

# Christian Vegetarian Association UK

Working towards a violence-free world

## Was Jesus a Vegetarian?

### A CVAUK Statement

#### *Extract from CVAUK Code of Practice*

*CVAUK want to make it clear that we support all Christians who, through their faith in a perfect, non-violent God, proclaim that 'Jesus was a vegetarian'. Our patron the Rev.J.R.Hyland comments as follows:*

In the debate regarding the validity of a campaign that claims "Jesus Was a Vegetarian," Rev. Andrew Linzey rejects the sources on which this claim is based and correctly points out that the texts used to validate such a position are not accepted by historians, theologians, or biblical scholars. Nevertheless, there are many people who accept books like "The Gospel of the Holy Twelve" or "The Gospel of Peace," using them as guides to help them live non-violently and with compassion for all creatures — a lifestyle that includes vegetarianism. Linzey is afraid that such texts are "works of fiction," but even if they were, what difference does that make? Certainly, the record of those who accept only the canonical texts has not always been inspiring. The Bible has been and continues to be used to support war, slavery, sexism, and human carnivorousness. Rather than worrying about being tainted by those who base their Christian vegetarianism on non-traditional sources, we should be celebrating their embrace of compassion and non-violence.

Rev. J. R. Hyland, Director, Publications,  
Humane Religion, Sarasota, FL

*However, when working within the church, statements like 'Jesus was a Vegetarian' will close minds to the message we want to convey and could even lead to ridicule. CVAUK therefore, fully endorse the position taken by Rev. Prof. Andrew Linzey (see article - page 2); that to proclaim **within the church** that 'Jesus was a vegetarian' is both un-necessary and counter productive.*

## **Good Causes Do Not Need Exaggeration.**

I think it is possible to locate more or less the exact moment when the anti-vivisection [AV] movement in Britain lost its way. It is found in the anti-vivisectionists' "Credo" adopted in 1908. "We are confident," it declares, "that a practice which is spiritually repulsive and morally deteriorating cannot be scientifically necessary." This line heralded, if not anticipated, the long history of AV societies claiming that vivisection is useless, quackery, or even fraudulent.

That little exaggeration has cost the AV movement dearly. Since 1908, it has only been necessary for vivisectionists to point out that such-and-such a utility was gained from experimentation to effectively demolish the AV case. I am entirely opposed on moral grounds to all harmful experimentation on animals. But it is because I care deeply for the AV cause that I cannot bear to see a first-class case weakened by untenable, exaggerated claims.

There is, of course, a serious scientific critique of animal experimentation — some, even much, may be misleading and wasteful — but to argue that vivisection is wrong does not require us to say that it can never be "useful." As George Bernard Shaw astringently (and entirely correctly) remarked, "Nothing can be proved to be useless."

I feel the same way about the claim that "Jesus was a vegetarian." I have worked for 25 years trying to combat the churches' indifference to animal suffering and I would dearly love them to embrace ethical vegetarianism. But this type of campaign, while otherwise admirable and well-intentioned, has as its leading slogan a statement that is at best an exaggeration. It presents historical possibility as historical fact. In the canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), there is plenty of evidence that Jesus assisted at the capture of, personally ate, and even cooked fish.

Interestingly, there are no precise examples of Jesus eating meat in the New Testament. It may be significant that even in the Gospel accounts that locate the Last Supper as a Passover meal that there is no reference to the lamb which would normally have been eaten. Moreover, as I argue in *Christianity and the Rights of Animals*, it is possible to see Jesus' attack on the Temple as a rejection of the practice of animal sacrifice. After all, what were they selling in the Temple? Not postcards and souvenirs but animals for sacrifice. But to go further and claim — without qualification — that Jesus was a vegetarian is to simply go beyond the evidence.

Now, I know that the reply will come: "But, look, Andrew, by this one advertising campaign we have secured more publicity for the Christian vegetarian cause than you have through years of book writing." Well, I concede that. But not all

publicity is good publicity, and some campaigns, however well-intentioned, can do real damage.

More to the point, there's not one university scholar specializing in biblical studies who upholds this line. Even a pro animal, vegetarian professor of Judaism has publicly ridiculed the claim, saying that if Jesus was a veggie he would have fed the 5,000 with "carrots, not fish."

There will be more to come, of course. Animal advocates will be singled out as people who simply fabricate the Bible for their own purposes. Far from being one means of opening up the debate about Christian vegetarianism, the claim will prematurely close it down. Opponents are thus given another stick with which to beat Christians who work to raise consciousness about animals within the churches.

All this is deeply galling because it is all so unnecessary. There are strong biblical arguments for vegetarianism. Genesis 1: 29-30 commands vegetarianism, a position only reversed after the fall and the flood (symbolizing the human descent into wickedness and violence) in Genesis 9:3. A slogan like "The first book of the Bible commands vegetarianism" could have aroused interest. But to misrepresent what is (truthfully) the most problematic aspect of the Christian case for vegetarianism is to invite derision.

Moreover, the "evidence" for Jesus' vegetarianism largely rests on a long canvassed view among some animal advocates that Jesus was a member of an ascetic Jewish sect called the Essenes. Various "gospels" like "The Gospel of Peace" or "The Gospel of the Holy Twelve" have been promoted by those eager to show that the original Gospels have been tampered with or have deliberately distorted Jesus' message. But, try as I may, I can find no evidence for their antiquity, and I deeply fear that they are works of fiction. I accept that new discoveries are possible, but I challenge anyone to produce evidence that these documents are part of a genuine apostolic tradition. Indeed, New Testament scholars are generally among the most sceptical academics who love overturning previous scholarly judgements, and would be only too delighted to have evidence of previously undiscovered manuscripts.

The view that Jesus was an Essene - and therefore a thoroughgoing ascetic who didn't eat meat of any kind and didn't drink wine - is simply impossible to harmonize with the picture of Jesus as presented in the four canonical Gospels. The individual charged with being a friend of sinners and drunkards is hardly likely to turn out to be a strict ascetic!

All this is a pity, because there is a serious discussion to be had about Jesus' attitudes towards animals. Scholars like Richard Bauckham, in his articles in *Animals on the Agenda*, have begun to piece together the evidence and

conclude that Jesus adopted the prevalent Jewish view that compassionate care for animals was a religious duty. The incident, for example, in Mark 1:13 where Jesus begins his ministry "with the wild beasts" would have been understood by its readers, according to Bauckham, as signifying that Jesus' ministry was inclusive of the animal world.

Similarly, the saying about the value of sparrows "not forgotten by God" (Luke 12:6) acquires new significance when it is appreciated that the sparrows were bought and sold in the market as little chunks of meat. In this one instance, Jesus appears to assert the intrinsic value of creatures routinely treated as economic commodities.

There is much more besides. From the third to the eighth century there is a voluminous amount of non-canonical literature associating Jesus and the apostles with animals. In the Gospel of Psuedo - Matthew alone we derive the tradition of animals at the birth of Jesus (not found in the canonical documents), animals befriending the Holy Family on their journey to Egypt, and the young Jesus' apparently filial and protective relations with lions. In the Acts of Philip, the Apostle heals a baby goat mauled by a leopard and even prays to Jesus to convert her to vegetarianism. Most striking of all, in an early Coptic manuscript, is the story of Jesus' healing of a mule beaten by its owner, and Jesus' admonition: "Now go on and beat it no more, that you also may find mercy." Of course these later works may well be embellishments and contain legendary accretions, but they do testify to a continuing tradition (hinted at in the canonical Gospels) that Jesus' ministry was designed to bring peace to all creatures.

Now of course it makes sense that the Jesus who did these things might also have been a vegetarian. But to claim dogmatically that he was — against plain evidence to the contrary — is a misguided, even counterproductive, strategy. It is to fall into the trap of a priori reasoning that has so hampered the anti-vivisection movement. I care deeply about both causes, deeply enough not to want to see both invalidated by strategies based on exaggeration.

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