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# World Religions and the Vegetarian Diet

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## World Religions and the Vegetarian Diet<sup>1</sup>

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The relationship between the physical and the spiritual nature of a human being has been widely discussed within many faith traditions. This paper seeks to deal with one of the physical aspects of human existence: diet. It will be limited to the religions most familiar to Westerners: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. We will find curious similarities and striking differences in the various links between diet and religion.

### Historical Survey

**1. Hinduism.** The complex system of Hinduism has proven to be very resilient. It has absorbed elements of various other religions over thousands of years and yet maintained its distinctive character. Hindus believe in many gods, reincarnation, and *karma* (understood as how one's actions in previous lives morally affect the current cycle of existence).

Regarding diet, Hinduism today differs from what we know of its oldest forms. During the Vedic period in India (after about 2000 BC), Hindus ate meat and sacrificed animals extensively. Conception of an afterlife included a "heaven" where those who had acquired enough merit through the bestowal of adequate sacrificial gifts were likely to go.<sup>2</sup>

Vegetarianism emerged gradually in Hinduism. Around the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, some Hindu sages began to advocate a meatless diet, though they were probably a minority.<sup>3</sup> A major upheaval around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC in India deeply affected Hinduism. This led to the formation of the Buddhist and the Jain religions—both of which put increased emphasis on the sanctity of all life, including

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the 54<sup>th</sup> annual meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, November, 2002, the theme of which was "World Religions."

<sup>2</sup> M. M. J. Marasinghe, *Gods in Early Buddhism*, Vidyalankara Campus, University of Sri Lanka (Ceylon, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> M. Lal, "Cow Cult in India," in *Cow-Slaughter: Horns of a Dilemma*, ed. A. B. Shah (Bombay: Lalvani, 1967).

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animal life. In the third century BC the great Indian King Asoka converted to Buddhism, and Buddhism became the official religion. Asoka himself gave up most, if not all, meat consumption. Eating flesh meat was almost entirely done away with at the royal court, and the killing of some kinds of animals was prohibited entirely. It is said that Asoka was converted to Buddhism after viewing the carnage that resulted from one of the great battles of the day.<sup>4</sup>

Economic factors were also affecting meat consumption. It was becoming more and more expensive to produce meat because of the pressure overgrazing and deforestation were placing on the land.<sup>5</sup> Some of Asoka's decrees, such as restrictions on forest-cutting, demonstrate an early sensitivity to the relationship between ecology and human life only now slowly emerging in modern Western thinking.<sup>6</sup> After about 1000 BC, meat-eating apparently was widely restricted. The Upanishads of this period are the first Hindu scriptures to mention doctrines suggestive of reincarnation. The sutras of this period (other collections of writings) also stated that one could eat meat only when the animal was sacrificed ritually.<sup>7</sup>

Hindu vegetarianism received its strongest impress from the Krishna cult, from whom the revering of the sacred cow in Hinduism originated. This perspective persists to this day. The followers of Krishna, who began propagating their view in the first few centuries AD, were strict vegetarians, and Hinduism came more and more under their influence.

From the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD onward, the use of beef was increasingly restricted. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century the Law of Manu again restricted meat-eating to sacrificial occasions. The life of Krishna was written down in the *Bhagwat Purana* during the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Upper castes in India resisted the trend toward vegetarianism, and it seems that they continued to eat beef as late as the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. After the translation of the *Bhagwat Purana* into Hindi (15<sup>th</sup> century AD), no orthodox Hindu would kill a cow or eat beef.<sup>8</sup> Not all Hindus became vegetarian, however—though the orthodox followers of Krishna's teaching undoubtedly were.

While many Hindus today and in the past have eaten meat, there is nevertheless a strong vegetarian tradition within Hinduism. Today it is generally motivated from issues connected with reincarnation.

**2. Buddhism.** Buddhism and Hinduism have many similarities. Both originated in India and both believe in karma and reincarnation. Buddhists reject the idea of the self or soul, however, believing it to be an illusion brought about by one's attachment to worldly things. The Buddha taught that life is a stream of

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<sup>4</sup> R. Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (New York: Oxford UP, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> B. G. Gokhale, *Asoka Maurya* (New York: Twayne, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> R. C. Dutt, *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, 1889), 104-105.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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becoming in which no permanent self endures. Individuals are composites of perception, feeling, volition, intelligence, and form, all subject to the law of karma. Life is essentially suffering, desire is the cause of suffering, and the path to Nirvana (or salvation) involves the cessation of all desire. Non-attachment to food was generally practiced as one way of withdrawing from desire. Compassion for animals was also urged in recognition of the shared life of all creatures.

Of the two chief branches of Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana, the Theravada tradition is the older. Today it is found in Burma, Ceylon, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Tibet, and Malaya. The Mahayana tradition is found in China. Both traditions are found in Vietnam, while Japan has yet another tangent originally brought from China.

Attitudes toward meat consumption are noticeably different within the two main traditions. In Theravada Buddhism, meat-eating has come to be largely condoned, while in Mahayana Buddhism, meat consumption is frowned upon. These differences are very apparent in some of their rituals.

Theravada Buddhist monks beg for food and are to accept what they are given. To receive some foods but to reject others signifies an attachment to the world, a trait which monks are supposed to suppress. Certain principles regarding flesh foods are also operant. For example, no monk can kill an animal. Nor can a monk accept meat that has been specially slaughtered for him.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, certain kinds of meat cannot be eaten under any circumstance. The Buddha forbade eating the meat of elephants, horses, dogs, serpents, lions, tigers, bears, hyenas, and panthers, even if they had died natural deaths.<sup>10</sup> The Buddha also clearly enjoined monks to abstain from killing animals, so that all creatures of whatever kind could live.<sup>11</sup> In most Theravada countries today, though, lay Buddhists regularly eat meat.

In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the monks do not beg for food at all. They prepare their own food, which they buy, grow, or collect as rent. The Mahayana monks in China were strict vegetarians in ancient times and remain so today.<sup>12</sup> In China, all animal foods, onions, and alcohol were either forbidden or customarily avoided. This included the use of animal products in dress with a prohibition on the use of silk or leather (not observed in Theravada Buddhism). However, dietary abstinence from meat was an ancient Chinese tradition that apparently antedated the arrival of Buddhism.<sup>13</sup>

Not only are Mahayana Buddhist monks vegetarian, but so are many Buddhist lay believers in China. People other than monks take a lay Buddhist ordination of from one to five vows. Almost everyone takes the first vow, which

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<sup>9</sup> Mahavagga VI, 31.14, in *Vinaya Texts*, pt. II, trans. T. W. R. Davids and H. Oldenberg, *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. XVII (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910).

<sup>10</sup> Mahavagga VI, 23, in *Vinaya Texts*, pt. II.

<sup>11</sup> H. C. Warren, trans., *Buddhism in Translation* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 303.

<sup>12</sup> Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1967), 112.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

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prohibits killing any sentient creature. This is usually interpreted to mean or imply vegetarianism. However, there is disagreement on this point. Some argue that the injunction against taking the life of sentient creatures means only that one should not personally slaughter animals or eat an animal expressly killed for personal benefit.<sup>14</sup>

In reincarnation, an animal may have to go through eons of existences before finally accumulating enough good karma to be reborn as a human. However, animals can eventually achieve salvation. In fact, there are many stories of the prior existences of the Buddha, and he is often an animal.

Even though it is meritorious to abstain from meat, not all Buddhists refrain. Yet there is a very strong tradition of vegetarianism in Buddhism, since the Buddha commanded his followers not to kill animals. The violence of slaughtering animals for food and the restless craving for flesh meats reveal modes in which humans enslave themselves to suffering. The ethical doctrine of *ahimsa*, or non-injury to living beings, shared by both Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions, derives from the conviction that violence to creatures, whose forms and identities through reincarnation are fluid, has consequences for karma. Motivation for the meatless diet does not seem to emerge from ecological issues or concern for the physical health of the Buddhist. Mahayana affirmation of spiritual potential in all sentient life, coupled with the Theravadin emphasis on compassion and karma, gave rise to the centrality of the meatless diet in Buddhist thinking.

**3. Jainism.** The Jain religion came into existence around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, about the same time as Buddhism. Jainism shares several beliefs with Hinduism and Buddhism, including reincarnation, karma, and nonviolence.

According to the Jains, the entire universe is alive. One should abstain, as much as is possible, from violence toward any living creature. Everything, including rocks and stones as well as plants and animals, is in some sense alive. The idea of *ahimsa*, or nonviolence, is heavily stressed by the Jains, having far-reaching implications for them.

There are five types of beings in the Jain universe, each type having one through five senses. These are grouped accordingly, beginning with the five-sensed beings (human beings, infernal beings [inhabitants of hell, or the lower regions], and some animals) down to the one-sensed beings (or *nigodas*—vegetable bodies, earth bodies, water bodies, fire bodies, and wind bodies—possessing only the sense of touch).<sup>15</sup>

While it is worse to cause harm to a higher being than to a lower being, the Jains carry the doctrine of *ahimsa* to its ultimate. Ideally, one should not harm any kind of being. This can only be accomplished by the Jain monks, who do as

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 355-56.

<sup>15</sup> A. L. Basham, "Basic Doctrines of Jainism," in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, compiled by W. T. de Bary, S. Hay, R. Weiler, and A. Yarrow (New York: Columbia UP, 1958).

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little as possible and are supported in this by the lay community. The path to salvation involves purifying the soul of its contaminations with matter. As long as the soul is enmeshed in matter, violence is inevitable, as countless *nigodas* would be destroyed even in the simple act of taking a walk.<sup>16</sup>

Dietary restraints are thus very prominent for the Jains. Meat, alcohol, honey, or any of the five kinds of figs are forbidden. The single-sensed *nigodas* are especially present wherever sweetness or fermentation is involved. Thus, consuming honey or alcohol brings untold millions of these *nigodas* to an untimely and violent death.<sup>17</sup> However, since this does not involve violence against higher beings, Jains may on occasion consume medicine with honey or wine in it, but they may *never* consume meat. Even meat from an animal that has died a natural death contains innumerable *nigodas* and must be absolutely avoided.<sup>18</sup>

Jains are decidedly ascetic. Their vegetarianism arises from the necessity of purifying the soul of its attachments to and contamination from matter. The ultimate objective is denial of the body and purification of the soul, as a necessary step to win the soul's release from matter.

**4. Islam.** Originating in the divine revelation to Muhammad in early 7<sup>th</sup>-century Arabia, the *Qur'an* speaks of a single God who is creator and sustainer of the universe. To Him belongs all that exists on earth and in heaven. Islamic theology traditionally has focused on religious questions regarding God's nature, His relationship to His creation, human destiny, and the laws that govern community life. Issues involving the relationship of humans to other forms of life, such as animals and the natural world, are treated indirectly for the most part. And yet, God is clearly implied as ruling all of creation, not just human beings. Non-injury to life-forms and compassion for all living things are rarely explicitly mentioned. However, a sense of the generous beauty and abundance of the earth pervades Islamic texts. All things belong to God and should be treated accordingly. Sacred places in which humans are forbidden to slay animals except in self-defense play a pre-eminent role in Muslim culture. The existence of these sacred sites where slaughter is forbidden suggests a spiritual aversion to the violence inherent in killing animals, even when its occasional necessity is recognized.

For Muslims, meat that is acceptable to eat is called *chahal*, the flesh of "clean" animals that have been properly slaughtered. Scavenger animals, for example, are forbidden as food. It is also taught that animal sacrifice indebts humans to those creatures whose suffering transfigures their own. That an animal could be surrogate for another implies Islam's conception of the commonality of all creaturehood.

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<sup>16</sup> Jagmenderlal Jaini, *Outlines of Jainism* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1916).

<sup>17</sup> Padmanabh S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

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**5. Judaism.** Among present-day Jews, only a minority eat no meat. It is recognized, however, that the Hebrew Bible records in Genesis that the first diet of humankind was vegetarian. Even the animals did not eat meat:

God also said, "I give you all plants that bear seed everywhere on the earth, and every tree bearing fruit which yields seed: they shall be yours for food. All green plants I give for food to the wild animals, to all the birds of heaven, and to all reptiles on earth, every living creature." So it was; and God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. (Gen 1:29-31)

Jewish writers have noted that immediately after giving these dietary laws, God saw that everything He had made was "very good" (Gen 1:31), implying inclusion of even the vegetarian diet. After Noah's flood, however, meat consumption was permitted:

"Every creature that lives and moves shall be food for you; I give you them all, as once I gave you all green plants. But you must not eat the flesh with the life, which is the blood, still in it." (Gen 9:3-4)<sup>19</sup>

Parallel passages in Deuteronomy (12:23-24, 27-28) imply that the injunction against eating blood is fulfilled if a person pours the blood "out on the ground like water." Talmudic commentators agree that Adam was not permitted to eat flesh. But after the flood, eating meat was permitted (Sanhedrin 59b).

Upon their settlement in Canaan, the Israelites were also permitted the use of animal food, but under careful restrictions, which tended to lessen the evil results. The use of swine's flesh and other unclean animals was prohibited. Of the "clean" meats permitted, the eating of the fat and the blood was strictly forbidden. Only healthy animals could be used for food. No creature that had died of itself, or from which the blood had not been carefully drained, could be eaten.

Some Jewish writers argue that the original meat-free diet was the one God intended for all humankind. Permission to eat meat was granted by God only after it became apparent that humans were going to go their own way regardless of what God told them. One Jewish author observes: "Only after man proved unfit for the high moral standard set at the beginning was meat made part of the humans' diet."<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, while it would not be a violation of the law to eat meat, it would be morally superior to abstain.

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<sup>19</sup> Some vegetarians have argued that this passage actually supports vegetarianism, since it is impossible to drain the blood entirely from the animal. Others have only quoted the phrase "But you must not eat the flesh" out of context. Both the Ebionites in the 1st century AD, and the Society of Bible Christians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, argued that blood could never be entirely drained from the animal.

<sup>20</sup> J. Hurewitz, "The Care of Animals in Jewish Life and Lore," in *The Jewish Library*, vol. 1, ed. L. Jung (London: Soncino, 1968).

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Jewish writers also describe the considerable evidence in the Hebrew Bible that God's ultimate hope is for a world in which no animals are killed, even by other animals. This portrays a world that, in respect to diet, is like the Garden of Eden. Through the prophets God promises a world where even the now-carnivorous animals will again be vegetarian. The wolf, sheep, leopard, calf, lion, cow, bear, cobra, and little child will all live peacefully with each other: "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for as the waters fill the sea, so shall the land be filled with the knowledge of the Lord." (Is 11:9). This prophecy is repeated in Isaiah 65:25.

Many Jewish materials also note that animals are regularly included in God's solicitude in the Hebrew Bible:

a. In Exodus, animals, as well as humans, are included in the observance of the Sabbath (Exod 20:10, 23:12). The Sabbath commandment in the Decalogue (Exod 20:8-10) along with Exod 23:12 and Deut 5:12-14 are used by Rashi to reason that animals must be free to roam on the Sabbath day and enjoy the beauties of nature. The fact that animals are even mentioned in the Decalogue expresses the importance of compassion for animals in Judaism. Rabbi J. H. Hertz, in commenting on Exod 20:10, writes: "It is one of the glories of Judaism that thousands of years [ago] it so fully recognized our duties to animals."<sup>21</sup>

b. God's covenants include animals. A striking example of this is in Hosea: "Then I will make a covenant on behalf of Israel with the wild beasts, the birds of the air, and the things that creep on the earth, and I will break the bow and sword and weapon of war and sweep them off the earth, so that all living creatures may lie down without fear" (Hos 2:18).

God's covenant included the animals. This is not the first time. The much-earlier Noahic covenant made after the flood did the same:

God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him: "I now make My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, all birds and cattle, all the wild animals with you on earth, all that have come out of the ark. I will make My covenant with you: never again shall living creatures be destroyed by the waters of the flood . . ." (Gen 9:9-11)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, 298.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger makes the same argument: "After Noah built an altar and made a sacrifice, God resolved never again to curse the ground because of humankind and never again to destroy the earth by water. And God once again blessed the humans, repeating the words given before violence and wickedness entered the world: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (9:1; 9:7; cf. 1:28). Only this time, significantly, God does not include the command to subdue (*kabash*) and have dominion (*rada*) over the earth and its creatures (1:28). . . . Taking the command to rule into their own hands, mistaking dominion for domination, the human earth-creature had perverted its royal responsibility and polluted the earth. This time, however, God explicitly grants permission to eat meat (9:3; cf. 1:29-30), so long as the blood, or life force, is not consumed. Though humans are now carnivores, respect for life is still the rule. But as one might expect, fear and dread come upon their prey.

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And when speaking to Jonah, God also includes animals in His description of His mercy toward the city of Nineveh (Jonah 4:11).

c. Humans also have an obligation to relieve the suffering of animals. In Proverbs it is stated that, “A righteous man cares for his beast” (12:10). Deuteronomy 22:4 enjoins a person to assist a fellow-countryman’s ass or ox which is lying in the road. In Exod 23:5, this obligation is extended to the ass or ox of even an enemy.

d. In Exodus (21:28-32) we find that animals, along with humans, are held responsible for their actions.

e. The Psalmist writes that “[God’s] tender care rests upon all his creatures” (Ps 145:9); and that God provides food for both humans and animals (Ps 104:24-30).

f. In Proverbs the ant is praised for its industriousness (6:6-8). Rock-badgers, locusts, ants, and lizards are said to be “wise beyond the wisest” (30:24-28).

g. Human beings and animals suffer a common fate. Eccl. 3:19-20 states, “For what happens to the sons of men also happens to beasts; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust.”

Several Talmudic commentators conclude that one can infer from these and other passages that relieving the suffering of an animal is a biblical law (Baba Mazia 32b). It is apparent that animals are entitled to consideration, even if they

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“And then God again (cf. 6:18) establishes a covenant (*berit*). Six times in chapter 9 the text speaks of a divine covenant . . . From the crescendo of God’s remembering (8:1) we come to the majesty of God’s covenanting (9:8-17). . . .

“With whom does God establish a covenant? Clearly, the text speaks of a covenant made by God, but it is not, as is often thought, mainly a covenant with Noah. This covenant, rather, is established with the earth and its plethora of creatures. The covenant with Noah (6:18) includes every living creature.... Bernhard Anderson summarizes the matter:

“The Noahic covenant, then, is universal in the widest sense imaginable. It is fundamentally an ecological covenant that includes not only human beings everywhere but all animals—every living being (*nepesh hayya*) of all flesh that is upon the earth (9:16 repeating what was said in 6:19).

“Two more features of this covenant merit comment. This covenant is an everlasting covenant (*berit olam*). It is not a temporary agreement or provisional pledge but a covenant in perpetuity. It is, furthermore, an unconditional covenant. Unlike the more reciprocal Mosaic covenant, in which conditions are imposed upon the people, God unilaterally and unconditionally establishes this covenant upon the people, God unilaterally and unconditionally establishes this covenant with the earth. This everlasting covenant rests solely on God’s commitment.

“With whom does God make a covenant? God covenants with the earth and all its creatures. An everlasting covenant. An unconditional covenant. God covenants with us his faulted people and with this his groaning earth. The God who remembered Noah and all the animals in the ark also remembered the earth. God, through his . . . life-giving Spirit, put the pieces of our dismembered home planet back together again.” Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 98, 99, 100.

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are to be used for farm work or to be slaughtered. Even the process of slaughter itself is carefully regulated. The procedures are dealt with in the Talmud.<sup>23</sup>

Presently, Jewish vegetarians argue that the compassion for all living things mandated by a reverence for God's creation is most obviously expressed in *kashrut* (kosher) dietary laws. Many commentators, including Roberta Kalechofsky and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, claim that *kashrut*'s prohibition against killing all but certain kinds of animals, and even then only in a humane manner, is a codification of the divine concession to humankind's bloodlust. It is a systematized attempt to wean the appetite until one attains the spiritual maturity to forgo flesh foods entirely.

But *kashrut* is not only a remnant of the original divine intention. It is also one obvious way, as Roberta Kalechofsky points out, to integrate the holy into the basic human act of eating.<sup>24</sup> Rabbi Abraham Kook suggests that God provided many laws and regulations related to the consumption of meat as a reprimand, and also as a reminder that animals' lives are being destroyed—in the hope that this would eventually lead people back to vegetarianism in the messianic period.<sup>25</sup>

In light of these claims, present Jewish vegetarian writers argue that a meatless diet is a logical extension of the Judaic spiritual tradition. Rabbi Kook, the first chief rabbi of the newly formed nation of Israel, even argued that returning to a nonviolent diet is one of the necessary conditions for the Messiah's coming. He maintained that if this is so, as the prophet Isaiah said (11:6-7), then a diet that approximates the ideal of peaceful harmony among all creatures does indeed make straight the way for the Lord.

Jewish writings point out that the Old Testament often implies a meatless diet. In the Song of Songs, the divine bounty is mentioned in terms of fruits, vegetables, vines, and nuts. The book of Deuteronomy also contains descriptions typical of the Torah's positive depiction of the non-meat diet:

For the Lord your God brings you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths, springing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates; a

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<sup>23</sup> Only specially trained slaughterers, who must be God-fearing, observant Jews, can be employed. The knife must be sharper than a razor, without the slightest indentation. The killing consists in cutting the esophagus and the trachea, severing the jugular vein and carotid arteries. This causes practically instantaneous unconsciousness. While not all sacrifices involved slaughtering for food, all slaughtering for food (in accordance with the law) implied a sacrifice. In Lev 17:3-4 it is stated that "any Israelite who slaughters an ox, a sheep, or a goat, either inside or outside the camp, and does not bring it to the entrance of the Tent of the Presence to present it as an offering to the Lord shall be guilty of bloodshed: that man has shed blood and shall be cut off from the people"

<sup>24</sup> Kerry S. Walters and Lisa Portness, ed., *Religious Vegetarianism: From Hesiod to the Dalai Lama* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2001), 95-96.

<sup>25</sup> Kook, *Vision*, Sections 1-7. Also Rabbi Shlomo Riskin: "The dietary laws are intended to teach us compassion and lead us gently to vegetarianism." ["A Sabbath Week," *The Jewish Week*, Aug. 14, 1987, 21.

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land of olive trees and honey; a land wherein you shall eat bread without scarceness, you shall not lack anything in it. . . . And you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you. . . . I will give you the rain of your land in its due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your corn, and your wine, and your oil. (Deut 8:7-10; 11:14)

Similar sentiments are also found in the prophets:

I shall return My people from captivity, and they shall build up the waste cities and inhabit them, and they shall plant vineyards and drink the wine from them, and they shall make gardens and eat the fruit from them, and I shall plant them upon their land. . . . Build houses and dwell in them, and plant gardens and eat the fruit of them. (Amos 9;14-15; Jer 29:5)

The Essenes, a prominent group within Judaism during Jesus' time, connected sacrifices and meat eating. Josephus states that the Essenes "did not make sacrifices" and adds that they lived in the same way that the Pythagoreans did among the Greeks, being vegetarian. Philo states that "they did not slaughter living creatures." Porphyry also writes that "all meat is forbidden for the Essenes."<sup>26</sup> Clement of Alexandria, an early leader of the church and a noteworthy vegetarian, also wrote that meat eating and animal sacrifice were interconnected.<sup>27</sup>

The destruction of the Temple in 70 AD by the Romans made it impossible for Jews to offer sacrifices at the Temple, rendering the relationship of meat-eating to sacrifices problematic. Apparently there was considerable debate about this among the Jews. In the Babba Bathra (60b) there is an account of this debate. Rabbi Yishmael said, "From the day that the Holy Temple was destroyed it would have been right to have imposed on ourselves the law prohibiting the

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<sup>26</sup> Carl Skriver, *Die vergessenen Anfänge der Schöpfung und des Christentums* (Bad Beltingen, Germany: Order of the Nazoreans, 1977), Section II, Part 3. (English translation, *The Forgotten Beginnings of Creation and Christianity*, now in manuscript.) Porphyry, Philo, Josephus, and Pliny the Elder all report the Essenes as primarily vegetarian.

<sup>27</sup> He states: "Sacrifices were invented by men to be a pretext for eating flesh." Clement of Alexandria, *On Sacrifices*, Book VII. Cited in J. Todd Ferrier, *On Behalf of the Creatures* (London: Order of the Cross, 1983), 19.

Any slaughtering exclusively for the sake of food was bloodshed. One scholarly commentator on this passage remarks that "the import of the old tradition is that eating the flesh of a domestic animal must be accompanied by a rite." There is the implication that the slaughter of animals without such sacrifice is idolatry, for further down the biblical writer states, "They shall no longer sacrifice their slaughtered beasts to the demons whom they wantonly follow. This shall be a rule binding on them and their descendants for all time" (Lev 17:7). It is interesting that much the same thing was taking place in other parts of the world at this same time. Both in India and Greece there was an increasing identification between meat consumption and a religious sacrifice; meat could only be eaten if the animal was sacrificed.

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eating of flesh.”<sup>28</sup> After the destruction of the Temple, apparently many Jews gave up meat-eating altogether, and in fact, meat consumption nearly died out at the time.<sup>29</sup>

The Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote about the Jewish wars with Rome, described the basic principle of all Judaic laws as mercy. The laws, he said, do not neglect the care of animals: “Ill-treatment even of a brute beast is with us a capital crime.”<sup>30</sup>

In the *Tanchuma*, a set of homilies from the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, written by Tanchum Bar Abba, we read:

If men embark on a sea voyage and take cattle with them, and should a storm arise, they throw the cattle overboard, because people do not love animals as they love human beings. Not so is the Lord’s love. Just as he is merciful to man, so is he merciful to beasts. You can see this from the story of the flood. When men sinned the Lord decided to destroy the Earth. He treated both man and beast alike. But when he was reconciled, he was reconciled to both man and beast alike.<sup>31</sup>

In the Middle Ages Yehudah Ha-Chassid wrote, “The greatest sin is ingratitude. It must not be shown even to the brute. That man deserves punishment who overloads his beast, or beats or torments it, who drags a cat by the ears, or uses spurs to his horse . . .”<sup>32</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Shalom Rabinowitz (1859-1916) wrote a story entitled “Cruelty to Living Creatures,” devoted to a child’s sorrow at the fate of a little fish which is shortly to be eaten.<sup>33</sup>

The modern Jewish vegetarian movement arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the publication of Aaron Frankel’s book *Thou Shalt Not Kill, or the Torah of Vegetarianism*. The late Rabbi M. Kosowsky, who was not a vegetarian, stated that vegetarianism was “the highest pinnacle of ethical achievement.”<sup>34</sup> Rabbi David Rosen, former Chief Rabbi of Ireland, is emphatic: “As it is halachically prohibited to harm oneself and as healthy, nutritious vegetarian alternatives are easily available, meat consumption has become halachically unjustifiable.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Rabbi Joseph Rosenfeld, “The Religious Justification for Vegetarianism” in *Tree of Life*, ed. L. Pick (Cranbury: A. S. Barnes, 1977). Also, Rabbi Yehuda Ben Batheira, the Talmudic sage, states that the obligation to eat meat for rejoicing only applied at the time when the Holy Temple was in existence. He adds that after the destruction of the Temple one can rejoice with wine. This is the basis of Rabbi Yishmael’s convictions. The reason that the rabbis did not make such a law was that they felt that most Jews were not ready to accept such a prohibition. *Pesachim* 109a.

<sup>29</sup> J. J. Berman, *Shehitah* (New York: Block, 1941).

<sup>30</sup> N. N. Glatzer, *The Writings of Josephus* (New York: Meridian, 1960).

<sup>31</sup> Joe Green, “The Jewish Vegetarian Tradition,” Johannesburg, South Africa, Oct. 1969. Cited in Richard H. Schwartz, *Judaism and Vegetarianism* (New York: Lantern, 2001), 215.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Rabbi David Rosen, “Vegetarianism: An Orthodox Jewish Perspective,” in *Rabbis and Vegetarianism: An Evolving Tradition*, ed. Roberta Kalechofsky (Marblehead: Micah, 1995), 54.

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**Christianity.** The Christian tradition is linked with and informed by the many concepts of Judaism on diet, due to the inclusion of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament into the Christian canon. The religion of both the Old and New Testaments is not a religion of asceticism, such as in Buddhism and Hinduism, where by refusing to eat and drink one avoids being contaminated by matter and thus can draw closer to God.<sup>36</sup> As Steven Bouma-Prediger writes: “The God of the Bible defines Himself as the God of life. And in fact, eating and drinking are often linked with worship. The Bible also prescribes, both explicitly and implicitly, a special diet in tune with the God of creation, the God of life.”<sup>37</sup>

In the history of the Christian Church, though the meatless diet has never been demanded of its adherents, we find many who chose it:

—James the Just, the brother of Jesus and first head of the church in Jerusalem after the death and ascension of Jesus, was a vegetarian. Both Hegisuppus and Augustine testify that James was not only a vegetarian but was *raised* as a vegetarian.<sup>38</sup>

—Both Athanasius and his opponent Arius were strict vegetarians. In fact, many early church fathers were vegetarian, including Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Heironymus, Boniface, and John Chrysostom.

—Basilus the Great, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, was a vegetarian who discussed the morality of eating meat:

The steam of meat meals darkens the light of the spirit. One can hardly have virtue if one enjoys meat meals and feasts. . . . In the earthly paradise there was no wine, no one sacrificed animals, and no one ate meat. As long as one lives frugally, the luck of the house will increase; the animals will be safe; no blood will be shed; no animal will be killed.<sup>39</sup>

—Many monasteries, both ancient and modern, have practiced vegetarianism. Boniface (672-754) wrote to pope Zacharias that he had begun a monastery that followed the rules of strict abstinence, whose monks do not eat meat nor enjoy wine or other intoxicating drinks.<sup>40</sup>

—In the modern era, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, extolled the virtues of the meatless diet: “Thanks be to God: since I gave up flesh and wine, I have been delivered from all physical ills.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Bouma-Prediger writes: “Because of who Christ is and what Christ does, there is gospel for us and the earth. Because Christ is the one in whom all things hang together, we know that the world is a cosmos and not chaos. Because Christ took on human flesh, we believe matter matters” (125).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in C. Skriver, op. cit., II, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., III, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., III, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Steven Rosen, *Food for the Spirit: Vegetarianism and the World Religions* (San Diego: Bala/Entourage, 1990), 108.

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—Others have recognized the psychological, even spiritual, benefits of the non-flesh diet. Albert Einstein said, “It is my view that the vegetarian manner of living, by its purely physical effect on the human temperament, would most beneficially influence the lot of mankind.”<sup>42</sup>

Issues of Continuity/Discontinuity with Judaism are regularly discussed in the Christian tradition. Discontinuity with OT dietary regulations is often maintained. It is important to note, with regard to diet, however, that Israel’s dietary stipulations were God-ordained:

The food laws are seen in the Pentateuch as a product of God’s revelation and not as an invention of a priestly school or other special group of people in Israel. Gispén underlines it: ‘In my opinion we must not forget that in the laws of clean and unclean we have not to do with the thoughts of the people of Israel but with the divine revelation given through Moses and Aaron.’<sup>43</sup>

Some argue that the Jewish distinctions between clean and unclean meat are no longer binding today in the Christian era. Jiří Moskala’s important book, *The Laws Of Clean And Unclean Animals In Leviticus 11: Their Nature, Theology, And Rationale: An Intertextual Study*,<sup>44</sup> clearly documents the universal nature of the divine mandate regarding permissible meat consumption. The distinction between clean and unclean meats is clearly evident in the early chapters of Genesis long before the Jewish nation was in existence. And later, when the clean/unclean principle is again highlighted in Lev 11, at the end of the discussion there is the keyword “holy” (*kodesh*):

The conclusion of this passage begins with the self-presentation of the Holy God. His holiness must be present among the people of Israel. The heart of the formula is repeated twice: “Be holy for I am holy. . . . It is noteworthy that both Leviticus (11:44-45; 20:25-26) and Deuteronomy (14:2) show that the regulations about clean animals have reference to Israel’s election. As God chooses and separates His people “out of all the nations that are on the face of the earth” to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Deut 7:6; Exod 19:6), so He calls for a distinction between animals. In the NT the

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Some of history’s greatest humanitarians were vegetarians and/or strongly in favor of vegetarianism. These include Plutarch, Leonardo da Vinci, Sir Isaac Newton, Jean Jacques Rousseau, General William Booth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Dr. J. H. Kellogg, Horace Greeley, Susan B. Anthony, Leo Tolstoy, Upton Sinclair, H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Albert Schweitzer, and Mahatma Gandhi. Jewish humanitarian vegetarians include Isaac Bashevis Singer, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, Franz Kafka, and Isaac Leib Peretz, as well as several chief rabbis (cited by Schwartz).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 109-110.

<sup>43</sup> Moskala, 282, citing W. H. Gispén, “The Distinction Between Clean and Unclean.” In *Judtestamentische Studien*, ed. A. H. de Boer, 5:192.

<sup>44</sup> Berrien Springs: Adventist Theological Society, 2000.

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same texts are used to stress the election and solemn task of Christians (1 Pt 1:15-16; 2:9).<sup>45</sup>

Grunfeld is also insightful:

The scope of the dietary laws is not only the human body, but the whole human personality as an inseparable entity. This is in complete accord with the fundamental conception of Judaism, which always strives at a unity of matter and mind, body and soul.<sup>46</sup>

In the NT Jesus Himself calls for the same complete commitment to God of mind, soul, and strength (i.e., Mark 12:33).

Presently, some Christian writers cite Peter's vision as evidence that the OT stipulations between clean and unclean meats are now superseded, yet Peter clearly understood that the meaning of the vision had nothing to do with diet, but was instructing him in cultural issues. God's response to Peter is crucial. God never asks Peter to eat the unclean animals, but to stop calling the clean animals *koinos*, defiled by their association with the unclean. Some modern versions have mistakenly translated the word *koinos* as "unclean" in several NT passages, but it simply does not mean "unclean." For example, in Rom 14:14, 20, Paul does not say that no foods are "unclean" (as in the RSV—that would be another Greek word—*akathartos*). He says that no food is *koinos*, "common," defiled by association with the unclean. Paul is rejecting the current Judaic principle of defilement by association, and not the law of clean and unclean foods. To be faithful to the apostle Peter's understanding of his vision, it cannot be used to argue against the divine stipulations of clean/unclean meat.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps the largest and most significant group of Christian vegetarians today is found within the Seventh-day Adventist tradition. This Protestant denomination recommends vegetarianism to their members, of whom nearly one half do not eat meat. Those who do chose to eat meat are careful to observe the clean/unclean distinction. Because of their dietary practices, Seventh-day Adventists have frequently been the object of scientific studies involving the relationship of diet to health. Published results have consistently found that Adventists live longer and enjoy better health than the rest of the population in the United States.

Ellen White, one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, wrote expansively on the importance of diet. She speaks of the significance of

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<sup>45</sup> Moskala, 294, 292.

<sup>46</sup> Isador Grunfeld, *The Jewish Dietary Laws*, vol. 1 (London: Soncino, 1972), 13.

<sup>47</sup> See Colin House, "Defilement by Association: Some Insights from the Usage of *koinos* in Acts 10-11," *AUSS* 21 (1983): 143-153. See also Richard M. Davidson, "Revelation/Inspiration: A Critique of Alden Thompson's 'Incarnational' Model," in *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, ed. Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson (Berrien Springs: Adventist Theological Society, 1992), 122-123.

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the diet given by God in the Garden of Eden and discusses many issues involved in eating meat:

Not an ounce of flesh meat should enter our stomachs. The eating of flesh is unnatural. We are to return to God's original purpose in the creation of man. . . . Is it not time that all should aim to dispense with flesh foods? How can those who are seeking to become pure, refined, and holy, that they may have the companionship of heavenly angels, continue to use as food anything that has so harmful an effect on soul and body? How can they take the life of God's creatures that they may consume the flesh as a luxury? Let them, rather, return to the wholesome and delicious food given to man in the beginning, and themselves practice, and teach their children to practice, mercy toward the dumb creatures that God has made and has placed under our dominion. . . .

Meat is not essential for health or strength, else the Lord made a mistake when He provided food for Adam and Eve . . . It is a mistake to suppose that muscular strength depends on the use of animal food. The needs of the system can be better supplied, and more vigorous health can be enjoyed, without its use. The grains, with fruits, nuts, and vegetables, contain all the nutritive properties necessary to make good blood.... Those who eat flesh are but eating grains and vegetables second hand ... How much better to get it direct by eating the food that God provided for our use!<sup>48</sup>

White was also sensitive to the grave problem of diseased animals:

Flesh was never the best food; but its use is now doubly objectionable, since disease in animals is so rapidly increasing. . . . Could you know the nature of the meat you eat, could you see the animals when living from which the flesh is taken when dead, you would turn with loathing from your flesh meats. The very animals whose flesh you eat, are frequently so diseased that, if left alone, they would die of themselves; but while the breath of life is in them, they are killed and brought to market. You take directly into your systems . . . poison of the worst kind, and yet you realize it not. . . . In many places fish become so contaminated by the filth on which they feed as to be a cause of disease. This is especially the case where the fish come in contact with the sewage of large cities. . . . Thus when used as food they bring disease and death on those who do not suspect the danger.<sup>49</sup>

The treatment of animals raised for slaughter also concerned White:

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<sup>48</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Diets and Foods*, 380, 395, 396.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 384, 385.

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Think of the cruelty to animals that meat-eating involves, and its effect on those who inflict and those who behold it. How it destroys the tenderness with which we should regard these creatures of God! . . . some of the processes of fattening [animals] for market produce disease. Shut away from the light and pure air, breathing the atmosphere of filthy stables, perhaps fattening on decaying food, the entire body soon becomes contaminated with foul matter. . . .

Animals are often transported long distances and subject to great suffering in reaching a market. Taken from the green pastures and traveling for weary miles over the hot, dusty roads, or crowded into filthy cars, feverish and exhausted, often for many hours deprived of food and water, the poor creatures are driven to their death, that human beings may feast on the carcasses. . . . Those who use flesh foods little know what they are eating. Often if they could see the animals when living and know the quality of the meat they eat, they would turn from it with loathing.<sup>50</sup>

White viewed diet holistically, discussing how the physical and the spiritual natures are affected by what is eaten. She urged that diet is linked not only to health, but also to holiness, recalling the OT principle:

The intellectual, the moral, and the physical powers are depreciated by the habitual use of flesh meats. Meat eating deranges the system, beclouds the intellect, and blunts the moral sensibilities. We say to you . . . your safest course is to let meat alone. . . . The morality caused by meat eating is not discerned; if it were, we would hear no more arguments and excuses in favor of the indulgence of the appetite for dead flesh. We have plenty of good things to satisfy hunger without bringing corpses upon our table to compose our bill of fare. . . . The moral evils of a flesh diet are not less marked than are the physical ills. Flesh food is injurious to health, and whatever affects the body has a corresponding effect on the mind and the soul.<sup>51</sup>

White exhorts the development of healthful eating habits motivated by the desire to glorify God in our bodies and to preserve physical and spiritual health.

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<sup>50</sup> Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing*, 315, *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 385, 388. In *Ministry of Healing*, 315-16, White continues: “The intelligence displayed by many dumb animals approaches so closely to human intelligence that it is a mystery. The animals see and hear and love and fear and suffer. They use their organs far more faithfully than many human beings use theirs. They manifest sympathy and tenderness toward their companions in suffering. Many animals show an affection for those who have charge of them, far superior to the affection shown by some of the human race. They form attachments for man which are not broken without great suffering to them.

“What man with a human heart, who has ever cared for domestic animals, could look into their eyes, so full of confidence and affection, and willingly give them over to the butcher’s knife? How could he devour their flesh as a sweet morsel?”

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 391; *Ministry of Healing*, 315.

**Conclusion**

The major world religions surveyed in this paper have all manifested dietary concerns. It is the position of this paper that the diet proposed in the Judeo-Christian tradition is the most wholistic, involving ethical, ecological, eschatological and spiritual issues. Of significance for Evangelical Christianity would be the positive results of various scientific studies on such groups as Seventh-day Adventists suggesting that vegetarianism, based on the scriptural principles found also within Judaism, markedly yields even present benefits.

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