

From Ancient Vegetarianism to Contemporary Advocacy: When Religious Folks Decide that Animals Are No Longer Edible

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ABSTRACT

Abstaining from meat consumption has persistently been a source of debate within religious communities, often functioning as a center pivot around which theological or philosophical orthodoxy and orthopraxy turns. Drawing upon diverse ancient practices, motivations, and textual perspectives in Judaism, Christianity, and Indic traditions along with contemporary religious vegetarians, this essay maps three stages that religious communities have historically grappled with, are presently attempting, and must continue to tackle, as they re/consider eating animals and animal by-products as part of their ethical identities and community meals: (1) critical, deconstructive engagement of textual multiplicity and interpretive authority, (2) robust analysis of human supremacy in light of animal behavioral studies, new materialist science, and empathic experience, and (3) constructing imaginative coalitions beyond species, institutional boundaries, and cultural identities.

KEYWORDS

vegetarianism, vegetarian empiricism, veganism, animal welfare, animal rights, Christianity, Judaism, Vedic Hinduism, Jainism, natural theology, critical animal studies, new materialism

Introduction

Unease over killing animals for food exists in the earliest streams of religious literature. The *Rg Veda* of ancient India controversially describes milk cows that are not to be killed (*aghnyā*),¹ the pre-flood narrative in Genesis 1:29 within Torah prescribes a diet of plants, while a handful of Christian lineages, from monastics to martyrs, saw vegetarianism as an alternate path to salvation. Religious texts are not at all univocal on the subject, nor are the interpretations and

1. Ludwig Alsdorf explores the etymology and conflicting uses and interpretations of the term *aghnyā* within the Vedas in *The History of Vegetarianism and Cow-Veneration in India* (2010), 69–74.

practices of individuals and communities that usher from a tradition's scripture(s). On the contrary, one easily finds justifications both for and against eating animals. Consequently, abstaining from meat consumption has persistently been a source of debate within religious communities, often functioning as a center pivot around which theological or philosophical orthodoxy and orthopraxy turns.

How paradoxical it is that animals, conceived as subordinate, minor characters within human-centered religious cosmologies, have always been—and continue to be—lively provocateurs undermining consensus; they are material tricksters interrupting myths of sacrifice, passivity, and subordination.

Certainly traditions have preserved some space for animals in the backdrop of their human dramas, even perhaps an affirmation to care for or respect them—whether because they were divinely created as some theistic religions claim, or because they are pervaded with the same spirit/energy as some eastern or native traditions maintain. Yet “this has neither deterred the adherents of some of these religions from sacrificing animals for ritual purposes [or] rationalize animal slaughter as necessary in order to sustain the higher life of humans” (Jaini 2010, 8). Religious vegetarians, then, by standing with marginalized animals, have themselves become “minoritarian” voices within traditions of intractable human exceptionalism.

In “becoming minoritarian,” a concept elucidated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987, 291), religious vegetarians—regardless of their mixed motivations—interrupt normative assumptions regarding hierarchy and edibility, moving animals—but also plants—into a community of consideration where human identity has been constructed over and against these very bodies. “Humans are special precisely because we are not animals or plants!” the interpreters of religious texts often say. Yet religious vegetarians mine the margins of their canons, along with the “meat” of their experiences and visions of alternative ideals, to reinvigorate inherited stories with previously silent bodies who lurk in the margins.

Consequently, telling a meat-free story is not new. It is perhaps as old as stories themselves. That said, the present state of food animals in industrial agriculture, does pose a new moral urgency for religious adherents and communities who want to articulate an ethical diet grounded within their formative narratives rather than relying solely on secular, rights-based arguments. The current global population and its anticipated rise to nine billion people by 2050, coupled with the exporting of meat-, milk-, and egg-heavy Western diets around the globe, and continued profiteering upon the exploited and tortured bodies of animals confronts all of us with engineered suffering at an unprecedented scale (Henning 2016, 24). Today's sixty-eight billion mammals and birds per year killed for food is expected to balloon to 120 billion per year over the next three decades, figures that do not include fish or aquatic life, one of the largest sectors of global food production (Henning 2016, 7).

In this article, I will map three stages that religious communities have historically grappled with, are presently attempting, and must continue to tackle,

as they re/consider eating animals and animal by-products as part of their ethical identities and community meals: (1) critical, deconstructive engagement of textual multiplicity and interpretive authority, (2) robust analysis of human supremacy in light of animal behavioral studies, new materialist science, and empathic experience, and (3) constructing imaginative coalitions beyond species, institutional boundaries, and cultural identities. Religious folks who decide that animals are no longer edible must thrill to the task of re/telling untold stories, and of writing new tales.

Fostering textual multiplicity and interpretive authority

There is a popular myth that India is a nation of vegetarians, and thus has some special historical claim to a unique animal-friendly morality rooted in its texts and rituals. The little understood concept of the “sacred cow”—brought to the western imagination primarily through Mahātma Gandhi, who presented cow veneration as a symbol of the wider Hindu ethos of nonviolence (*ahimsā*) toward people and the earth—is often conflated with a uniform commitment against meat-eating, which has never been, nor is it now, the case in the subcontinent.

The concept of nonviolence toward animals in India is difficult to trace, and is not always synonymous with vegetarianism, but likely arose in relation to debates over, and eventual transition away from, animal sacrifice among the mainstream Hindu tradition, a shift recorded in the Vedic *Brāhmaṇas* (800–600 BCE)² and early *Upaniṣads* (400 BCE–200 CE).³ As recorded in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*: “Where Indra in the Vedas ate bulls and buffalos, now the gods neither eat nor drink but become sated just by looking at the soma nectar” (3.6.1). Such shifts were likely hastened by the growing influence of anti-sacrificial renunciation movements such as Buddhism and Jainism that were winning converts among lay people and political leaders.

Yet even here, nonviolence to animals in the form of vegetarianism was more the purview of separatist ascetic individuals or groups—whether Vedic, Jain, or Buddhist—who understood a close connection with the purity of one’s soul and one’s diet. The pan-Indian concept of reincarnation, or the transmigration of souls (an evolving doctrine in its own right), enters here insofar as one’s future rebirth was determined, in part, by the degree to which one indulged extreme passions of lust or violence in the present, resulting in a darkening of the soul through karma, and negative rebirth. At issue was not sentimentality toward animals so much as the guarding of one’s soul from violent actions that might result in one being reborn in a lower form such as an animal! Because most monks and ascetics had a special focus on the doctrine of the soul, killing ani-

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2. The *Brāhmaṇas* are the second of the four sections contained within each of the four Vedas. These priestly texts offer a commentary on the original four Vedas called the *Saṃhitas* and are concerned chiefly with correct performance of Vedic ritual; written between 800–600 BCE
 3. The *Upaniṣads* are the final portion of Vedic literature also known as *Vedānta*, or “end of the Vedas,” emphasizing knowledge of the nature of the ultimate reality, or Brahman; composed between 400 BCE–200 CE.

mals for food became a logical activity to avoid. Consequently, vegetarianism was seen as a virtuous act for ascetics, though not necessarily a required one. The exception to this was Jain monks and nuns for whom vegetarianism was, and still is, a defining doctrine.⁴

Householders, or those with families and jobs, lived by much more relaxed rules than the renunciates of their respective traditions. Texts reflect a continuum of practices such as nonviolence toward animals on particular days, or eating meat only on special occasions. Again, Jains are the exception since their stricter concept of nonviolence, even to microscopic life, required vegetarianism for monastics as well as householders, though the vows for the latter were more lax than the former. Lower caste groups, however, excluded from both priestly, ascetic, and householder strata, had no such regulations.

The *Dharma Śāstras* (300–100 BCE), the texts on Hindu law, include injunctions not to eat meat while simultaneously condoning killing animals for sacrificial religious purposes. Sacrificial killing was actually not seen as violence (*ahiṃsā*) violence at all since it was conducted in a highly proscriptive ritual way. Wendy Doniger summarizes this tension helpfully, quoting the *Kāma-sūtra* 2.2.7, “Dharma consists in doing things, like sacrifice, that are divorced from material life and refraining from things, like eating meat, that are a part of ordinary life” (Doniger 2009, 316). The *Codes of Manu* (100 CE) further illuminates this seeming contradiction:

As many hairs as there are on the body of the sacrificial animal that he kills for no [religious] purpose here on earth, so many times will he, after his death, suffer a violent death in birth after birth. You can never get meat without violence to creatures with the breath of life [...] Anyone who looks carefully at the source of meat, and at the tying up and slaughter of embodied creatures, should turn back from eating any meat. (5.38.48–53; Doniger 2009, 317)

While the last line is sympathetic to the actual plight of creatures, and while Manu is more sympathetic to vegetarianism, with twenty anti-meat verses and only three pro-meat verses, the texts make it clear that one can eat animals, so long as they are the right animals killed in the right way, providing lists of creatures and laws similar to the Buddhist-informed edicts of Aśoka or the Jewish food laws in Deuteronomy (Doniger 2009, 319). Manu leans toward the vegetarian ethic emerging in the growing cultural engagement with nonviolence toward animals, which is both socially and karmically beneficial, but does not require it. Hindu *pūja* today reflects this shift as mainstream priests offers fruits, flowers, and other vegetables instead of animals, and one study shows that 55 percent of Brahmins in India are vegetarians (Yadav and Kumar 2006), though the population of vegetarians in India more broadly ranges from 25–40 percent depending on the source (Indian Census 2004; Yadav and Kumar 2006), and regional variations in diet—from seafood heavy coastal communities, to

4. There are a few historical examples of Jains consuming meat, such as meat provided as alms to an ascetic, when the animal had not been killed specifically for that purpose, or when a lay person was sick or during famine (Dundas 2002, 177).

beef and mutton heavy northern regions, to vegetarian-dominated Gujarat, home to Gandhi and a large number of Jains—further diversify Indian food trends (Bajželj and Bothra 2016, 69–70).

Contemporary action-reflection

The desire for univocity within a textual or cultural tradition is understandable. Contemporary calls not to eat animals would indeed be strengthened by clear-cut textual affirmations of the value of animal life, and/or a formal commitment not to harm or eat animals for their own sake. The case of “vegetarian India,” however, is a good example of the many-sided debates, past and present, regarding killing animals for food. Vegetarian advocates who hold up India as the exemplar for compassionate diets, often overlook the diversity of views inherent in its culinary and religious legacies, and in so doing, may hinder their own efforts to renew debates in their present contexts. One dimensional-arguments, selective textual references, or blanket generalizations are easily dismissed by alternate readings to the contrary, preventing any real engagement with the wages of life and death at stake in the present.

The first stage that religious vegetarians must undertake is to highlight competing, and even contradictory, claims and practices as part of their same, evolving tradition, rather than seeking a single orthodox view. Doing so allows communities, first, to *neutrally* illuminate multiple debates and minority streams of thought very much alive in the past, thereby deepening their own lively engagement with lesser known voices within their traditions. A number of contemporary texts addressing animals across religious traditions exist to facilitate this work (see, for example: Waldau and Patton 2009; Kemmerer 2012; Perlo 2009).

Second, evaluating divergent historical perspectives on vegetarianism illuminates mixed motivations within those debates, inviting conversation on a community’s own commitments. If we return to the sources for the example of vegetarian India above, we might discern vegetarian practices based on purity restrictions, caste differentiation, political motivations (such as the Jain and Buddhist desire to firmly distinguish themselves from Brahmanical practices), or genuine compassion toward animals. Further, a continuum of practices emerge, from absolute abstinence from animal flesh to abstaining on a few specific days, or even on most days except on the occasion of a visit from a special guest. Laying out these diverse motivations and action-response opens up a wider frame of interpretation and ethical response that exceeds an “all or nothing” option within communities, so that more perspectives and proposals can be heard.

Historian of religion Aaron Gross recently wrote about his own efforts to raise the issue of eating animals within Jewish and Christian religious communities, saying, “It feels at times as if I am on a seesaw in which one must chose between, on the one hand, being honest and direct, and, on the other hand, being intelligible and understood” (Gross 2016, 263). Gross has been a vegetarian/vegan for over half of his life, not because he objects to all killing of animals for food, but

because he rejects the cruelty inherent in factory farming which is responsible for ninety-nine percent of farmed animals produced in the US. Gross is unequivocal that factory farming is wrong on a universal and public scale and not merely as a personal decision. Yet as the co-founder of Farm Forward, a non-profit organization working to support sustainable agriculture and end factory farming, he has articulated conditions by which one could eat meat more ethically. For Gross, animals are no longer edible. But for the communities he engages with, where the issue of eating animals remains charged, he grapples with the essential task of finding new ways to be heard. “[T]here is much I would want to say that cannot be heard,” he writes, “In my own Jewish tradition there is a prohibition on speaking an inconvenient truth when a person is incapable of hearing the truth. One needs to wait for the right time” (Gross 2016, 264).

The question becomes, then, how might religious adherents curate conversations that open up the debates, motivations, and ethical responses of the past in order to invite diverse views in the present to proliferate, even if not unanimously. There have always been minority streams within religious traditions that have, for various reasons, abstained from eating animals, and exploring this buffet of voices, motivations, and practices can provide good food for thought.

Analyzing human supremacy in light of animal behavior studies, new materialist science, and empathic experience

Christian theological accounts of vegetarianism are diverse mixtures of empirical observation, non-empirical metaphysical assumptions, and good bit of empathic fellowship tossed into the mix. To put it another way, the methods and authoritative sources that inform theological or religious intuition on animals are not always “pure.” While the Enlightenment attempted to bifurcate disciplines—religion from philosophy from science, for example—based on their social purview and methodology, the vegetarian question—and its underlying definition of human-animal relations—blurs these boundaries.

This ambiguity can be confusing for contemporary religious folks who want to anchor an argument against eating animals in the language, rituals, and texts of their traditions, even as they themselves may have been shaped by secular rights-based arguments, intuition, philosophical commitments, environmental concerns, economic analyses, and modern science. Can these diverse sources function together? Historical debates over religious vegetarianism reveal a multi-disciplinary approach that frequently involves empirical observation, metaphysical assumptions, and empathic experience.

Pythagoras (≈570–490 BCE) is a unique example of one considering vegetarianism from diverse methodological sources. Though he is known today for (disputed) contributions in math and science, Pythagoras, who was informed by Egyptian, Indian and likely Jewish cosmologies, maintained that the cosmos had moral significance, and that the human soul would transmigrate into the body of animals after death, since “all animate beings are of the same family” (Porphyry 1823, 19). His work in science and math co-existed with his religious and philosophical investigations.

Later historical sources for Pythagoras' life differ in their accounts of his diet, which was strictly vegetarian by some accounts, and permitted eating certain species of animals according to others (Huffman n.p.). Although the textual history is not univocal, Pythagoras' multi-disciplinary approach profoundly influenced subsequent Christian attitudes towards eating animals.

The Greek tradition of natural theology, including Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Plutarch, *et cetera*, while sharing some resonance with Pythagoras' concept of an animated soul, formalized a hierarchy of souls—or “great chain of being”—with humans at the top. This religious structure was informed by detailed observation of the morphology and capacities of living beings, of which humans were deemed the one *rational* animal. Western Latin Church fathers were likewise influenced by Pliny, whose encyclopedic *Naturalis Historia* borrowed from Greek sources to produce an encompassing work of zoology, mineralogy, botany and horticulture. When combined with scripture, these naturalist commentaries about animals often served to justify biblical claims such that “natural history corroborated the exegesis,” insofar as species type seemed to designate purpose or use (Grant 1999, 51). Four-legged animals show up in scripture as “serviceable for men,” other animals seem to be useless, while reptiles have “serpent-like” physical and moral attributes (Grant 1999, 51).

These amalgamations of observation-based natural history and metaphysical biblical texts are laced through early Christian conceptions of animals, functioning in many cases as even more authoritative than scripture itself. As Anglican priest and vegetarian theologian Andrew Linzey has written on the legacy of natural theology:

[I]t remains a fact that Aristotle did argue (typically or untypically) that ‘since nature makes nothing to no purpose, *it must be* that nature has made them [animals and plants] for the sake of man.’ Augustine did maintain (however *ad hoc*) that ‘Reason has not been given to them [animals] to have in common with us, and so, by the just ordinances of the Creator, both their life and their death is subject to our use.’ And St. Thomas (interpreting Aristotle rightly or wrongly) did write that ‘It is not wrong for man to make use of them [animals] either by killing or in any other way whatever.’ Whatever higher thoughts they may have had—even probably did have—they cannot be entirely absolved of responsibility for the way their words have subsequently been interpreted, as stating that animals should be excluded from proper moral responsibility. (1998, xiii)

This view would later inform Descartes' observation-based philosophy of animals as un-feeling, un-speaking machines without souls or self-referential awareness, and thus, without the ability to suffer. I will return to Descartes momentarily.

Christian writing about eating animals seem to preserve the ethics of Pythagoras, without its troublesome family of souls, on the one hand, alongside the superiority of human rationalism emerging in natural theology on the other. Clement of Alexandria (150–215 CE), for instance, rejected the transmigration of souls, but shared the purity and health rationale that wine and meat harm the superior human mind since “animal meat ‘has already been assimilated to

the souls of irrational creatures” (Grant 1999, 47). Church father Origen (185–254 CE), well known for vegetarianism, categorically denied that humans could be reborn as animals (Stuart 2007, 93). The second-century *Sayings of Sextus*, authoritative for Clement and Origen, among others⁵, reiterates the claim that vegetarianism can be spiritually edifying, but not required, asserting “though abstinence is more rational, eating animate beings is really a matter of indifference” (Grant 1999, 47). Later medieval monastic orders such as the Anchorites, Coenobites, Cistercians, Carthusians, Franciscans and Dominicans shared some version of the Rule of St. Benedict which prescribes meat only for a sick monk (Fry 1982, 62), since eating flesh inflamed the passions and confused the human mind, rendering it like that of a lower animal. Health, theology, and a heightened focus on the rational human pervade these diverse vegetarian views.

Empathy also informs theological vegetarianism. Early Jewish-Christian texts of the first century describe the vegetarianism of the Ebionites who “believed that Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross had put an end to all animal sacrifices in fulfillment of the Mosaic law,” whereby the suffering of the Christ rendered the future suffering of animals unnecessary (Ehrman 1999, 135). Likewise, Theophilus of Antioch (≈ second century CE) described a future vision of reduced suffering when humans return to an original state of eating plants, “When man returns again to his natural state and no longer does evil, [wild animals] too will be restored to their original tameness [...] to [the command to eat] from the fruits of the earth and seeds and herbs and fruit trees” (Grant 1999, 12).

Martyr accounts offer another empathic source for vegetarian theologies. The Acts of Thecla features a Eucharistic meal prior to her persecution meant to break down social/economic enmity, such that “[T]hey had five loaves and vegetables and water and they rejoiced in the holy works of Christ” (Ehrman 1999, 281). The martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas emphasized a “love feast” rather than a banquet of food (Ehrman 1999, 48), while St. Ignatius upon facing death sought only “God’s bread” (10). Biblis, falsely accused of eating children, defied her torturers, saying, “How could children be eaten by people who are not even allowed to eat the blood of brute beasts?” (Ehrman 1999, 38). Beyond the issue of meat, creaturely reciprocity can be seen when Blandina is ignored by the creatures in the arena (Ehrman 1999, 39), the lioness protects Thecla in the amphitheater rather than devouring her (Ehrman 1999, 282); and the wild beasts are allies in the persecution of Ignatius, hastening his reunion with God (Ehrman 1999, 29).

Christian vegetarianism—in its many non-unitary forms—frequently draws up empirical observation, metaphysical commitments, and empathic experience. A final example of this is found in the debate between René Descartes (1596–1650 CE) and his philosophical adversary Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655 CE). Both were key figures in the Scientific Revolution (though the latter is lesser known), each making substantial contributions in mathematics, astronomy,

5. Many other theologians engaged with or practiced some degree of vegetarianism including John Chrysostomus, Tertullian, St. Isaac of Nineveh, Gregory of Nazianzus of Cappadocia, Hieronymus, among others, though their motivations and praxis were not uniform.

and biology. Both were also steeped in Catholic theology. Descartes, though marginalized by the Catholic Church, offered rational proofs for the existence of God, wrote a treatise against atheism, and challenged many existing theological doctrines. Gassendi was a Catholic priest. The two exemplified the religious intellectualism that would inform and provoke the rationalist and empiricist debates throughout the seventeenth century.

In his cultural history of vegetarianism from 1600 to the present, Tristram Stuart describes the “empirical vegetarian tradition” begun by Gassendi. In response to Descartes’ dualist split between animated soul/mind possessed only by humans who could reflect on their self awareness (“I think therefore I am”) and mindless, feeling-less matter, plants, and animals (140–141), Gassendi revived what he saw as a vital materialism from the ancient philosopher Epicurus. In this view, atoms, and certainly animals, were pervaded by an animating soul, even if it was not immortal. The bodily senses themselves provided the content for the mind, and since animals had the same senses as humans, Gassendi argued, animal thoughts were akin to human thoughts, if different in their degree of perfection (Stuart 2007, 141).

Like subsequent vegetarian empiricists of the next century such as Edward Tyson, John Wallis and Francois Bernier who would continue this stream of thought, Gassendi based his argument on comparative anatomy, drawing upon the observational tradition of Aristotle and Plutarch, asserting that the teeth structure and stomach processes of hominids corroborated a diet of plants prescribed in Genesis. Beyond this, and in direct refutation to Descartes’ mechanistic view that animals were machines, Gassendi maintained “similarities between ourselves and animals—rather than being a mandate for eating them—should teach us to recognize our consanguinity [intimate blood relation]” (Stuart 2007, 142).

This was a remarkable counter claim to Descartes who so thoroughly excluded animals from the human community of moral concern that, “we have *no obligation whatsoever* toward animals—*nothing* that we do to animals can properly be construed as injustice” (Steiner 2006, 121; emphasis added). On this basis Descartes enthusiastically provides his own commentary on live animal vivisection noting that that hearts of fish “after they have been cut out, go on beating for much longer than the heart of any terrestrial animal” (Steiner 2006, 123). Additionally he writes, “If you slice off the end of the heart in a live dog, and insert a finger into one of the cavities, you will feel unmistakably that every time the heart gets shorter it presses the finger, and every time it gets longer it stops pressing it” (Steiner 2006, 123). And of their movements and cries of pain writes Descartes, “nature [...] acts in them according to the disposition of their organs. In the same way a clock, consisting only of wheels and springs, can count the hours and measure time more accurately than we can with all our wisdom” (Steiner 2006, 119). The contemporary “speciesism” debate, in which humans are the masters and possessors of nature—such that dominion equates to domination—has been irrevocably shaped by Descartes and the Greek/Christian influences he assimilated.

Yet, Gassendi and the tradition of empirical vegetarianism offers a meaningful, if not methodologically pure, alternative version rooted in new interpretive links between observation, theology, and empathic feeling. Gassendi, it should be noted, was not a vegetarian though he advocated the diet (Stuart 2007, 142–143). Having been raised eating meat, he subscribed to medicinal lore that suddenly changing one’s diet was dangerous, though he reflected, “[I]f I were wise, I would abandon this food bit by bit, and nourish myself solely on the gifts of the earth: I do not doubt that I would be happier for longer and more constantly in better health” (Stuart 2007, 143). Ironically, Descartes’ may have shared the same view that vegetarianism was the natural diet of humans, though certainly not all scientists of the day agreed.

Contemporary action-reflection

The second stage that religious vegetarians must undertake is to illuminate the strands of religious intellectualism that integrate empiricist observation, metaphysical claims, and empathic feeling. Contemporary religious folks who want to pursue a modern empirical vegetarianism have an ever-enlarging wealth of resources at their disposal to engage in this integrative work. In addition to mining the empirical histories of their own traditions (again, the anthology *Communion of Subjects* edited by Waldau and Patton is an excellent resource in this regard), there is now a wealth of observational data including (a) animal behavior studies that challenges human exceptionalism, and (b) new materialist science in biology and physics that explores the liveliness of more-than-human matter, and (c) observation of subtle and sophisticated emotional lives in domesticated and food animals.

I will say a word about each briefly. At least from the time of Aristotle, human exceptionalism has been delimited on multiple fronts, and soundly dispensed with. Reason, creativity, tool use, language, rape, murder, crying, blushing, gambling have all been put forth and disproven as human-only activities (Chance 1998, 18–19). Animal cognition has been subordinated or disappeared entirely, though biologists argue that animals can have cognitive abilities surpassing that of people (Saniotis and Henneberg 2016). Recent studies demonstrate additional examples of consciousness in insects (Klein and Barron 2016), fish friendship (Brandl and Bellwood 2014) and fish intelligence (Balcombe 2016), dolphins, whale, and chicken communication (Ryabov 2016; Darewin 2016; Evans and Evans 1999), and curiosity across species (Byrne 2013), to name a few.

New materialist philosophy and science unify insights from physics and ecology to look at the relationships *between* what we normally consider fixed things. Reality, in fact, is not what it seems. Just as the studies above show that consciousness is not contained in the brain, and communication transpires without language, physics affirms nonlocality, nontemporality, retrocausation, and dark matter. The *real* of reality fools our senses and disrupts the demands of positivist science and reproducible observation. Feminist physicist Karen Barad argues for the “agential realism” of materiality (2007, 32), political ecologist Jane Bennett asserts the vitality of trash, plastic bottles and dead rats (2010),

and Timothy Morton investigates unruly biological ecologies that do not play by the rules of nature (2007, 2016). Although the above do not necessarily lead to a vegetarian conclusion (most are silent on the topic), undermining human-centered metaphysical claims across our knowledge systems provide contemporary fuel for religious folks opening a dialog on human/more-than-human distinctions.

The final experiential source for data involves both social closeness with “pets” and the emergent insights of the emotional sensitivities, sensory intelligence, and social bonds evident in the lives of animals used for food. Texts such as *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon: The Emotional Lives of Farmed Animals* (Masson 2003) or *The Emotional Lives of Animals* (Bekoff 2007) extend the empathic bond with companion animals to creatures hidden away in confinement agriculture. Undercover videos from organizations such as Mercy For Animals, The Humane Society of the United States, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals provide visual access to the standard brutalities of farming, and each have resources, films, or specific outreach programs for religious communities. These visual-narrative glimpses into industrial farming are emotionally powerful and intellectually disturbing. Confronting the gruesome and cruel realities of modern food production from the perspective of animals, workers, and the environment can lead to genuine grief, as expressed by the seventh-century St. Isaac of Syria who described a merciful heart as “one who cannot bear to hear or to see any injury or slight sorrow in any in creation” (Homily 81).

In his book *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, former speechwriter for George W. Bush, Matthew Scully, articulates an elegant vegetarian argument—integrating empirical reason, metaphysical value, and empathy toward animals—that reframes the concept of dominion in light of current hunting and farming practices and technologies, reviving prophetic creation-centered obligations toward animals that are even more stringent than those of a utilitarian-based animal rights movement:

When substitute products are found, with each creature in turn, responsible dominion calls for a reprieve. The warrant expires. The divine mandate is used up. What were once ‘necessary evils’ become just evils. Laws protecting animals from mistreatment, abuse, and exploitation are not a moral luxury or sentimental afterthought to be shrugged off. They are a serious moral obligation, only clearer in the more developed parts of the world where we cannot plead poverty. Man, guided by the very light of reason and ethics that was his claim to dominion in the first place, should in the generations to come have the good grace to repay his debts, step back wherever possible and leave the creatures be, off to live out the lives designed for them, with all the beauty and sights and smells and warm winds, and all the natural hardships, dangers, and violence too [...] If we take Isaiah at his word, maybe the moment prophesied is arriving, an unexpected turn in our human story, not an onerous moral demand but a wonderful moral opportunity. (Scully 2002, 43)

Religious folks who decide that animals are no longer edible have robust traditions that unify empirical observation, metaphysical commitments, and empa-

thy in debates about human relationships with the more-than-human world, offering diverse justifications not to kill and/or eat animals. Developing the fluency to move between and beyond Enlightenment distinctions, especially in the realms of science, philosophy, and religion that together offer resources capable of inspiring new modes of empathy and fellow feeling for our planetary multiplicity, is essential for our social life together.

Constructing imaginative coalitions beyond species, institutional, and cultural identities

One of the central features of most religious narratives is the articulation of social imaginaries that put forth an alternate ideal in regard to social hierarchy, exclusion, and violence. These religious ideals are frequently smuggled into secular political rhetoric, in calls for scientific innovation, and in the context of animal rights. On the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) website, for example, there is a page titled “Religion for Animal Activists.” One of the website images depicts an activist in silhouette, fence cutters in hand, alongside a rabbit and deer sitting atop a picturesque hill as the sun sets. Although the ALF was named a domestic terrorism organization by the Department of Homeland Security in 2005—primarily for causing economic damage to “property” (referring to the animals themselves) when they are freed from laboratories, fur farms, or factory farms—it is important to note the religiously-tinged vision of a future peaceable kingdom where people, creatures, and habitats coexist without enmity (Donaldson 2015, 1–2).

On one hand, such a vision clearly constructs an alternate social imaginary beyond the boundaries of species. Religious organization focused on animal care or vegetarian advocacy frequently depict such prophetic imaginaries. Quaker Concern for Animals, celebrating its 125th anniversary in 2016, asserts: “We are committed to the defense of our fellow species, whilst appealing to that of God in everyone” (Quaker Concern for Animals. n.d., “Our Mission Statement” n.p.). Jewish Veg invites site visitors to “save the soul of Judaism, which should not be complicit in the horrors of factory farming,” providing information about the lives of chicken and cows along with plant-based versions of traditional Jewish recipes. The Christian Vegetarian Association promotes the “‘reconciliation of Creation’ that promises to result in the ‘Peaceable Kingdom’ foreshadowed by Scripture” (Christian Vegetarian Association n.d., “Our Mission” n.p.). Catholic Concern for Animals lists vegetarianism as a practice of simplicity in solidarity with the poor and as a new expression of social justice (Catholic Concern for Animals. n.d., “Vegetarianism,” n.p.). Unitarian Universalist Animal Ministry’s vision imagines “a world embodying multi-species justice, based on compassion, empathy and deep respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all beings” (Unitarian Universalist Animal Ministry n.d., “Vision” n.p.). Constructing social imaginaries that undermine the human/animal boundary is an essential task for religious folk who decide that animals are no longer edible, and it is my hope that the first two sections of this essay might prove helpful in that regard.

On the other hand, what is even more fascinating, to my mind, is the unruly coalitions that emerge around the common decision not to eat animals, breaking down religious-secular boundaries, as well as distinctions between sectarian religious traditions or cultural identities. One might not think of balaclava-clad activists in the Animal Liberation Front as being informed by Judeo Christian prophetic visions, and yet so it seems to be. Animals seem to be the insistent, provocative causes for new “provisional unities” brought together “in the context of concrete actions that have purposes other than the articulation of identity” (Butler 1999, 21).

In late 2015, a group of evangelical Christian leaders released a statement of principled positions toward animals called “Every Living Thing.” This first-of-its-kind statement among evangelicals was the result of a multi-year interfaith conversation initiated by The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). Although HSUS had past presidents who were former clergy, the organization itself has been a secular association since its inception in 1954, only reaching out to religious communities explicitly for the last decade.

The Every Living Thing statement walks through scriptural resources to care for animals, locates the statement within a tradition of evangelical support for animal care (C.S. Lewis, John Wesley, and William Wilberforce), and includes resolutions—though explicitly avoids prescriptive actions—to reevaluate attitudes about and treatment toward creatures “in part by confronting any and all cruelty against animals, seeing it as a violation of our rule and an affront to the ultimate Ruler who created, values, and sustains these animals” (Every Living Thing 2015, “Sign” n.p.). Though the statement itself is brief, there is an accompanying document explaining each principle, akin to the systematic theological rigor of Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’* issued on behalf of animals and the environment. “Faith Outreach” is now a distinct HSUS program that “seeks to engage people and institutions of faith with animal protection issues, on the premise that religious values call upon us all to act in a kind and merciful way towards all creatures” (Humane Society of the United States. n.d., “Faith” n.p.). HSUS now hosts multi-religious “faith councils,” including Abrahamic traditions as well as a Dharmic [Indian] Leadership Council, and offers a film, theological booklet, and Sunday School curriculum for Christians to consider merciful eating.

Similarly in 2007, representatives from several of the world’s major religious traditions convened at the White House to sign *A Religious Proclamation for Animal Compassion*, a document they had composed at a retreat earlier in the year in collaboration with Best Friends Animal Society, a secular US-based animal welfare organization established in 1991 (with its own intriguing religious origins).⁶ One of the five action points listed in the *Proclamation* calls upon people of all

6. Assembly of God, Baptist, Buddhist, Roman Catholic, Church of the Brethren, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Community of Christ, Episcopalian, Interfaith/New Thought, Islamic, Jain, Jewish, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Quaker, Religious Science, Unitarian Universalist, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist.

faith traditions to reduce meat consumption (Best Friends Animal Society. n.d., “A Religious” n.p.). Even the controversial secular animal rights organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has crossed into religious terrain, erecting religiously-themed billboards, developing a list of Islamic resources, including existing fatwas, against animal cruelty, and developing programs such as Jesus People for Animals and Humane Kosher. The outreach goes the other way as well. Quaker Concern For Animals’ site lists organizations they support with donations each year, ranging from local animal shelters to The Nonhuman Rights Project seeking legal protections for primates, to Animal Interfaith Alliance, to name only a few.

Religious organizations have also been informed by the work of secular animal rights groups. One unique case study is the modern Jain Vegan movement that has been shaped by encounters with European and North American animal rights and vegan advocacy. The ancient Indian tradition of Jainism is fairly consistent in its commitment not to harm animals, based on their elaborate taxonomy of sentience for people and animals, as well as plants, insects, and microorganisms. The earliest Jain texts insist on a vegetarian diet for both monastics as well as lay people as a central aspect of nonviolence (*ahimsā*). As I mentioned in the first section above, the textual origins of Jainism developed in opposition to Vedic practices of animal sacrifice. Yet Jains have largely maintained their vegetarian identity up to the present, even eschewing eggs and honey, as well as certain root vegetables whose uprooting destroys the plant or injures soil microbes. Like most Indian communities, however, milk and cheese sourced from cows has been permitted on the logic that milking a cow did not cause its death and could be done with minimal harm.

The movement toward Jain “veganism” already signifies a collision between cultural concepts, since “vegan” was a term coined for orthodox vegetarianism in 1940s England. It has now been picked up by diaspora communities who began coming to North America and the U.K. throughout the 1970–1990s, encountering videos and outreach pamphlets from organizations such as PETA, Vegan Outreach, among others (“Interview,” Vegan Jains 2016). US-based “Vegan Jains” (<https://veganjains.com/>) and U.K.-based “Jain Vegans” (<http://www.jainvegans.org/>) echo an informal platform within The Federation of Jains in North America (JAINA) raising the question of violence in modern dairy production. Regular messages are now sent through email listservs describing the health, environmental, and karmic benefits of a “*low-himsā*” vegan diet, and a growing number of diaspora Jains have adopted a vegan ethos or abstain from dairy products during their highest religious holiday season (“Please consider,” Jain Vegans. 2014).

Contemporary action-reflection

The third stage that religious vegetarians must undertake is to construct new imaginative coalitions beyond species, institutional boundaries, and cultural identities. At each level, subjectivity is drastically revisioned. Animals are no longer merely the objects of our meals or of our debates regarding edibility.

They become active subjects inspiring critical deconstructive engagement with texts, troubling narratives of human supremacy with their persistent presences, and inspiring people to transgress sectarian boundaries to find common cause at the margins of society where the effects of socially sanctioned violence and exclusion are most evident.

Human subjectivity is also reimagined, not only beyond structures of species hierarchy, but toward new forms of pluralism and multi-cultural engagement centered on praxis rather than merely membership identities. Here we see the promise that animals might inspire the reorientation of our doctrines and knowledge regimes toward visions that are more inclusive of wider swaths of life, whether different, Other, or truly strange. Animals invite a new engagement beyond the traditional bounds of religion or secularism toward provisional unities of diverse world visions, distinct empirical methodologies, and competing value claims that collide unpredictably toward alternate futures characterized by less violence and less loss.

Conclusion

In his book *Eating Animals*, Jonathan Safran Foer begins with a story of his Jewish grandmother struggling to survive in World War II Europe (Foer 2009, 16). Though she was often dependent on strangers to offer her some bit of sustaining food, she recounts a moment during the last, hardest days of the war when a Russian man generously offered her a piece of pork. Though she was nourished by the gesture, she did not eat the meat since it was not kosher, telling her grandson “If nothing matters, there’s nothing to save” (Foer 2009, 17).

Religious communities are in the business of telling stories of who they are, of what they have faced and overcome, and how they act in relation to their neighbors and strangers, to the creatures and habitats with whom they share their corner of this universe, and in regard to the Ultimate questions and sources that sustain and give meaning. *Eating Animals* is Foer’s attempt to stay connected to the stories of his family and Jewish tradition in light of what he learns about animals raised for food. This research-intensive story takes him to an industrial chicken shed, into the heart of industrial fishing, to small- and corporate slaughterhouses, and those endeavoring to raise animals humanely, to the turkey’s body in the center of the Thanksgiving table where he collides with the stories of workers, farmers, environmental statistics, histories, our global neighbors, and always the animals’ stories insisting silently from the plates.

What happens if we change our traditions, he asks? If we alter our rituals in light of what we learn, or whom we encounter, or when we confront the reality of animal suffering on an unfathomable scale, of which most people in industrialized nations know but “don’t want to know”? To take the instance of one ubiquitous cultural meal, if we forego the turkey at Thanksgiving, as a part of who are and what we believe, Foer queries, “Would fewer or more values be transmitted?” (Foer 2009, 251)

Although Foer’s book, laden with data, clearly appeals to the need for rational analysis, he ultimately suggests “that being human, being humane, is more than

an exercise of reason [...] [It] calls for a capacity to care that dwells beyond information, and beyond the oppositions of desire and reason, fact and myth, and even human and animal” (Foer 2009, 263). Religious stories shape and respond to the very formation of our consciousness and character as individuals and in community. And our actions likewise provide new contexts for the stories we have told, and the way we will tell them in the future. Religious folks who decide that animals are no longer edible live between the texts of tradition and social habits, between bodies and ideas, between the past and present, enacting possible futures that will reveal what matters and what is worth saving.

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