

Christianity & Vegetarianism



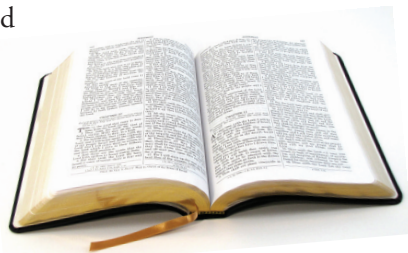
FR. JOHN DEAR

As a Catholic priest, peace activist, writer, and vegetarian, I have been deeply troubled by widespread violence and injustice. More than 30 wars are being waged, more than 1 billion people suffer from malnourishment and its effects, another billion people barely survive in dire poverty, and over 50 billion land animals suffer and die in factory farming conditions annually. Here in the United States we see injustices due to prejudices grounded in race, ethnicity, gender, and species. I agree with Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that the only way out of this culture of violence is through the ancient wisdom of nonviolence. Dr. King said the night before he was assassinated, “The choice before us is no longer violence or nonviolence; it’s nonviolence or nonexistence.”

For me, nonviolence begins with the insight that all life is sacred and that, as God’s children, we should do our best to avoid hurting or killing any human or nonhuman. The bible tells us that Jesus rejected violence. As the soldiers took him away to torture and execute him, his last words to his friends were, “Put away the sword.” After his execution, God raised him from the dead, and he returned to his friends with a greeting of peace.

I’ve attempted to follow Jesus’ call for nonviolence. I’ve organized demonstrations, been arrested for acts of civil disobedience, and taken every opportunity to promote Christian nonviolence – in books and articles, at retreats, in college auditoriums, on inner city streets, and from pulpits across the country. I’ve also traveled into the war zones of the Middle East, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Haiti, Northern Ireland, and Iraq to learn about and speak out against the violence that always accompanies injustices.

My commitment to Christian peacemaking was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, a great teacher of peace and leader of revolutionary nonviolence. He had lived and worked for justice in South Africa, struggled nonviolently for India’s independence, and



spent two hours every day in meditation and prayer. He vowed to live simply, to speak the truth, and to practice nonviolence. And, he refused to eat meat, declaring that “the life of a lamb is no less precious than that of a human being.” Dedicated to non-violence, in 1982 I too became a vegetarian.

World Hunger

More and more, instead of feeding hungry people, grains are given to animals who are brutally exploited for their flesh, milk, and eggs. These animal products are consumed by the people of the developed “First World” and the few rich people living in the developing world.

Until recently, China was a net grain exporter. However, as a direct result of increasing consumption of animal products, China is now one of the world’s top grain importers. In China, many developing countries, and elsewhere, growing production of animal products is a major threat to food security.

Inefficiently feeding the world’s crops to farmed animals, rather than feeding them directly to malnourished people, is a kind of theft. I became vegetarian when I made the connections between food security, justice, and the life of nonviolence.

The Biblical Vision of Compassion and Nonviolence

There are other good reasons to adopt a plant-based diet, including the witness of the Scriptures, reverence and compassion for God’s creatures, responsible stewardship of the earth, and respect for one’s own health.



Edward Hicks "Peaceable Kingdom"

“Compassion, in which all ethics must take root, can only attain its full breadth and depth if it embraces all living creatures and does not limit itself to humankind.”

– Dr. Albert Schweitzer

In God’s initial and ideal world, represented in Genesis by the Garden of Eden, there was no suffering, no exploitation, and no violence. People and animals were pure vegetarians (vegans), as we read in the first chapter of Genesis: “God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the Earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food’ ” (1:29). Immediately after creating this nonviolent world, God described it as “very good.”

Later, however, “the earth was filled with violence” (Genesis 6:11). After the flood, when the world’s vegetation was destroyed, God allowed humans to eat meat. Some scholars have argued that this was only a temporary permission, granted because of human violence and sinfulness. Until people could renounce flesh, the Laws of Moses forbade cruelty to animals and mandated the most humane slaughter possible at the time.

There are biblical stories that extol a nonviolent, vegetarian diet. Daniel, for example, refused to defile himself by eating the king’s meat. He and three friends actually became much healthier and smarter than everyone else through their vegetarian diet.

Isaiah proclaimed the vision of the peaceable kingdom, a new realm of God where everyone will beat their swords into plowshares, renounce war, enjoy their own vine and fig trees, and never fear again. Isaiah foresaw a day when people and animals will be vegetarian: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain” (Isaiah 11:6, 9).

Similarly, according to the prophet Hosea, God said, “I will make a covenant for you on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things on the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety” (2:18).

These beautiful visions of the prophets reach their fulfillment, according to Christianity, in the life of Jesus. He is the “Prince of Peace,” who exemplifies God’s ideal of nonviolence, mercy, and justice. Jesus healed the broken, liberated the oppressed, called for justice, and opposed oppressors. In response, the violent ruling authorities executed him.

Reflecting on the radical, nonviolent life of Jesus, I believe that today Jesus would again side with all the vulnerable individuals. Anglican priest, theologian, and Oxford professor the Rev. Dr. Andrew Linzey asserts that following Christ means casting our lot with the most oppressed. In his book *Animal Theology*, he says that no beings are more oppressed and abused today than farmed animals.

Jesus

The Gospels reveal that Jesus had great reverence for animals and nature. Jesus called his followers “sheep,” and Jesus compared his concern for Jerusalem with a hen’s caring for her brood. “Behold the birds of the air,” Jesus said. “They do not sow, they do not reap, nor do they gather into barns, yet your heavenly God feeds them” (Matthew 6:26). “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And yet not one of them is forgotten by God” (Luke 12:6). Indeed, Jesus describes himself as a “Good Shepherd” and notes that a good shepherd lays down his life for his flock of sheep (John 10:11).



As Jesus’ disciples, we are called to follow his gentle footsteps. For example, St. Francis of Assisi walked among the poor, preached peace, and loved and celebrated all of creation, including the animals. “Not to hurt

our humble brethren, the animals,” he said, “is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not enough. We have a higher mission: to be of service to them whenever they require it. If you have people who will exclude any of God’s creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have people who will deal likewise with other people.”

The Rev. Dr. Linzey maintains, like St. Francis, that humans should act not as the master species, but as the servant species. Christ came as a humble servant and called us to love and serve one another and not to harm anyone. Linzey maintains that the Gospel call to service includes selfless service not only to poor and oppressed people but to all creation, including animals.

Many early Christian leaders advocated vegetarianism, including Tertullian, St. John Chrysostom, St. Jerome, and Clement of Alexandria. To this day, most Orthodox monks are vegetarian.

There is compelling evidence that Jesus’ first followers were pacifist and vegetarian. (See *Disciples* by Keith Akers.) These values were gradually lost, and the church completely abandoned nonviolence in the fourth century, when it aligned with Constantine and the Roman Empire.

Despite centuries of hard-heartedness with respect to animals, more and more Christians have become vegetarians and vegans. In 1966, the Vatican newspaper wrote, “To ill-treat animals, and make them suffer without reason, is an act of deplorable cruelty to be condemned from a Christian point of view.” Subsequently, bishops have included cruelty toward animals under the basic sin of violence. Remarkably, Pope Francis’ 2015 *Laudato Si’* encyclical acknowledges the intrinsic worth of all animals and declares, “We must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures.”

So, when we sit down to eat, when we say our grace and invoke the blessing of Jesus, we should also choose to reflect his life of compassion and nonviolence by choosing a plant-based diet. And, we know that as we practice mercy to one another and to all God’s creatures, we, too, shall receive mercy and blessings, as Jesus promised in the Beatitudes.

Farmed Animals

Tragically, the reality today for God's creatures is neither compassionate nor merciful. From birth to death, nearly all farmed animals experience severe, unrelenting physical and mental suffering. Each year, the United States raises and kills over 9 billion land animals and slaughters far more sea animals. Hens who are raised for their eggs spend their entire lives crammed into wire mesh cages with the space for each hen less than a sheet of letter-size paper. Their feet sometimes grow around the wires and, unable to reach food and water, they slowly die. One egg represents about 28 hours of suffering for a hen. Every year in America, 250 million male birds are suffocated or ground up alive, because they are useless for the egg industry and are a different breed from those used for meat.



Crowded laying hens. © Vicky Mark

Meanwhile, chickens, pigs, turkeys, and cows used for flesh and eggs are separated from their families at birth and often mutilated without any painkillers. Many chickens have portions of their beaks chopped off with a hot blade. Cows and pigs are castrated. Cows have their horns cut off. Pigs have parts of their teeth cut off and most of their tails chopped off. They all suffer the mental and physical anguish of living in cramped spaces with no relief, no opportunity to act on any of their natural desires and needs, and no hope for escape.

Adding to their misery, most animals raised for food have been selectively bred to grow so quickly that their hearts, lungs, and limbs often cannot keep up. On average, cows are forced to produce four to ten times more milk than they would naturally, and their udders often drag on the ground.



Sows are immobilized for weeks as their young suckle. © CIWF

Then, animals are transported without food or water, maximally crowded, and exposed to the elements to a hellish death. Many animals who can no longer walk are dragged from the trucks, often breaking bones in the

process. They are killed by being hung upside down and bled to death from a cut throat, often skinned while still conscious.

In short, humans subject the vast majority of farmed animals to extremes of cruelty and abuse. What have animals done to deserve this? Absolutely nothing. Why is this done? Humans like to eat animal flesh and animal products.

Over the centuries, the human race has slowly increased its respect for human rights. It is now generally agreed that oppression and exploitation of humans because of their race, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, and physical ability are unacceptable. As we continue to grow in our moral consciousness, we will learn to protect the earth and the earth's creatures. Gandhi rightly said that you can judge a society by the way it treats its animals.

"If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would go vegetarian."

— Sir Paul McCartney

The Environment

Another reason to adopt a plant-based diet is to help protect the environment. Raising animals for food is polluting and depleting our land, water, and air. In the

United State, 11 times more fossil fuel is required to produce a calorie of animal flesh than to produce a calorie of vegetable food. We wastefully feed 60% of our grain to farmed animals, rather than eat these foods directly. Likewise, it takes up to 2,400 gallons of water to produce a single pound of meat – about ten times more than a pound of vegetable protein.

Meat-eating is responsible for 85% of topsoil erosion. We are rapidly losing this resource. Further, the feces from 9 billion land animals killed for food in the United States often contaminate groundwater and spill into waterways.

Similarly, the fishing industry is steadily ruining the world's delicate marine ecosystems. The ocean floor is being devastated by miles-long drift-nets and massive vacuums.

So, if you're reusing bags, turning off lights when you leave the room, and trying to walk and bicycle rather than drive, that's great. But, you will likely have a far greater impact on the earth and God's creation if you don't consume animals.

Health and Wholeness

Many people become vegetarian or vegan to promote good health. God has given us our bodies as sacred gifts (1 Cor. 6:19-20), which we should preserve so that we can serve others and be instruments of God's peace. Until a few decades ago, it was assumed by many people, including physicians, that humans had to eat meat. We now know that our bodies can thrive on a plant-based diet, and groups like the American Dietetic Association and Kaiser-Permanente have endorsed vegan diets. Vegetarians and vegans tend to weigh less and have significantly lower rates of heart disease, cancer, obesity, and diabetes. Nearly all plant foods have far less artery-clogging saturated fat than meat, dairy, and eggs, and only animal-derived foods have cholesterol.

If we're eating meat, we are paying people to be cruel to animals.

Human Rights

Becoming vegetarian or vegan supports basic human rights. Slaughterhouses are violent not only for animals but also for the unfortunate people who work there. Killing animals is inherently dangerous work, and the fast pace, filthy killing floors, and lack of training make working at a slaughterhouse “the most dangerous factory job in America,” according to Human Rights Watch. We can and should withdraw our financial support from this violent and unjust industry.

Conclusion

We have recently seen an astonishing array of positive social changes. Many well-meaning people of the 19th century did not recognize the basic human rights of women, children, Native Americans, or African-Americans. Human slavery flourished until the mid-1860s in the United States. Women were unable to vote 100 years ago. Child abuse was not prosecuted in this country 150 years ago. In each case, the Bible was used to defend injustice. But, thank God, we have taken steps toward justice. Unfortunately, many continue to use the Scriptures to defend violence and justify war, executions, and animal abuse, as if God wants us to be



violent and kill. I am convinced that God desires the peace and justice that Jesus taught and exemplified.

We still have a long way to go. I think that, centuries from now, people of faith and conscience will look back at our times in shock and amazement at the massive injustice and violence suffered by humans and animals. Nonetheless, I remain hopeful. More and more people are seeing the wisdom of nonviolence, including the wisdom of vegetarianism and veganism. As these trends gain momentum, they will have dramatic and positive consequences for our health, our environment, animal welfare and humans rights.

Jesus' Diet and Animal Sacrifices

Many people have asked me, "Didn't Jesus eat meat?" Some biblical scholars doubt that Jesus ate meat, but I think that a more important question is: What would Jesus want us to do today? I believe that he would want us to do everything we can to help end violence and injustice. That would include adopting a plant-based diet.

"What about animal sacrifices?" The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with stipulations about when and how to slaughter animals, but this does not justify eating animals today. I think the Mosaic Law was trying to reduce violence. The Hebrew Scriptures seem to permit slaveholding, war, and other forms of violence that were prevalent at that time. I think the Law intended to limit human sinfulness, to reduce our violence, and to hasten the advent of a new world without violence. When Jesus entered the picture, he insisted on radical nonviolence and compassion. The Apostle Paul said that we should offer our own bodies as sacrifices to God (Romans 12:1).

In a world of massive violence and suffering, why not take whatever steps we can to become more compassionate, less violent, and more faithful to the peacemaking Christ? Why not become a vegetarian or, better, vegan, for the love of God and all God's creatures? Your health will benefit. The environment will be better off. Animals will suffer less. And, your spirituality will deepen and mature.



Fr. John Dear

Fr. John Dear, a resident of northern New Mexico, is an internationally known voice for peace and nonviolence. A Catholic priest, activist, organizer, and lecturer, he is the author of over 35 books on peace and nonviolence, including *The Nonviolent Life*; *Living Peace*; *Jesus the Rebel*; *Thomas Merton, Peacemaker*; *The Questions of Jesus*; *Lazarus Come Forth!*; *A Persistent Peace: An Autobiography*; *The Beatitudes of Peace*; and *They Will Inherit the Earth*. He has been arrested over 80 times in acts of nonvio-

lent civil disobedience against war and injustice. He is on the staff of Pace e Bene, and he is a co-founder of CampaignNonviolence.org. He has been nominated many times for the Nobel Peace Prize, including by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. See www.johndear.org.

A version of his essay was originally published by PETA (www.peta.org). This essay is published by the Christian Vegetarian Association (www.christianveg.org). To order copies, contact cva@christianveg.org.