



From *Encyclopedia of World Environmental History* Vol. 3, ed. Shepard Krech III, J.R. McNeill and Carolyn Merchant (New York: Routledge, 2004) p. 1273-1278 .

## Vegetarianism

*Vegetarianism*, the term used to describe a diet that excludes the flesh of animals, has a long, complex and often tumultuous history. Many of the world's religions and philosophies have praised it as the ideal diet, but vegetarians have also been condemned and killed for their refusal to eat meat. The choice to eat or not eat flesh foods has typically reflected deeply ingrained philosophical and religious beliefs. Foremost among these has been the idea of human kinship with the nonhuman world. While the underlying motives for vegetarianism differ widely throughout different cultures and historical periods, certain themes predominate. These include: the idea of transmigration of souls, compassion for nonhuman animals, asceticism, purification of the body and soul, health benefits, the dehumanizing effects of meat-eating, environmental considerations, and the unnaturalness of eating flesh foods. Some of the additional underlying themes include the association of meat with class, caste, and gender.

### Definition

Most of the world's populations have usually eaten a predominantly plant-based diet. The word *vegetarian*, however, is generally reserved for the self-conscious decision to abstain from flesh foods, based upon philosophical, ethical, metaphysical, scientific, or nutritional beliefs. The term first appeared in the 1840s and was derived from the root word *vegetus*, signifying the idea of "whole and vital." Although the word refers to those who abstain from eating flesh, there is disagreement

about what constitutes flesh, and some people who call themselves vegetarian consume chicken and fish. Most vegetarians, however, believe that the term should be retained for those who avoid all forms of animal flesh. The most common types of vegetarian are: lacto-ovo vegetarians, who include eggs and dairy products in their diet; lacto-vegetarians, who include milk; ovo-vegetarians, who include eggs; vegans, who exclude all animal products; natural hygienists, who eat a non-processed, plant-based diet; raw fooders, who eat only raw foods; and fruitarians, who eat only fruit.

### Origins in the East

Vegetarianism has two major philosophical roots in the ancient world, Jainism in the East and Pythagoreanism in the West. Both schools of thought arose in the sixth century BCE at approximately the same time, and scholars continue to speculate on the cross-fertilization of ideas between the East and West.

The Jains' notion of *ahimsa* refers to the desire not to cause injury to other living beings and the concomitant idea of compassion for all living beings. Jains argue that all life goes through a series of incarnations, with the highest incarnation belonging to humans who have attained enlightenment or nirvana. By eating flesh foods humans attract negative karma to their soul (*jiva*), and impede their chances of attaining enlightenment. They also risk dining on their next of kin from a previous life. Jains believe that one can only contact the god within by conquering the "animal passions" that lead one to acts of violence and self-indulgence, including the eating of flesh foods. Jains also con-

demned the practice of animal sacrifice, intimately connected to meat-eating in the ancient world.

Buddhism also contains the ideas of *ahimsa*, transmigration of souls and compassion for animals. Buddhism helped to spread vegetarianism throughout Asia, and influenced the development of a strong vegetarian tradition in Hinduism.

### Origins in the West

Pythagoras is regarded as the greatest influence on vegetarian thought in the Western world. The Pythagorean sect was founded at the end of the sixth century BCE in Croton, Italy, in Magna Grecia. The basic precepts of Pythagoras's school included a refusal to eat meat or to offer blood sacrifice. Pythagoras believed that the human soul could transmigrate to humans or other animals after death but the ultimate goal was to free the soul from the earthly rounds of existence to reunite with its divine origins. This was accomplished through a series of strict, ascetic rules for purifying the body.

Most of the modern arguments against meat eating can be found among Ancient Greek as well as Roman philosophers. Plutarch (c. 350-433 BCE) believed that this "barbaric vice" was unnatural for humans and engendered violence. Other ancient philosophers who advocated vegetarianism include Theophrastus (360-287 BCE), Empedocles (c. 495-c. 435 BCE), and Porphyry, who made one of the first ecological defenses of vegetarianism. According to Porphyry it was not necessary to kill animals to curb the problem of animal overpopulation, since nature would find a balance by itself.

### Early Jewish and Christian Vegetarians

There were several early Jewish Christian sects that are believed to have adhered to a strict vegetarian diet. Among these were the Essenes, the Ebionites, and the Nazoreans, considered by many to be the first Christians. The early ascetic Jewish Christian sects were a minority tradition in the first-century ancient world. Nonetheless, scholars have argued that Jesus counted among their numbers and was himself a vegetarian.

The early Church fathers believed that meat was a powerful sexual stimulant, so it was appropriate for those in holy orders to refrain from eating it in order to curb their sexual desires. However, abstaining from meat was acceptable only as part of a practical exercise in subduing the "animal passions."

From the third to the thirteenth century the Church engaged in a vigorous campaign against a number of

heretical Gnostic sects. Ranging from the Balkans in the Byzantine Empire to Southern France, they included the Manicheans, Cathars, Paulicians, Montanists, Massilians, Apostolics, and Bogomils. The refusal to eat meat was viewed by Church authorities as evidence of heresy.

### Middle Ages to Renaissance

Support for vegetarianism went into a long dormancy during the Middle Ages. In the early Renaissance, due to late-thirteenth century food shortages, the vast majority of the population, particularly the poor, ate primarily vegetarian food. It was at this time that the emphasis on meat-eating as desirable and necessary for one's health became an article of faith, particularly for men. A small number of dissidents protested against cruelty to animals and meat-eating, including Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) who blended concern over animal suffering with the first environmental critique of the large amounts of land used to produce meat. Other dissidents included Erasmus (1467-1536), Montaigne (1533-1592), and Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519), although Da Vinci was the only one of the three to become vegetarian.

### Seventeenth Century: Cartesian Thought

In the seventeenth century, Rene Descartes (1596-1650) developed the Christian belief that animals lacked souls or spirit with devastating consequences for nonhuman animals. He contended that since animals lacked spirit, and hence the capacity to understand, they could not feel pain. Their anguished cries were in all probability merely mechanical responses. Cartesian philosophy sanctioned the widespread practice of vivisection in the seventeenth century as well as the confinement of animals on factory farms.

Despite this setback to the status of nonhuman animals, the seventeenth century simultaneously witnessed the growth of a greater sensitivity to nonhuman animals. Ironically, this was due in part to animal studies, which showed the structural similarities of their nervous systems to those of humans, suggesting the commonality in their experience of pain. In addition, as the threat from nature receded, people began to have greater empathy for nonhuman animals. Most advocates for vegetarianism, including Thomas Tryon (1634-1703), one of the foremost advocates for vegetarianism of his age, still framed their calls for compassion in religious terms. Other proponents of vegetarianism

during the seventeenth century include John Ray, John Evelyn, and Margaret Cavendish, duchess of Newcastle.

## Eighteenth to Nineteenth Century

The eighteenth century gave rise to humanist philosophy and to the notion of natural rights, based on the belief in the inherent dignity of humans. Due in part to Evangelical religion's emphasis on concern for the oppressed, and the Lockean idea of human beings' innate capacity for benevolence, there was an increasing sensitivity to animal suffering.

As the century progressed, public attention began to focus upon a wide range of social issues, including prison reform, child welfare, care for the poor, sick, and elderly as well as opposition to slavery. A growing number of people viewed concern for nonhuman animals as a logical extension of these social movements. While compassion for nonhuman animals was the foremost concern of these animal advocates, they also pointed to the harmful effects of meat-eating on human moral character. Joseph Ritson (1752-1803), John Oswald (1730-1793), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) all linked meat-eating with interhuman violence, including war.

The emphasis on the harmful effects of meat-eating on human moral and spiritual character continued into the nineteenth century. There was an increased focus, however, on the wrongfulness of animal suffering in and of itself. Acknowledging the moral significance of animal suffering was an integral part of Jeremy Bentham's (1748-1832) utilitarian theory. According to Bentham, "the question is not, can they reason?, Nor can they talk? But, can they suffer?"(Bentham, 1780).

Arguments for vegetarianism were also increasingly being linked to land use practices. As a result of the enclosures, the common land was being seized by rich land owners who were using it to grow fodder crops to feed their cattle. The philosopher and priest, William Paley (1743-1805), Shelley, and Dr. William Alcott (1798-1859) all inveighed against the inefficiency of feeding fodder to animals instead of directly to human beings.

## Food Reform Movement

The food reform movement began in Germany in the 1820s and 1830s as a reaction to the growing ties between the food industry and science and technology. In the 1830s, vegetarians became a vocal minority

within the radical wing of the food reform movement. Many of the food reformers, including Sylvester Graham (1794-1851), Bircher-Benner (1867-1939), and John Harvey Kellogg (1852-1943), combined health and ethical arguments, focusing on the purifying effect, both spiritual and physical, of a vegetarian diet. Meat-eating was typically condemned for its overstimulating effect. Indeed for Graham, stimulation was the root of all disease. Meat-eating was also linked to overindulgence in sex. Kellogg maintained that meat-eating caused undue pressure on the male organ and that vegetarianism was the cure.

The success of the food reform movement and the vegetarian cause is largely attributable to the support of women. Some of these women included Catherine Harriet Beecher Stowe (1800-1878) and Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) in the U.S., and Luise Otto-Peters (1819-1895) and Lina Morgenstern (1830-1909) in Germany.

A number of feminists promoted vegetarianism, often connecting it with the themes of peace and nonviolence. The contemporary author Carol Adams sees in their writings the beginnings of a feminist, vegetarian, pacifist tradition. Some of these women include Charlotte Despard (1844-1939), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) and Agnes Ryan (1878-1954), and Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) as well as the theosophists Annie Besant (1847-1933) and Anna Kingsford (1846-1888). Kingsford maintained, "universal peace is not possible to a carnivorous race" (Adams 1991, 124).

## The Social Movement for Vegetarianism

In the middle of the nineteenth century, in Germany, the Netherlands, England and the U.S., the vegetarian cause began to coalesce as a social movement. The first secular vegetarian society in England was formed in 1847 at Ramsgate, at which time the term *vegetarian* replaced the more common *Pythagorean* as the official word for someone who abstained from flesh foods. In 1850, William Metcalfe founded a similar organization in New York, The American Vegetarian.

Support for vegetarianism in the mid-nineteenth century was fueled, in part, by the findings of evolutionary science, which had begun to demonstrate the similarities between human and nonhuman animals. With the publication of Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) *Descent of Man* in 1871, the privileged position of humans was further eroded.

The humane movement developed from the belief that if human beings were, in fact, superior it behooved

them to act civilized by controlling their "animal passions" and practicing benevolence to animals. Although most members of the humane movement were not vegetarian, some of the most vocal activists were, including Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), the philanthropist Lewis Gompertz, Anna Kingsford and the author and social reformer Henry S. Salt (1851-1939).

Salt's writings had a wide-ranging impact, including on Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948). Gandhi was inspired by the connections Salt made between animal rights and social justice, to move beyond his previous traditional Hindu vegetarianism to see vegetarianism as a movement for the moral and spiritual progress of the human race.

Gandhi's conversion to ethical vegetarianism illustrates the cross-fertilization of ideas between East and West that characterizes much of the modern vegetarian movement. Gandhi went on to influence millions of Hindus to adopt vegetarianism. Eastern thought, in turn, has had a profound influence on vegetarianism in the West. The influence of Hinduism and Buddhism on theosophy was an important factor in theosophy's endorsement of vegetarianism. The influx of Eastern ideas that began in the 1960s also had a large influence on the adoption of vegetarianism. The Krishna cult, in particular, had a profound impact in the west through their dispensing of free vegetarian food.

### The Modern Vegetarian Movement

Vegetarianism was largely eclipsed by the two world wars. A number of factors contributed to its increased acceptance in the postwar years. Beginning in the 1920s, there had been a growing appreciation for the benefits of vegetables and fruits due to the discovery of vitamins. Additional studies in the 1950s, including research on the Seventh Day Adventists, confirmed the health benefits of a vegetarian diet. In the 1970s, many people also became concerned over the purity of food, and in particular meat. Concerns focused on the effects of pesticides, chemicals, and bacterial contamination, all of which are found in greater concentrations in meat. People became additionally worried about the purity of meat as a result of the outbreak of BSE (mad cow disease) and foot-and-mouth disease in England and Europe. The publicity surrounding these outbreaks served to educate people about the contents of the food fed to farm animals, including sludge, carcasses, and the excrement of other animals, thereby providing people with additional incentive to adopt a vegetarian diet.

A number of health studies in the 1980s and 1990s also helped to fuel interest in vegetarianism, including the China Health Project directed by the Cornell professor of nutrition, Colin Campbell. Campbell's cross-cultural research involving over 10,000 people in the U.S. and China concluded that human beings are not anatomically designed to eat meat, and that there is an inverse correlation between the amount of animal products that one eats and the benefits that accrue to one's health. The physician Dean Ornish's research, first published in 1983 in *Stress, Diet and Your Heart*, also demonstrated that arterial sclerosis could be reversed through a vegetarian diet.

The growth of the animal advocacy movement in the U.S. and England in the 1970s also helped to advance the vegetarian cause. In previous centuries, vegetarians tended to focus on the cruelty inherent in the slaughter of innocent beings. The modern animal advocacy movement, in addition, has called attention to the conditions in which animals live throughout their lives, promoting vegetarianism as a means of protesting this treatment. Significant influences on the development of vegetarianism in the animal advocacy movement include Peter Singer's utilitarian arguments for the equal consideration of the interests of both humans and nonhumans, Tom Regan's case for the "inherent worth" of animals, and the writings of Carol Adams as well as the literature of Feminists for Animal Rights, which underline the commonalities in meat dominance and male dominance.

Veganism also developed increasing support in the 1980s and 1990s. Rejection of dairy products had begun in the nineteenth century, but it was not until 1944 that the first Vegan Society was formed in Leicester, England.

### Vegetarianism and the Environment

Beginning in the 1970s ecological arguments also became an important motive for many people to adopt a vegetarian diet. In *Diet for a Small Planet*, published in 1971, Frances Moore Lappe criticized the inefficiency of a meat-based diet, arguing that only a small proportion of the nutrients that are fed to nonhuman animals return to humans as nutrients. Moore contended that in 1968 the amount of edible protein that was wasted by America's animal based diet was equivalent to the world protein shortage. *Diet for a Small Planet* provided a major impetus for people to either cut back on or eliminate meat from their diets.

In the following two decades, numerous articles and books advanced similar environmental critiques of a meat-based diet, including Jeremy Rifkin's *Beyond Beef*, Howard Lyman's *Mad Cowboy*, and John Robins's *Diet for a New America* and *The Food Revolution*. These authors highlighted the link between animal agriculture and a host of environmental problems: soil and water depletion, desertification, air and water pollution, global warming, the waste of valuable grain resources, and the destruction of the tropical rain forests. Current estimates are that 90 percent of all agricultural land, more than one half the total land area of the U.S., is devoted to the production of animal products. Cattle now occupy 70 percent of rangeland in the American west and are a major contributor to both agricultural runoff and desertification. Beef production is also a major factor in the destruction of half the tropical rain forest of southern Mexico and Central America.

Animal agriculture has also been blamed as a major contributor to global warming. Greenhouse gases are produced from grain fertilizers and from the methane released from animals. American waterways are equally threatened. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, animal waste poses a greater threat to American waterways than all other industrial sources combined. In a 1999 report by the Union of Concerned Scientists, meat-eating is cited, along with driving automobiles, as one of the two most damaging lifestyle factors contributing to environmental destruction.

Not all environmentalists believe that meat-eating and animal agriculture are inherently harmful to the environment. Advocates for mixed farming and biodynamic farming argue that some use of animals on small-scale farms is necessary, due to the usefulness of their manure for fertilizing the soil. A number of environmentalists also support meat-eating as long as the meat is "organic" and the animals are raised "humanely."

While studies show that the number of people adopting vegetarianism has been slowly increasing throughout most of the Western world, vegetarianism has not followed a steadily uphill course. Meat-eating has actually increased throughout the world. Consumption of chicken has also sharply risen, in part because of concerns over the purity of beef. In the West, the rise in meat consumption has been attributed to the proliferation of fast food restaurants, and in the East and developing world to the desire to imitate Western society's affluent lifestyle, symbolized by meat. Studies vary around the world as to the number

of people who are currently vegetarian, ranging from a low of 0.2 percent in Poland to a high of 4.4 percent in the Netherlands. In the U.S. estimates range from a low of 0.3 percent to a high of 7 percent of the population. The higher numbers generally represent people who claim to be vegetarian but who sometimes eat meat, including fish. Most studies suggest that women have been, cross-culturally and throughout history, about 70 percent of vegetarians.

In his book *Meat: A Natural Symbol* Nicke Fiddes suggests that meat has functioned throughout history as a means of asserting human dominance over the natural world. By eating nonhuman animals, humans show their superiority over the "lower" animals. Both religious vegetarians as well as those motivated by health have at times demonstrated the reverse side of this phenomenon. Rather than dominating the external environment, some vegetarians (and perhaps mostly men) have sought to tame the "beast within" as a means of attaining a physical or spiritual purity.

The modern vegetarian movement is part of a long continuous history. Although compassion for nonhuman animals and environmental concerns are parts of this history, they have moved to the fore in recent years. The modern vegetarian movement deviates from the past, however, in focusing less on self-denial and ritual purity and more on the idea of embracing vegetarianism as a positive ethical choice.

Marti Kheel

### Further Reading

- Adams, C. J. (1991). *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory*. New York: Continuum.
- Akers, K. (1993). *A vegetarian sourcebook: The nutrition, ecology, and ethics of a natural food diet*. Denver: Vegetarian Press.
- Barkas, J. (1975). *The vegetable passion: A history of the vegetarian state of mind*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Bentham, J. (1988). *Introduction to the principles of morals and legislation*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books. (Original work published 1780)
- Berry, R. (1998). *Food for the gods: Vegetarianism and the world's religions: Essays, conversations, recipes*. New York: Pythagorean.
- Dombrowski, D. (1984). *The philosophy of vegetarianism*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Fiddes, N. (1991). *Meat: A natural symbol*. New York: Routledge.
- Fox, M. A. (1999). *Deep vegetarianism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

- Gandhi, M. (1999). Diet and morality. In K. Walters & L. Portmess (Eds.), *Ethical vegetarianism: From Pythagoras to Peter Singer* (pp. 139-144). New York: State University of New York Press.
- Gregerson, J. (1994). *Vegetarianism: A history*. Fremont, CA: Jain Pub. Co.
- Leneman, L. (1997). The awakened instinct: Vegetarianism and the women's suffrage movement in Britain. *Women's History Review*, 6(2), 271-286.
- Marcus, E. (1998). *Vegan: The new ethics of eating*. Ithaca, NY: McBooks.
- Maurer, D. (2002). *Vegetarianism: Movement or moment?* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Meyer-Renschlausen, E., & Wirz, A. (1999). Dietetics, health reform and social order: Vegetarianism as a moral physiology: The example of Maximilian Bircher-Benner. *Medical History*, 43, 323-341.
- Ornish, D. (1983). *Stress, diet and your heart*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.
- Paley, W. (1999). The dubious right to eat flesh. In K. Walters & L. Portmess (Eds.), *Ethical vegetarianism: From Pythagoras to Peter Singer* (pp. 65-67). New York: State University of New York Press.
- Pythagoras (1999). The kinship of all life. In K. Walters & L. Portmess (Eds.), *Ethical vegetarianism: From Pythagoras to Peter Singer* (pp. 113-125). New York: State University of New York Press.
- Rifkin, J. (1992). *Beyond beef: The rise and fall of the cattle culture*. New York: Dutton.
- Robbins, J. (1987). *Diet for a new America*. Walpole, NH: Still point.
- Robbins, J. (2001). *The food revolution: How your diet can help save your life*. Berkeley, CA.: Conari Press.
- Rosen, S. (1997). *Diet for transcendence: Vegetarianism and the world religions*. Badger, CA.: Torchlight.
- Shelley, P. B. (1999). A vindication of natural diet. In K. Walters & L. Portmess (Eds.), *Ethical vegetarianism: From Pythagoras to Peter Singer* (pp. 69-74). New York: State University of New York Press.
- Spencer, C. (1995). *The heretic's feast: A history of vegetarianism*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.