

The theology of vegetarianism

By John Gilheany

Whenever the topic of vegetarianism arises in theological discussion the tendency for most Christians is to duly declare the Bible inconclusive but supportive of individual conscience.

The Churches have harboured outspoken objectors to 'flesh-eating' since the earliest decades of Christian history and in more recent times the locally influential Bible Christian Church of Salford gave rise to the national Vegetarian Society, in 1847. In that same year, an essay was reprinted which afforded an earlier concern, expressed by John Calvin, with a contemporary title, 'The Tyranny of Vegetarianism'. For whilst the Salford sect and many of their early VS allies sought to invoke the tranquillity of Eden and Isaiah's vision of wolves and lambs relaxing in harmony; supporters of Calvin's stance were acutely wary of being bound by "fictitious laws".

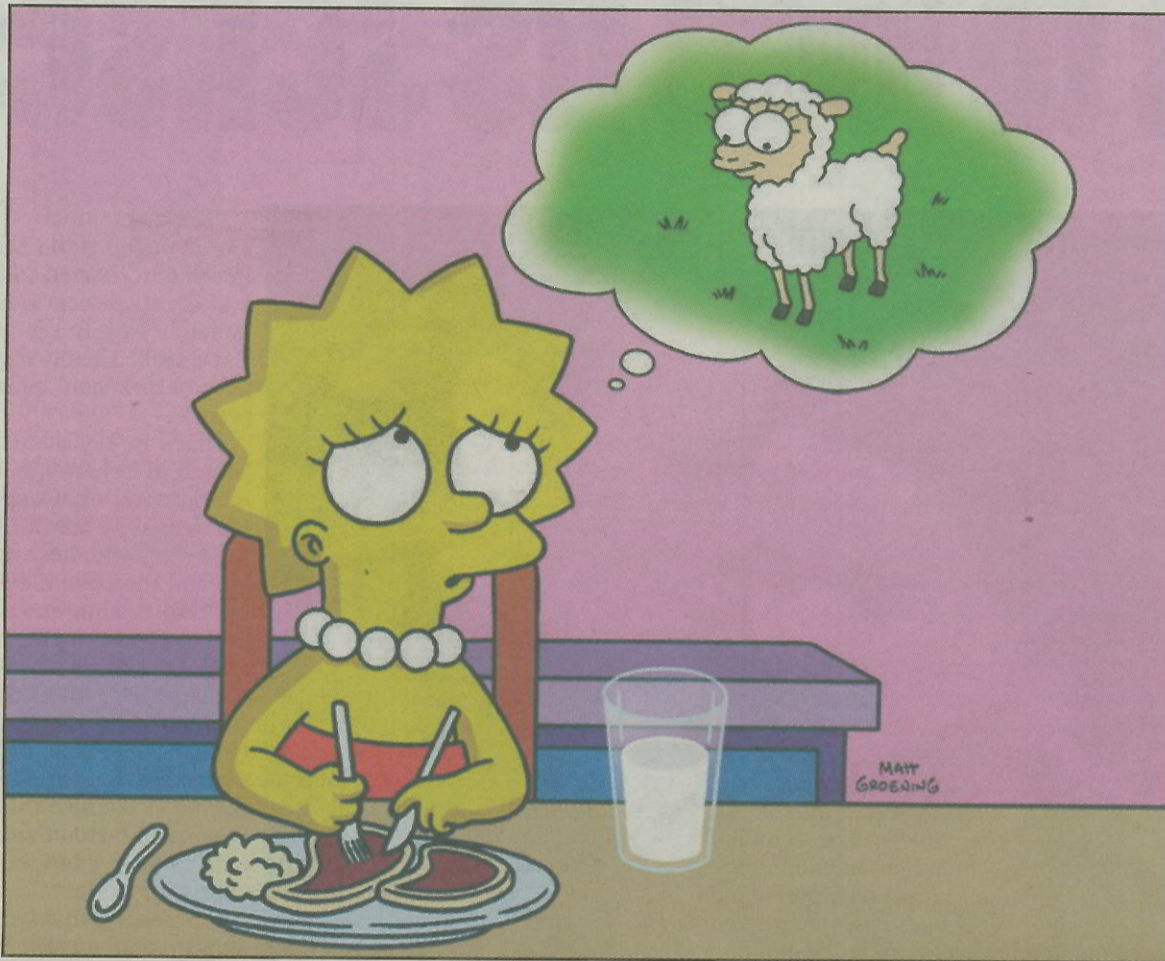
And indeed very little has changed between Christians who believe that slaughter defies spiritual existence and those prepared to dismiss such assertions as apostasy.

In 1990, the dispute even erupted in Parliament when the Minister of Agriculture, John Selwyn Gummer – a General Synod member at the time – denounced the growth of vegetarian propaganda. In a speech to the international Meat Trade Association, Mr Gummer referred to human dominion over creation and chastised "deeply undemocratic food faddists who want to impose on the rest of us views which come from their own inner psyches."

The dispute became a brief source of media bewilderment when the (vegetarian) Speaker of the House of Commons, Bernard Weatherill, conveyed otherwise private misgivings to the Minister about the relevance of equivocal passages in the New Testament. In the Christian press, meat-eating commentators were unable to support any contemporary challenge to conscientious abstinence from animal products on biblical grounds.

If anything at all became clear from the controversy, it was that Christians had never really got round to reflecting upon the relevance of industrial-scale slaughter and individual shopping habits in any profound way.

Yet historically, the vegetarian diet not only found favour with many monastics and lay penitential practitioners but also appealed to the sensibilities of Methodist founder John Wesley, Baptist preacher CH Spurgeon, General Booth of the Salvation Army, Leo Tolstoy and even Pope Pius X, who became a vegetarian within months of receiving a respectful plea from religious food reformers in 1907.



It may seem unlikely to contemporary onlookers but Christian-vegetarian apologetics were more prevalent in the active sense a century ago than is the case today.

Those familiar with GK Chesterton's writings may be struck with curiosity at the comparative frequency with which vegetarians were taken to task by the towering Catholic controversialist during the early decades of the 20th century. Yet for all his satire, banter and the occasionally meaningful essay on the subject, Chesterton's inveterate hostility to vegetarian values belied an abiding respect for their adherents: so long as they didn't behave like 'prigs'!

The Anglican communion has traditionally adopted as diverse a response to ethical vegetarianism as has been the case with any other controversial issue.

In the 1920s the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, Ralph Inge, occasionally riled the London Vegetarian Society with the contention that pigs owe their entire existence to human demands for pork.

It seems unlikely that the theory could hold moral weight in an era of relentless factory farming which is currently being exported lock, stock and farrowing crate to developing nations.

However, it should be emphasised that Dean Inge was an otherwise straightforward advocate of animals' rights in his writings, which included a regular column in the *London Evening Standard*.

In contrast, Canon Peter Green – a Chaplain to the Royal Family for over three decades – wrote

dismissively of animal rights recognition during the 1930s, despite having adopted a vegetarian diet for health reasons following Lenten abstinence in 1909.

Animal rights theory and theology almost completely perished before the Second World War despite having been acceptable in the basic sense to many meat-eaters. That vegetarians could dismiss the concept may seem unusual but for the fact that many abhor unnecessary rather than all killing under prevailing, fallen conditions.

The principle has been highlighted by Christian vegetarians such as Air Chief Marshall Lord

Dowding and Sir Barnes Wallace who played pivotal, if reluctant, roles in WWII while others felt it more noble to make a stance as Conscientious Objectors.

The Church of England afforded solace to the Vegetarian Society during its twilight existence prior to the cultural revolution of the 1960s, through the kindly presence of Canon Edward Carpenter who eventually became Dean of Westminster Abbey in 1974.

Indeed, the vegetarian/vegan movement has always been able to rely on clergymen to occupy prominent positions, or provide theological assurance, even

though such stalwarts usually remain mavericks within their wider vocation. However, that's not to lend unfair credibility to the caricature of an uncaring and human-fixated clericalism, despite significant anecdotal disenchantment among 'animal-friendly' laity and ex-churchgoers that persists to the present day.

For there is often a more occupational reason for 'clergy indifference' to myriad forms of animal plight of which slaughter for cuisine may seem almost peripheral.

As former Bishop of Salisbury, John Austin Baker recently recounted: "I must have been entertained to meals in hundreds of vicarages, but memory suggests that those in which the menu was vegetarian could be counted on the fingers of one hand. But the number of people who have said to me, 'I feel we ought to be vegetarian but it means learning a whole lot of new recipes, and I've never got round to it' is really very considerable."

As the 21st century unfolds, vegetarian criteria has firmly begun to emerge from the province of personal inclination and increasingly relate to issues of environmental sustainability; ethical allocation of grain, as a primary food source in a hungry world; as well as to medical benefits pertaining to a potential reduction of Western obesity and the prevention of certain forms of cancer.

Whether Christian witness should reflect or counter such concerns, embrace or ignore them, remains, as ever, within the realm of honest reflection and prayer.

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Wine of the week

Tesco Finest
Touriga Nacional 2010

Tesco, £7.99 (2 for £10, 5 October-1 November)

From Portugal comes this red: appropriately named, that country's national signature grape. It is the most valued in the making of the best Ports: the first time I met it there as a table wine, I rejoiced at how enjoyable it was. Most bottles sold here are blended. So, a chance to taste it unpartnered, at a very reasonable price too. From the big Alentejo Region, south of Lisbon and the Tagus, it is classified as Vinho Regional Alentejano, roughly like as a French Vin de Pays.

The Alentejo stretches inland to the Spanish border, and is flat and hot: considering the latter, this bottle is not over-alcoholic, being 13.5% by Vol. When opened, the nose was at first a disappointing introduction, a warning that time to breathe is essential. We therefore decanted. Ten minutes began to work wonders, the nose putting out good biscuit and fresh bread notes. A bit sharp on the palate at first, with more time this subsided, to reveal very plummy assertive fruit with spice in the background. Now enjoyably and luxuriously mouth-filling, it ended with a finish that was long and delightfully slow-fading. A great partner to a traditional English beef stew (a fit celebration of our oldest ally!) or mature Cheddar.

Graham Gendall Norton