are the least religious; they are much more likely to answer "none" when asked what their religious affiliation is. How does this explain their moral choices?

What unites Democrats and young people, and what separates them from most Americans, is their penchant for autonomy. For

many of them, autonomy is their god. Abortion, they reckon, is all about "bodily autonomy," hence it is morally acceptable. The competing right of the child to live is given short shrift.

The interest in protecting animals cannot be explained by an affection for autonomy. Something else is going on.

Young people are more likely to own a pet than older people, and may therefore be more protective of their status. More important, however, is their relatively high exposure to videos and instruction on animal rights in school and social media. As for Democrats, they are more likely to take an expansive view of rights than other Americans (save for the life of the unborn). Because they fancy themselves as being open-minded, they regard an exclusive interest in human rights as chauvinistic.

We need to get our moral house in order. If we can't conclude that Freddy should be awarded a higher moral plane than Fido, we are heading towards disaster.