Comment:
Almost Theological Opposition

According to a letter in *The Times* , from a correspondent writing from East Lothian in Scotland, the British Government's opposition to vaccinating cloven-hoofed animals against foot-and-mouth disease, is 'almost theological' (Wednesday March 14, 2001).

It's an increasingly familiar sense of the word 'theological': equivalent to 'dogmatic', 'irrational', 'unwilling to listen', 'obdurate' — not to put too fine a point on it: 'plain stupid'.

The case against vaccination is easy to understand. Animals would need to be vaccinated twice a year, which would be expensive, in terms of equipment and the veterinary surgeons' time.

In any case, the vaccine works against only one of the four strains of the disease. Moreover, vaccinated beasts might well be carriers, though showing no symptoms. This means that no country where the disease is absent would risk trading with the United Kingdom. Britain would lose export markets for meat — beef, lamb, pork — in all the 48 foot-and-mouth-free countries, including our most lucrative customers.

Then, though the disease never kills us and seldom the afflicted animals, it can be painful for them and — worse — costly in terms of care and drugs to nurse them back to health. Worse still, by this reckoning, they would not recover completely, as we can see in countries where they are allowed to live; they would be too debilitated to yield acceptable levels of meat and milk. It is simply more economical to kill them and burn their bodies to ashes. (That isn't cheap either.)

Then, most important of all, there is the tourist industry. Servicing tourists is, evidently, vastly more lucrative in Britain than rearing sheep and cattle. According to *The Times*, Britain earned £500 million from exporting meat last year, *but about £12 billion from tourism.* Incomparably more people are employed in keeping foreign visitors happy than on exporting mutton, pork and beef. If holiday-makers from abroad, and especially from the United States of America, were to be put off in significant numbers by fears of carrying infection back from visiting stately homes and country pubs, the damage to the British economy would be vastly greater than any losses brought about by slaughtering half a million animals.

Thus, opposition to vaccinating animals against the disease is not in the least bit 'theological', in the sense of 'irrational'. It's sheer common sense; most farmers agree with the policy. It's simply a matter of self-interest. ('It's the economy, stupid!'.) The cheapest method of treating the

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disease is to kill and burn the animals whenever there is an outbreak. The last one in Britain was in the 1960s. It took the lives of half a million animals. It would have cost incomparably more to have gone in for vaccination, all these years.

The only way of maintaining sales of meat products to the most coveted foreign markets is to be in a position to say, not that every sheep, pig and cow has been vaccinated, but that every diseased animal has been exterminated. In practice, of course, this means that every animal even suspected of having been in contact with an identified case of the disease has to be shot, however healthy it obviously is.

Of course, the sight of dead beasts and smoking pyres might well prompt theological opposition in the old-fashioned sense. At least, it might provoke doubts about the ethics of this way of protecting the meat and tourist industries.

Moral theology, at least, might come into it. You don't have to be particularly compassionate to find it distressing to read about the farmer and his wife weeping in the kitchen as they play the loudest music they have in a bid to drown out the noise of the shots killing one by one the 250 cows they have reared from infancy and come to know individually. You don't have to have been brought up on a farm to guess what it is like to love animals. (I shall never forget my grandfather's anguish when he accidentally wounded a well loved dog when they were hunting rats in a haystack and had to put her down.)

It is distressing, too, to read about the dealers, who inadvertently spread the disease throughout the country, some of whom, according to the newspapers, are looking forward with glee to the compensation — more money, they say, than selling the animals would have raised.

You don't have to be much of an animal rights activist to question the wisdom of shuttling animals long distances, from one end of the country to the other, fattening them on this or that farm, selling them at this or that market, delivering them at this or that abbatoir — not to dwell on the conditions in the trucks transporting them.

You don't have to have a Hindu-like religious reverence for cows to wonder whether the economics of farming and food production in Britain are now so crazy that it would take nothing less than theological opposition to bring us to our senses.

Opposition does not have to be theological in the sense of dogmatic, irrational and stupid. Opposition could also be theological in the proper sense: bringing reason, wisdom, and perhaps the Christian doctrine of creation, to bear on the manifestly stupid economics of much of the farming industry in Britain.

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