

Theological Reflection on Eating Meat

Several of my Christian friends are vegetarian or vegan and, when asked, give differing reasons for their practice. Some associate their practice with their faith so, should I follow their lead? Should I eat fewer, or no, animal products? I shall draw on the four components of the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral to help me think this through. To begin, I wish to situate myself as a white European woman who has lived most of her life in the developed West with a brief time in the former Soviet Union's Central Asian republics. I have always eaten meat as a proportion of my diet but, more recently, I have sought to reduce my consumption of meat generally and red meat in particular; my motivations have been to do with my health and with a growing ecological awareness of the carbon footprint of red meat, especially cows. Considerations of animal welfare have led me to try to buy organic/free range products when possible but have not been the motivation for eating fewer animal products.

Firstly, as someone with an evangelical background, I wish to consider the biblical texts which I have heard used in this debate. Many Christian proponents of vegetarianism or veganism point out that the first creation account in Genesis describes a world where both humans and other animals are allotted plants as their food source (Gen 1.29-30). To balance this focus on the beginnings, there are also hints that vegetarian diets will be a feature of the age to come (Isa 11.4-7) when 'the lion shall eat straw like the ox' (v.7).¹ Meat-eating could therefore be argued to be a feature of the world without sin – indeed if there is to be no death (1 Cor 15.26), meat-eating will be impossible (unless the new earth has developed meat-tissue cultivation in test-tubes!). If Christians are to live as 'new creation' then surely they should abstain from meat-eating as a means of enacting the kingdom of God?

Other Christians might point to the huge significance of eating meat and using other animal products throughout human history, including in accounts of the Christian God and God's dealings with humanity. They note that Noah and, by implication, all humanity thereafter, are specifically granted permission to kill and eat animals as long as God's rights over the life of the creature itself are respected and acknowledged (Gen 9). They also might note the significance of the shedding of animal blood in various covenant-making and atonement-directed ceremonies in the biblical texts, suggesting an ongoing process of animal death in the service of repairing humanity's relationship with God. And, in the New Testament, Jesus keeps Passover (presumably with a lamb?), and participates in eating fish (Matt 15.36) even after the resurrection (Luke 24.42-3). Jesus is understood to have declared all animals 'clean' to eat (Mark 7.18-19) and this is reinforced by Peter's vision in Acts (15.9-15). Later in Acts, James suggests that Gentile Christ-followers should abstain from strangled meat and any that 'has been sacrificed to idols' but does not suggest avoiding meat or other animal

¹ All biblical quotations are from the NRSVA.

products altogether (Acts 15.20, 29). It is unclear what motivation lay behind those mentioned in Romans (14.2, 6), who avoid meat; those who eat only vegetables are described as having 'weaker' faith (14.2) and the 'strong' among the letter's recipients are only urged not to eat meat if their doing so risks damaging the faith of the 'weaker' (14.21). The implication is that meat-eating is perfectly acceptable.

I am, however, aware that it is not simply a matter of seeing which 'side' of the argument can muster the most biblical passages in its favour. Wayne Meeks suggests that pro-slavery arguments defending the institution from the Bible had a stronger case than those abolitionists arguing against it, and that the latter's moral sense of the faith over-rode the literalist divine-command readings that suggested slavery was acceptable.² Perhaps the creational and eschatological passages in the first paragraph above indicate an overarching trajectory in the scriptures to which those itemised in the second paragraph are contextually-situated aberrations, like instructions to slaves? Is meat-eating going to be viewed by future Christians in the same light as slavery?

In light of that thought, and turning to the next element of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, it is interesting that throughout church history there have been streams of Christian tradition which eschewed meat or at least saw virtue in restricting its consumption to feast days or other special occasions. David Grumett and Rachel Muers note a 'recurring Christian norm of abstention from red meat' with this forming 'a foundational element of Christian identity and discipline'.³ Why might this be so? Philo describes the Jewish group, the Therapeutae as abstaining from meat because it was believed to arouse desire⁴ but Grumett and Muers suggest this idea arose from classical or Eastern traditions. Christian anchorites often had highly restricted diets but Grumett and Muers conclude that their main motivation was spiritual discipline through self-denial and self-control rather than the welfare of the creatures whose flesh they would not eat.⁵ While they argue that an anchorite focus on avoiding meat to reduce sexual passions is an over-simplification, Grumett and Muers do admit that 'association of the avoidance of lust with the avoidance of gluttony does feature prominently',⁶ being related to ancient understandings of the attributes of bodies and food: heat, coolness, dryness and wetness. As a 'hot' food, meat was believed to promote passion (and fasting does result in reduced libido). However, the ultimate aim was to allow a focus on 'alternative spiritual ends'⁷ away from worldly cares like supporting a family, and to free one from both gluttony and lust. This was understood as important because gluttony was understood as the first ever sin, expressed in eating the fruit of Eden's forbidden tree, which

² Meeks, Wayne A. 'The "Haustafeln" and American Slavery: A Hermeneutical Challenge' in Lovering, Eugene H. & Sumney, Jerry L. (eds) *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters: Essays in Honor of Victor Paul Furnish* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), pp. 232-53.

³ Grumett, David & Muers, Rachel *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, Meat and Christian Diet* (Abingdon: Routledge: 2010), p.1.

⁴ *Ibid* p. 4

⁵ *Ibid* pp.5-6.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.9.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.9.

had led to the loss of sexual innocence.⁸ Interestingly, however, Grumett and Muers also note stories of the early ascetics in the wilderness in which they befriend carnivorous animals and persuade them to adopt a non-meat diet in order to return to the diet set for them by God. (Animals, unlike humans, were not granted permission to eat animal flesh after the Flood).⁹ Up until 1966 Catholic believers abstained from meat every Friday, as an act of abstinence and penance; this has since been changed and now only applies to Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.¹⁰ Perhaps a Reformation move away from penitential practices has led to the lack of teaching on fasting and self-denial more generally in the Western protestant denominations?¹¹

Regarding other sources which are relevant to this question, (under the Wesleyan category of 'reason'), we can see from human physiology that it is likely that humans from pre-history onwards ate meat; indeed they are evolutionarily adapted to do so.¹² However, it may be argued that widely practised modern, large-scale methods of growing (I won't use the word 'nurturing'!) and despatching animals prior to preparing them for butchery and sale are vastly different from both the scale and the manner of animal killing in the prehistoric and ancient worlds; indeed, if done publicly, the modern processes of slaughter themselves might cause many to turn vegetarian.¹³ I remember reading Michael Pollan's book on food preparation in the USA, some years back; his accounts of large-scale commercial animal slaughter did not encourage one to eat food prepared that way.¹⁴ Moreover, it raises the question of how our treatment of animals matches the biblical passages discussed earlier; as Richard Bauckham puts it 'How much of our actual production and consumption of meat is really compatible with the carefully conditional concession of Genesis 9:3-4?'¹⁵

More recently, and in a British setting, a Christian ethical study has given an account of current animal rearing practices in the UK (which currently has higher standards of animal welfare than the USA).¹⁶ It also offers an account, based on biological research, of what might constitute a 'flourishing life' for each of the key farmed species examined (chickens,

⁸ *Ibid*, p.10.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.16.

¹⁰ Van Sloun, Michael A. 'Why don't Catholics eat meat on Fridays?' <https://www.archspm.org/faith-and-discipleship/catholic-faith/why-dont-catholics-eat-meat-on-fridays/>. (2008) Accessed 29/11/22.

¹¹ There has, however, been more teaching on this, and other spiritual traditions, within some sectors of Protestantism. For an example from the Quaker tradition: Foster, Richard *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, revd edn, 1989).

¹² Lindeberg, S. 'Modern Human Physiology with Respect to Evolutionary Adaptations that Relate to Diet in the Past'. In: Hublin, JJ., Richards, M.P. (eds) *The Evolution of Hominin Diets. Vertebrate Paleobiology and Paleoanthropology*. (Berlin: Springer, Dordrecht, 2009). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9699-0_4

¹³ Grumett *Theology* p.127.

¹⁴ Pollan, Michael *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

¹⁵ Bauckham, Richard *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), p.26.

¹⁶ Clough, David L., Adam, Margaret B., Grumett, David & Mullan, Siobhan *The Christian Ethics of Farmed Animal Welfare: A Policy Framework for Churches and Christian Organizations* (2020) https://www.abdn.ac.uk/sdhp/documents/CEFAW_PolicyFramework-DigitalDownload-Jan22.pdf Accessed 30/11/2022.

fish, sheep, pigs and cattle). The theological position behind the work is that 'human and animal creatures praise God by reflecting God's goodness in their creaturely lives, with the unique capacities and gifts God has given them and to the extent possible before the ultimate fulfilment of creation'¹⁷ so '[f]armed animals glorify God by fully living out their particular abilities, activities, relationships, and characteristics'.¹⁸ Interestingly, with reference to my reflection here, it makes recommendations including buying animal products from sources that promote the flourishing of the animals and eating fewer animal products altogether.¹⁹

Any discussion of using animals for food, or of use of the Earth's resources in general, must also be read within the current climate emergency which is forcing a re-examination of all human practices in relation to the rest of the globe. Calls to reduce our carbon footprint must suggest a re-examination of the carbon debts generated by animal husbandry, compared to the cultivation of grains, with 'the use of animals for meat causing twice the pollution of producing plant-based foods'.²⁰

I now turn to the fourth quadrilateral element, experience. According to Helen Collins, in the sense intended by Wesley this 'refers specifically to the personal experience of the assurance of salvation' as a source of theology.²¹ She therefore suggests that theological reflection should make use of experience 'as testimonies of encounters with Christ'²² but, in that sense, I can claim no experience of hearing from God personally and specifically regarding this issue. I can 'testify' however, to hearing the more general call of the Gospel to a simplicity of lifestyle and a reduction in meat consumption would seem consonant with this.

If I take what is perhaps the more general usage of the term 'experience' within theological reflection,²³ then I could include my limited experiences of farms, and the occasional abattoir visit when I was a biologist, as well as 'encounters' with very freshly killed animals in the meat-markets of Central Asia in the nineties. Perhaps because I have dissected the insides of a few dead animals, I have never found the sight of dead animals, nor the idea of eating them, especially repulsive. Moreover, in the Asian parts of the former Soviet Union, good use was made of every part of the animals, including hides, in various ways. Back in the UK, I am fortunate now to be able to afford to buy meat where I am fairly sure the animals have had better standards of care (e.g. organic, free-range) or have lived as naturally as they possibly could in 21st century England – as with wild deer culled and sold as

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.7.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.2.

¹⁹ Clough *et al. Welfare* p.54.

²⁰ Milman, Oliver 'Meat accounts for nearly 60% of all greenhouse gases from food production, study finds' <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/13/meat-greenhouses-gases-food-production-study>. (13/09/2021). Accessed 14/12/2022.

²¹ Collins, Helen *Reordering Theological Reflection: Starting with Scripture* (London: SCM, 2020), p.119.

²² *Ibid*, p.120.

²³ *Ibid*, p.118.

venison. I wonder if my attitude would be different if the English language used the same name for animal and meat (e.g. beef, in Spanish, translates as 'cow-meat') but I'm not sure it would. I love the texture and flavour of meat, and have eaten it all my life. On the other hand, I know I would find it extremely difficult to actually kill an animal myself – although if I or another depended on it for survival, I expect I would find it possible.

Drawing together these four elements, Bible, Tradition, Reason and Experience, allows them to interact and 'read' one another, suggesting other areas for reflection on this topic. Situating the repeated biblical call to 'love your neighbour' within the context of climate emergency could involve consideration of meat consumption in terms of my personal carbon footprint, and my obligations to love my global neighbours who are being affected by carbon gluttony in the West; reducing or eliminating meat from my diet, especially red meat, would seem a logical response – and farming friends who keep animals in very good organic conditions would most certainly take issue with this conclusion. My non-aversion to the idea of eating dead animals needs to be weighed against biblical passages referring to the eschaton; do I currently devalue a new creation call for abstention because of my Western context and upbringing – and diet – and my biologically trained 'distance' from the 'objects' of study? Or should I tailor my actions to take account of the world as it is, where farmers work long, hard hours to produce good quality meat

I do not feel able to conclude this reflection as yet; for me, this will be an ongoing process. While I do not yet feel the argument for total abstention from meat is conclusive, I can see a very strong argument for reducing my consumption drastically and for opting to only eat meat that is produced from animals who have lived as freely as possible and been killed as simply and painlessly as possible.