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Vegetarianism

Vegetarians believe that human beings should not eat the flesh of animals. The Christian tradition has generally viewed vegetarianism as unnecessary, though it has been a common ascetic practice for particular individuals and communities. In recent years theologians have argued that Christianity must rethink its attitudes to animals, including whether Christians should be vegetarian.

The legitimacy of killing animals for food has been defended with reference to the dominion given to Adam and Eve over the animals (Gen. 1:28), the explicit permission to eat animals addressed to Noah (Gen. 9:3), Jesus' rejection of the significance of diet (Matt. 15:11), and Peter's vision of the cleanliness of all animals (Acts 10:9–16). Some heretical sects, such as the Manicheans, considered the material world evil and abstained from eating meat on the grounds that it defiled the soul. Augustine and others rejected such fastidiousness, citing Paul's teaching to the

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Corinthians that avoiding meat offered to idols is mere superstition (1 Cor. 8:4–6).

Perhaps the most important influence on current Christian views of animals, however, is Thomas Aquinas' appropriation of the work of Aristotle. In his *Politics*, Aristotle

claims that animals are made for the sake of human beings, just as plants exist for the sake of animals (bk. I pt. viii). Citing this text and supporting scriptural verses, Aquinas reasons that it cannot be a sin to use a thing for the purpose it was intended, so it must be lawful for human beings to kill animals (*Summa Theologica* IIa IIae, q. 64 a. 1).

As a result of this dominant emphasis, the animal rights movement has often seen Christian theology as part of the cause of disrespectful and unethical treatment of animals, rather than part of the solution. Theologians have responded to this criticism in two ways. Some have affirmed the right of human beings to make use of animals, but recognized that Christians should be concerned about reducing the suffering this causes to animals and proposed incremental measures such as regulating the distance animals travel before slaughter, or the conditions of veal production. A second response has been to look at whether the traditional view that animals were made to be used by humans is sustainable. In this context, theologians note that Adam and Eve are originally given only plants and trees for food (Gen. 1:29), that the prophets look forward to a time when killing animals will be unnecessary (e. g. Is. 11:6–9), and that the permission to eat meat given to Noah in Gen. 9 seems to be a reluctant concession to human sin. Human beings and animals are frequently seen in solidarity: they are common participants in the covenant made with Noah (Gen. 9:8–17) and will share together in the redemption of creation (Rom. 8:19–23). God tells Job in no uncertain terms that human beings know little of God's purposes for the rest of creation (Job 38–41). Those looking again at the Christian tradition have also found dissenting voices that affirm the value of animals, including St Francis, St Bonaventure, and St Catherine of Siena. Particularly notable is St Basil the Great's petition in the 4th century asking God to help us realize that animals live not for us

alone but for themselves and for God.

While we cannot know all God's dealings with other species, the Genesis narrative makes clear that human beings have a particular responsibility and vocation with respect to the created order in general and animals in particular (Adam's naming of the animals, Gen. 2:19–20, is significant here). The key issue in deciding how Christians should respond to vegetarianism is the character of this vocation. The traditional interpretation of the dominion given to Adam and Eve interprets this special role as hierarchical authority and power over the rest of the created order, but there are good reasons to reject this in favour of a model of stewardship where the emphasis is responsibility for creation rather than power over it. Beyond debates about the meaning of Hebrew terms here, the authority given to human beings must be understood in New Testament Christological terms, where lordship means service (see Phil. 2:5–9). The hierarchical model gives rise to no difficulties for killing animals for food, since human beings are free to do what they like with creation. If we understand the special vocation of human beings as service to animals and the created order, however, it is much harder to justify eating animals except when absolutely necessary. An Inuit hunter, at least in the past, could legitimately claim that killing seals or whales was necessary for their survival, but there are few others who could not obtain all their nutritional requirements without killing animals.

Christian thought on this issue must recognize the significance of the brokenness of God's relationship with God's creatures, and of the relationships between creatures, as a result of the Fall. Human beings cannot attain a perfect relationship with creation: even by eating vegetables they compete for scarce resources that other creatures could have thrived on. There is no moral purity to be found in this sphere, then, but instead a demand to find responsible ways of living in

this fractured world that witness to God's graciousness to all creation. Christians must give serious consideration to whether.

Further reading

St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ila Ilae (ET, New York, 1918), q. 64 a. 1, 3.

A. Linzey, *Animal Theology* (London, 1994).

C. Pinches and J. B. McDaniel, eds., *Good New for Animals? Christian Approaches to Animal Well-Being* (Maryknoll, New York, 1993).

Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (London, 1995).