

Ecology

A Christian Case for Vegetarianism?

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Is there a Christian case to be made for vegetarianism? In this short article, I hope to answer this question in the affirmative! But first, it is important to make a few observations. For starters, the Bible does not prohibit eating meat. In the Bible, the eating of meat is sometimes prescribed and the New Testament even records Jesus eating both fish and lamb. Attempts to deny these realities are rather historically implausible. And yet, simply because a practice was once considered normative does not mean we should always follow it today. Citing biblical examples of behaviour as exemplary, and therefore exempt from critical moral investigation, is the same hermeneutical key by which Christians have defended all sorts of injustices! Instead, we must examine the many reasons why a Christian may choose not to eat meat, both theological and ethical, and then weigh these up alongside the liberationist trajectory of the Christian faith.

Before we approach explicitly Christian arguments for vegetarianism, it is important to consider the general ethical reasons why someone may choose not to eat meat. For many vegetarians, Christian or otherwise, ethical considerations are often the main reason for adopting a meat-free diet. Here it is worth highlighting the work of renowned animal ethicist Peter Singer. Singer begins his argument by asking if there are really some special qualities that all people share that enable them to have full and equal moral status? After an examination of various possibilities, he concludes that all examples of such characteristics are qualities that some, if not many, human beings lack. If such is the case, on what basis should we assign moral interest? For Singer, the basis of our moral rights depend on our ability to feel pleasure and pain. As animals can feel pain in the same way as humans, Singer concludes that it is wrong to cause them needless suffering. For Singer, 'if a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for disregarding that suffering.' Many Christians find this sort of argument compelling. Animals undoubtedly suffer pain: if we are to exhibit the virtues of compassion and care, perhaps it is our duty to take animal suffering into account when making dietary decisions?

We might summarise the above paragraph as follows: suffering is suffering, everywhere it occurs, human or otherwise. But what about explicitly Christian reasons for why we can and should

become a vegetarian? In Christian thought, Genesis is the most formative text for our understanding of humanity's place in relation to animals. In Genesis 1:28, God confers to mankind the power to subdue (kābaš) and rule over (rādāh) nature, including animals. For many Christians, as humankind shares in God's jurisdiction over nature, our human desire for meat justifies the exploitation of animals. But we should be careful at this juncture. Subduing in Genesis implies some dominion, but in all likelihood not the systematic and reckless abuse of animals we witness today. The Genesis authors knew nothing, nor likely could they imagine, the types of factory farming we employ today. Indeed, one of Christianity's greatest failures is the way in which it has interpreted these verses as a license to exploit the natural environment. As many such as James Barr have suggested, rule over (rādāh) could refer to a peaceful state of affairs, such as Solomon's peaceful rule — not necessarily boundless exploitation. Animals were created by God, they are individuals with personalities and desires. A proper concept of human stewardship and dominion would take these desires, fears, and joys into account and likely exclude much of the modern animal agriculture we partake in today.

Finally, and the most persuasive reason I think that Christians should become vegetarians, is the disastrous environmental effects associated with intensive animal farming. Today, animal agriculture is in large part responsible for our global environmental crisis; an issue of almost unparalleled magnitude and urgency. Worldwide, livestock production contributes up to 18% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Accommodating animals raised for human consumption requires close to seventy percent of the planet's agricultural land, with this figure growing every day. This growing demand for meat leads to excessive deforestation to make way for new grazing land, a practice which releases huge amounts of greenhouse gases. In addition, the animals themselves emit methane gas. For many vegetarians, the environmental demands of the meat-production system make it an unsustainable choice. Indeed, it might also be a selfish one. On average, meat production requires ten times as much land as plant based diets. Worldwide, more than forty percent of wheat, rye, oats, and corn is fed to animals. When eleven percent of the world's population — 815 million people — still do not have enough food to eat, is this not an irresponsible way of using our resources? It's certainly an inefficient one: when we feed animals grain and wheat we lose

a huge amount of energy at each trophic level.

Amongst many Christians, climate change is widely recognised as a serious problem. More and more, we are coming to the realisation that abuse of nature is incompatible with the Kingdom of God. If animal agriculture does cause environmental damage on the scale described above, then perhaps it is necessary and timely for us to formulate new Christian ethical imperatives in relation to meat consumption. That is to say, we must formulate and promote an ethical matrix which calls for vegetarianism as a way of combating climate change. As John Barclay puts it, 'it is now our Christian duty to reduce our meat consumption to an absolute minimum, if not zero, and we should have no hesitation in urging this self-denial on ourselves and on others, for the sake of the future of our planet and the lives of its most vulnerable inhabitants.' Encouragement and exhortation to vegetarianism can cause many people discomfort, particularly as meat-diets are central to many of our economic and social relations. But this countercultural message is a timely and important one. Indeed, cutting meat from our diets may be the best way we can individually counter climate change.

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This article reflects his views and not necessarily those of SCM.*