

# Christian Abstinance and Vegetarianism: An Historical Overview

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Present-day Christian vegetarians continue an ancient tradition of Christian dietary abstinence with sources in scripture, monasticism and the work and witness of key theologians and spiritual leaders. Yet this tradition does not conform to the modern concept of vegetarianism, as shown by the historic persistence of feasting, fish-eating and animal sacrifice. Moreover, views of body and soul, the character of recent spiritual and liturgical revivals, and worries about heresy have contributed to most Christians' failure to take vegetarianism seriously, both historically and today. Nonetheless, the current ecological crisis and the continuing centrality of the Eucharist in many denominations provide grounds for renewed engagement.

Back in June, I was in Romania in the ancient city of Constanța on the Black Sea. One day we drove inland towards the Bulgarian border to visit some new and revived convents and monasteries, which have been such a feature of the Orthodox Church's expanding life since the fall of Communism. We were on ancient Christian soil, evangelised by Saint Andrew who, the Orthodox love to remind Westerners, was the first of the apostles to acknowledge Jesus and the apostle who brought Peter to Jesus. Turning off the road, we headed down a long bumpy track towards a desolate lake, until stopping at a large new house that was home to about ten sisters, one of whom was the mother of our driver. Foodwise, things had gone well for me so far. It was the post-Pentecost fast and so no red meat or poultry were being eaten—a situation that would continue right through the month until the feast of Saints Peter and Paul. This meant I hadn't found myself in any difficult situations. As we entered the small refectory, we were told with profuse apologies that this was a poor house that had adopted a fully vegetarian rule. With more notice of our visit they might have been able to get us, as guests, some fish, but as it turned out all they could offer was vegetables.

The soup was, of course, delicious, probably supplied from the fields and herb beds just outside. The obligatory Țuică ("chooka") was too. This strong plum brandy is always served to guests at the start of both dinner and lunch, and enjoying this exalted status for several days, we tasted a good few glasses. As in ancient Western monasteries, a little wine or similar for the stomach wasn't frowned on, whereas meat was rightly seen as more problematic. Indeed, the abbot hosting us even had his own label wine.

This little story shows that Christianity and vegetarianism aren't merely two separate movements with separate histories brought into encounter by force of circumstance. Rather, they are interwoven traditions of material practice and spirituality that have, in some times and places, been closely related. But neither are they completely uncritical partners. In wider Orthodox society, for instance, vegetarianism is only required during specific fasts, and in Western fasts, although red meat and poultry are banned, fish is permitted. It's certainly encouraging to see a resurgence of a kind of Christian vegetarianism in present-day Europe, and it would be fascinating to research what's currently happening in Romania. But in this introductory presentation, I'll scan a wider, historical horizon and in so doing address three questions in turn. First, what are the positive linkages between Christianity and vegetarianism? Second, how has Christianity challenged vegetarianism? Third, what opportunities have Christians missed to take vegetarian claims seriously, and what are the future prospects for rapprochement?

I move then to my first heading, linkages, and begin by considering scripture. Some readers of the Bible look for doctrine, others for statements of faith or mission, principles of political emancipation and many other types of material. But let us look for food. This isn't difficult: food is everywhere in the Bible. Vegetarianism also features widely. We could tell a story beginning with the vegetarian paradise of Genesis 1, in which humans are given for food 'every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit'. The animals, birds and insects likewise are given 'every green plant for food'. But this idyll is destroyed by the economy of violence surrounding meat. Abel kills the firstlings of his flock and offers their fatty portions to the Lord, who apparently regards them more highly than Cain's

offering from the fruits of the ground. Anger wells up in the pious vegetarian, who avenges this rejection of his offering—or perhaps the slaughter of an innocent living being?—by luring his brother out into the fields and killing him. Soon after comes the Flood, in which both humans and animals are drowned as punishment for their sinful predation.

As is well-known, vegetarianism features in the book of Daniel, in which the handsome, well-bred intellectual is brought with his friends to the Babylonian court. They refuse the king's non-kosher rations, preferring vegetables, and end up better and fatter than the other guests who had accepted the king's indulgence. They gain knowledge and skill, as well as in Daniel's case the gift of interpreting dreams and visions.

More important than this staple vegetarian tale, however, is that meat is so often viewed in scripture as hazardous and requiring detailed regulation. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the species of animal that may be eaten as meat are carefully delimited. Slaughter methods are closely circumscribed, some parts of animals may not be eaten, and the blood must be drained off and not consumed. Carrion mustn't be eaten, nor must animals killed by a predator. Moreover, animals known to prey on other animals—especially those with tell-tale markers like claws—are classified as unclean and therefore unfit for human consumption. Some of these rules are restated in the Acts of the Apostles, in which the Council of Jerusalem orders Christians to abstain from animal blood.

Modern vegetarians might well look to other less direct biblical inspiration, such as the desire to inhabit or inaugurate a peaceable kingdom. But historically we shouldn't understate the importance of close textual reading of scripture and attention to its literal sense in shaping Christian practice. This long predated the Reformation, which can in no way be seen as having inaugurated a seriousness of engagement with scripture that had previously been absent. For instance, in Celtic Irish monasticism, the Mosaic food rules were applied in detailed if somewhat amended form, reinforced by the system of private penance so distinctive of genuine, rigorous Celtic spirituality. What the Reformation brought about, perhaps, was rather the gradual privatization of scriptural reading. Lessons were more likely to be drawn for interior piety and private, voluntary observance rather than for practical, public wisdom in matters such as dining. The tendency for Christians to focus on the New Testament at the expense of the Old is an even more recent innovation, as suggested by the persistence of so many Old Testament place names and Christian names today, especially in the United States.

Nowhere is scripture taken more seriously than in the Rule of Benedict. The main Western monastic rule, Benedict's Rule was primarily an attempt to live scripture in community by regulating every aspect of communal life in accordance with scriptural precepts. Notably for our purposes, in chapter 39 the flesh of four-footed animals is restricted to people who are sick. Elsewhere, it's also permitted to the elderly and children. So here, meat is to be eaten only by weak people and is consequently a sign of weakness. Healthy adults didn't need meat, despite undertaking manual labour, study and prayer in the course of their day.

Vegetarians may also draw inspiration from more recent figures such as John Newton, John Wesley and William Booth. Newton made vegetarianism a part of his scheme of life while at sea, and Wesley experimented with it for at least two extended periods. Booth recommended vegetarianism and commended it in Salvation Army regulations. But these three Christian figures all promoted vegetarianism on a far more personal basis than what had gone before. Remember that in Britain, Lenten abstinence from meat and poultry was a legal requirement punishment by fine or imprisonment until as late as the 1660s, and wasn't undertaken merely out of personal piety. In contrast, Wesley seems to have been preoccupied with matters of health and diet, and in this sense a very eighteenth century figure. Although the term 'vegetarianism' wasn't itself coined until the 1840s—in this talk, I use it rather loosely—both Newton and Wesley can be seen as anticipating its supposition that abstention is a personal choice to be pursued when and how one wishes, rather than by observing rules laid down by the church or state.

So far, I've presented a rather cosy relationship between Christianity and vegetarianism. But this by itself would be inexcusably selective. Christianity has posed several major challenges to vegetarianism, of which here I'll consider three.

The first challenge is the place of meat in traditions of feasting in secular Christian society. In Europe, the Christian liturgical year has developed to mirror the natural seasonal year. For example, Lent falls at the end of winter and opening of spring, when food is naturally scarce. During this time, it's expedient to abstain from meat, as meat is in naturally short supply. Far better to leave animals alive for ploughing, milking and transport than kill and eat them and be left with nothing. This fasting period echoes various acts of fasting in scripture, including that of Jesus in his forty-day retreat in the wilderness. But after Lent comes Easter, the celebration of Christ's resurrection from the dead and a fifty-day celebration of which meat has often been a feature. Here we have, then, a controlled period of meat-eating of finite duration in recognition of God's graceful act of salvation for the world accomplished in Christ, himself the lamb of God offered on the cross. The Easter and Christmas celebrations formed the most important markers of the annual calendar in an age when food availability was far more varied, seasonal and haphazard than today. Making use of modest quantities of easily-available meat from land that probably couldn't support arable farming, these celebrations were part of the spiritual and ecological rhythm of the year.

The second challenge to vegetarianism I'll consider is the Christian tradition of eating fish. From Christ in the beautifully-narrated post-Resurrection appearances through monastic fishponds, Lenten stockfish and fish on Fridays, fish has consistently been placed in a different category from red meat and poultry. Several apostles were fisherman, but none a butcher. Even the purist Cathar sect, whose members abstained from dairy as well as red meat and poultry on the grounds that all were products of coition, happily ate fish, seeing them as born spontaneously from water. Medieval monastic sign manuals and contemporary accounts prove that monasteries boasted often lavish fish cuisine, with many species and dishes served up to members and guests. Yet modern vegetarianism, at least in its strict definition, classifies fish as meat and excludes it from the diet. Theological work remains to be done, I suggest, to demonstrate that fish should be placed in the same category as red meat and on this basis prohibited.

The third Christian challenge to vegetarianism is the persistence in Christian tradition of animal sacrifice, especially in Orthodox lands. This continues even today in sometimes weird juxtaposition with high-tech living, as in William Dalrymple's description of the Syrian cosmonaut just returned from the Mir space station trekking into the desert to offer just such a sacrifice in thanksgiving for his safe passage. A key component of the Christian espousal of sacrifice seems to be honesty about the act of killing that is taking place. In sharp contrast with the predictable outcries when animals are killed on screen on cookery programmes, as well as with the far more common tendency to hide killing behind the closed doors of anonymous abattoirs, the moment of death is here hallowed and shared in by the community, who stand round and watch. Furthermore, implicit in rituals of sacrifice is a recognition that the animal killed is not in fact the possession of the slaughterer or the eater to do with what they will. In sacrifice, it is recognized that the animal killed is a gift of God and that the killing must be a significant, regulated act. The eating of the sacrificial meat is, moreover, an act of communal fellowship with often strict prohibitions on taking away any meat for private consumption. So sacrifice can foster community as well as constituting an act of giving back to God something of his bounty. It doesn't appear to be obligatory to consume part of such a sacrifice, so even vegetarians might feel able to join the festivities.

I now move to my third and final section: missed opportunities. Why hasn't Christianity had a closer relationship with vegetarianism, given both are about peace, self-denial and acknowledging all life as sacred because created by God?

A figure with a lot to answer for is Augustine of Hippo. A Manichean in his youth, Augustine had first-hand experience of rigorous food rules. The Manichean elect were strict vegetarians, believing that eating any product born of coition weighed down the soul. Their job, in contrast, was to liberate the light particles they believed to be imprisoned in matter. Vegetables were especially good to eat because it was from these that light particles could be expelled most effectively. Augustine wasn't a member of the elect and so was

permitted to eat meat, but would have served the elect at table as we know from his detailed references to them and their meals. The unelect like him were permitted to eat meat because they were regarded as spiritually inferior.

Like so many converts, Augustine felt under pressure to prove his orthodoxy, especially once a bishop when charged by rivals with closet Manichaeism. So he came out strongly against food rules, adopting what some regard as the classic Pauline maxim that anything is clean to those who consider it clean. This apparently liberal approach to food choices is undercut, however, by a strikingly dogmatic assertion, repeated on several occasions, that it would be better to die of starvation than eat food sacrificed to idols. So here we see the real motivation for Augustine's dogmatically liberal stance on food: his continual anxiety not to be branded a Manichean heretic.

Augustine's immense prestige as one of the Church's premier doctors lent credence to this view of diet as at best marginal to Christian practice and at worst downright harmful if distinctive. Similar sentiments recur at different points in subsequent Christian history, when the strict asceticism of ancient desert practice is moderated partly in implicit response to concerns that doctrinal orthodoxy be upheld. A vegetarian diet was a hostage to fortune, able to be used by opponents as evidence of closet heresy. In various heresy trials, such as of Lollards as well as Cathars, defendants were required to consume meat, this being one of the signs of renouncing past deviations.

The second opportunity to engage with vegetarianism missed by Christianity that I'd like to identify is Christian views of body and soul. In high medieval theology a view emerged of body and soul as separable, especially in purgatory, where the soul does time to atone for its faults on earth before rejoining the body in heaven. This doctrine, associated with the stocky Dominican Thomas Aquinas among others, coincided with a rise in scholastic theology that tended to construe identity and spirituality in terms of philosophy, abstract doctrine and metaphysics, rather than seeing material practice as central to their formation. Now too much could be made of this, and I'm certainly not wanting to promote a simplistic concept of omnivorous mind-body dualism. Nevertheless, we have here at least a coincidence of increasingly abstract concepts of the soul with a decline in dietary discipline in the Church and religious orders, in which such theological concepts were being formed and debated. Even in Benedictine monasteries, where red meat was meant to be reserved only for the weak, aged and children, logic was employed to undermine the spirit of this rule. The legislation applied, it was argued, only to meals taken in the refectory, so in large and wealthy monasteries other rooms could be brought into service for dining in which the old rules were deemed not to apply.

This takes us nicely to the third missed opportunity for Christian-vegetarian convergence, which I locate in the twentieth century revival of various facets of classic Christian spirituality. One is the monastic revival, seen in Britain among both Roman Catholics and Anglicans, in which the classic rule of abstention from quadruped flesh has often been regarded, as by Chaucer's monk on pilgrimage to Canterbury, as 'old and somedeel strait'. Although fasting is often practiced, the basic vegetarian discipline that was fundamental to the religious life from its origins in the desert wilderness has frequently been seen, ridiculously, as inappropriate to modern times. Indeed, when a visitor to religious houses, the vegetarian will quite possibly need to request special catering, when actually it's their diet that should be normative. I see an associated missed opportunity in the wider growing engagement with Christian spirituality exemplified in new interest in classical writers and in liturgy. Yet if one looks around British society, vegetarianism is seen largely as a secular phenomenon, not one intrinsically linked to Christian tradition. This fact is recognized by the existence of the Christian Vegetarian Association: in other words, this title admits, most Christians are not vegetarian.

The lack of linkage of much of this spiritual revival with vegetarianism I trace partly to the impoverished character of the revival. Whether in spiritual reading or liturgy, the emphasis seems to be too often on interior spiritual dispositions, whether of individuals or communities, rather than on a more ambitious effort to reorient oneself in a fully material Christian cosmos. Only infrequently does new spirituality take serious account of basic facets of embodied human existence, such as the food we eat, clothes we wear, our bodily

evolution from animals, and our use of technology continually to transcend previously imagined boundaries. In the Fresh Expressions of Church movement, some communities have sought to base their identity around particular practices such as Fairtrade or social justice advocacy, but these have often found it difficult to sustain an ecclesial identity, gathering members and inspiring activity based largely on their secular advocacy. In the case of vegetarianism, mainstream churches have largely failed to articulate its Christian relevance or use it as a means of drawing people, via practice, into identifying with some historic Christian values and lifestyles. This has been seen particularly in the risible response of the large majority of bishops to the Veg4Lent campaign—though as some will know, Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London, is now vegetarian.

A lot more could be said but I'll now move to concluding comments to allow discussion time. One helpful way of reflecting on the historical relationship between Christianity and vegetarianism might be to consider which theological or ethical principles vegetarians have been embracing at different historical points, and which they've been resisting or rejecting.

The first issue to be clear about is that concerns about animal welfare are marginal in the Christian history of meat abstention. The desert fathers ate no meat but wore fur to keep out the biting cold. Christian vegetarianism has historically been motivated far more by concerns about simplicity of life, bodily purity and personal spiritual discipline. It seems to me that the notion of animal rights provides a more ambiguous basis for vegetarianism, because the discourse of entitlement that rights discourse promotes is bound up with the ideas that everything is by default available for consumption, and that humans have a right to make free choices about their diet, which a rights-approach tends to view as a private matter.

Vegetarianism is currently gaining major impetus from the ecological movement. As more and more people discover that the global meat economy generates more pollution than motor vehicles, is hugely wasteful of natural resources and diverts food from needy humans, we should at the very least be able to agree that meat-eating levels need to be reduced urgently and drastically. So why are motorists taxed onto often non-existent public transport while supermarkets are allowed to sell meat below cost? There are powerful interests here that haven't even begun to be challenged. Perhaps Christians could help realign priorities. We see ecological concern echoed in the classic monastic pursuit of a simple life as well as in the wider harmony between the liturgical and natural seasons, with periods of fasting and feasting steering dietary choices in ways appropriate to the resources available at different times of year. Remember that, in the medieval calendar, more than half the days of the year were days of abstinence: Lent, Advent, Fridays, Wednesdays, Saturdays, and the eve of major saint's days, so the disciplined use of natural resources was built into the Christian, social, political and cultural consciousness. Days of abstention outnumbered days of unbridled consumption.

Situating vegetarianism within a wider theological nexus is likely to require a pragmatic approach to campaigns and alliances with other organizations. How about Compassion in World Farming, for instance, who aim to eliminate factory farming worldwide? A rights-based vegetarian might, like an aggrieved Liberal Democrat in coalition, balk at such dirty deal, but if a key aim of Christian vegetarianism is to improve the lot of animals generally, then any effort to reduce meat-eating should, I suggest, receive support. Indeed, one could argue that it would be preferable to have fewer vegetarians and lower overall levels of meat consumption than a greater number of vegetarians offset by a populace eating greater quantities of meat. Not least, this would better undermine the vested interests of the meat economy. At the same time, discrete acts of uncompromising, identifiable witness undoubtedly have value, not least in focusing wider, more diffuse sentiments and energies. So Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple was, as a focal image of resistance, undoubtedly key in challenging that particular meat economy.

Lastly, a word about the Eucharist. By making an act of dining so central in their collective life, Christian churches might be seen to be promoting diet as a key spiritual concern. Moreover, from a vegetarian viewpoint, because the Eucharist uses bread and wine it could be viewed as marking a clean break with sacrificial practices, despite the persistence of sacrificial language and doctrine in some traditions. But as

has been seen, animal sacrifice and Eucharist can't be regarded as historical alternatives. The Orthodox Churches have a highly developed liturgy but have also continued up to the present day to sacrifice animals.

This points to a wider truth: that the Eucharist has made an ambiguous impact on Christian dietary discipline, often enabling discussions about food, dining and fellowship to be transmuted into a realm of theological symbolism far removed from the concrete realities of everyday food choices. Even the classic Western preference for unleavened bread has obscured the core doctrinal intuition underlying the use of leavened bread. In the classical world, the quasi-miraculous rising of bread was attributed to the action of gods, being otherwise inexplicable. This understanding persists in Orthodox liturgy, in which the bread is accorded honour even before what, in the West, would be regarded as its consecration at the altar. In the Christian Eucharist, interesting use is made of the inexplicable nature of ordinary risen bread, which can be seen as analogous with the rising of the resurrected Christ from the tomb, also inexplicable by ordinary means. So perhaps, after all, the Christian Eucharist points in a usually unacknowledged way to how the ears of wheat blowing in the wind intimate a kind of life absent even from animals, a life which Christian vegetarians can fully share and consume.

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