

**Why Are So Few Christians Vegan?
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A Reflection on Charles Camosy's "Why All Christians Should Go Vegan"



Something happens when a person or institution for whom progress seems anathema says something seemingly progressive: accolades abound. For example, whenever Pope Francis utters a view that does not sound like it comes from the Middle Ages, he is lauded by liberals as the radical pope.¹

Francis became PETA's Person of the Year for the parts in his 2015 encyclical on saving the environment which urged Catholics to respect animals.² However, his comments did not amount to an animal liberation manifesto. They largely reiterated those of the Catholic Catechism and his predecessors, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, with any differences being in emphasis rather than substance.

Echoing the Catechism, he said: "Every act of cruelty towards any creature is contrary to human dignity." But he prefaced it with the anthropocentric observation that animal cruelty leads to human cruelty. He urged Catholics to respect the intrinsic value of animals as a part of nature and to "forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures." But he made clear that he was not advocating species equality, just a more caring approach to domination based on an anthropocentrism which is not "excessive," "distorted," or "misguided." Most significantly, the Pope did not call upon the world's 1.2 billion Catholics to stop eating and exploiting animals. Veganism, it seems, is a step too far, even for a radical pope.

Enter Catholic theologian Charles Camosy. In a recent Washington Post article,³ Camosy ventured where pontiffs fear to tread. He asserted that all Christians should go vegan because God created the Garden of Eden as a vegan paradise and, therefore, intended all humans to live that way. This is not a mainstream reading of Genesis, but Camosy hopes it will catch on. And like PETA with the Pope, he seized

on a prominent religious leader as a hopeful messenger of that innovative reading. The Reverend Franklin Graham is the son of and successor to Protestant super-evangelist Billy Graham and was a prayer leader at Donald Trump's inauguration. In a recent Facebook post, he announced that he is going to try a plant-based diet to lose a few pounds.⁴ To Camosy, that makes him a useful role model for bringing all Christians to veganism, apparently including Trump's conservative, alt-right, "let's overturn reproductive choice and marriage equality" supporters. But bringing all Christians to veganism is no small challenge. Most of the 90 billion animals slaughtered in the US every year⁵ — within an industry that devastatingly exploits minority and undocumented workers⁶ — suffer and die at Christian hands on their way to Christian stomachs. That's around 30 corpses a year per Christian, and relatively few Christians seem to care. Although they comprise 71-75 percent⁷ of the US population, Christians are less likely than the rest to be vegetarian or vegan.

Statistical data bears this out. A 2014 Harris poll of 11,400 randomly-selected Americans found that only 34 percent of current vegetarians and vegans are Christian.⁹ The year prior, an online poll of 1,700 people interested in vegetarianism found that 49 percent of the Christians who responded were vegetarian or vegan compared to 61 percent of the atheists and 60 percent of the Buddhists.¹⁰ Finally, an informal 2013 online survey of 7,000 international vegans found that only 11 percent were followers of Christianity and other world religions.¹¹ The remaining 89 percent were evenly spread between "atheist/agnostic" and "spiritual but not religious."

So what are the chances of Camosy's theology and Graham's pronouncements persuading all Christians to go vegan? Not likely. If it couldn't be done by Matthew Scully — a conservative, anti-abortion Christian who has written speeches for the likes of George Bush, Dick Cheney, Sarah Palin, Paul Ryan, and Melania Trump (the bits she didn't plagiarize from Michelle Obama) — with his extraordinary book *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (2002), there seems little hope of Graham doing it with a Facebook post and an inauguration prayer.

The problem of speciesism is not one that will be solved with the right preacher as front man. The survey results point to Christianity itself being the problem. It's as if Christian belief actually suppresses veganism, perhaps because the doctrine of human exceptionalism inhibits believers from empathizing with other animals.

Despite Camosy's wishful reading of it, the Bible as a whole is just not "vegan-friendly." As a result, theological veganism is unconvincing to most Christians. It hangs tenuously on a few cherry-picked verses, most of which are open to interpretation. Arrayed against these are many far less ambiguous verses which sanction violence to animals. Since this is a rhetorical game that anyone can play, most non-vegan Christians are likely to respond defensively to the vegan Eden argument by simply turning to Bible verses which further entrench their views. Theological veganism also has a more fundamental problem. At root, its advocacy of veganism is not primarily for the animals but to win God's favor by honoring his presumed intentions. Animal suffering counts for nothing if God does not care about it. This puts theological veganism on very shaky ground, especially as so many Bible verses suggest that God really does not care about His non-human creations.

There is another disadvantage to using the Bible's moral authority in support of veganism—one with wider intersectional implications. Such use gives credibility to the Bible as a moral authority in other spheres too. The danger in this is that the Bible is inherently conservative in its deference to authority, irrational in its privileging of faith over reason, and capricious in being open to interpretation. This has always made it a useful tool for demagogues and agents of the status quo.

The revolution will not be sermonized

In his inauguration speech, Donald Trump, now Commander-in-Chief of the planet's most powerful nation, assured his constituents: "We will be protected by the great men and women of our military and law enforcement and, most importantly, we are protected by God."¹² As double proof, he furnished not one but two copies of the Good Book as he took his oath of office—this in a country premised upon separation of Church and State.¹³

With the Trump/Bannon/Pence regime now in place, religion is increasingly being used to justify conservative, repressive, and exclusionary social, educational, and political agendas. Indeed, Trump's highly contested ban on Muslims from seven Middle Eastern countries came with the tweeted avowal that Christian persecution in those countries is a "horror" that cannot continue.¹⁴ That Muslims fleeing Syria are also facing unimaginable horrors does not seem of great import to the new administration. Christians are a clear priority.

Is this a bandwagon that Christian vegans should try to climb on? In the Trump era, Biblical revelation has the potential to be a toxic political force. Any dignifying of it as an authority strengthens the ground on which reactionary forces stand.

Although liberal Christians can proudly point to the Bible's role in the emancipation struggles against child labor, slavery, and segregation, in which Christian activists marched alongside secular ones, it must be noted that the oppressors they marched against were invariably Bible-touting Christians. Although the issues have changed, this sort of Bible-infused conservatism is still rife.

Consider Franklin Graham's response to the legalization of gay marriage in the U.S. in 2015: "Homosexuality is sin. Same-sex marriage is a sin against God. Now, people who don't believe in God don't care about that, but at the same time ... God is going to judge sinners, so I love them enough to warn them of the consequences of sin."¹⁵ The reason Graham holds this opinion on gay marriage is the same reason he is not an ethical vegan: the Bible tells him so.

For those seeking progressive change, the Bible is a fickle friend at best. Although Jesus was an irritant to religious authorities, he was no rebel, advising the Pharisees and Herodians to "[g]ive back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."¹⁶ To the multitude at the Sermon on the Mount he said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."¹⁷

His disciple Peter put it even more bluntly: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend

those who do right.”¹⁸ Further: “Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.”¹⁹ So, whether you deem Trump a “good and considerate” man or “harsh,” the Bible will have you honor him regardless.

This is an especially affronting message for women, millions of whom took to the streets on 20 January 2017 to protest a man generally seen as the most outwardly misogynistic President in U.S. history. Trump’s misogyny has its roots, or at least its theological justification, in the Bibles he brandished on Inauguration Day, wherein also lie the theological foundations of the animal oppression that Camosy hopes to upend. This is vividly illustrated in the story of Eve and the Fall from grace.

First, the misogyny. An enraged and unhinged God punishes Eve for eating from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge by cursing her and all women who follow to painful childbirth and lifelong strife. He also condemns her to be forever subservient to Adam, and curses the ground beneath them to bring forth thorns and thistles.

Next, the speciesism. His rage extends to Eve’s partner in crime, the serpent, whom God curses “above all livestock and all wild animals.”²⁰ These words are revealing. They tell us that animals were already cursed before the Fall and, more significantly, that they were already being farmed—an awkward, even fatal, Bible moment for proponents of a vegan Eden. Worse, to cover their nakedness, the hitherto vegan God “made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”²¹ Whose skin? It takes weeks to tan and cure hides. Such a chore seems antithetical to a supposedly vegan Eden.

The fact that progressive thinkers attempt to rend something loving, compassionate, and enlightened out of a book that so stubbornly resists their procrustean efforts is staggering, but religious proponents of animal liberation continue pointing to the Good Book as an answer to the billions of tortured animals’ silent prayers.

The Bible: A vegan dead end



The Galatians sailing sailing down into the sea

Applause is due to those Christians who swim against the crimson tide of animal slaughter and embrace veganism, but it is difficult to escape the feeling that they were not led there by the Bible, that many were driven not by Christian duty but by

personal health motivations or by the same universal ethical motivations that drive most secular vegans—empathy and a visceral sense of fairness —whose roots are in biology not theology.

Vegan theology is a valiant attempt to reconcile the Bible with these secular values, but it is a misguided attempt. The Bible is just too compromised on this issue. To see this, one need look no further than the “Comments” section that follows Camosy’s article. As some of his readers point out, for every ambiguous verse that can be interpreted to support animal-free, plant-based living, there are others that flatly contradict such a doctrine.

It seems that as long as the vegan debate is framed within a belief system that has a speciesist God dictating morals and giving humans dominion over other species, other animals don’t stand a chance. Omnivorous Christians will continue to cling to the many Bible passages that support their meat and dairy habit.

Skepticism on this is warranted by the evidence to date. Bible-based meat avoidance has been around for a while with little to show. The world’s first Vegetarian Society was formed nearly 200 years ago in England by followers of the Bible Christian Church. The church founder, the inaptly named Reverend William Cowherd, abstained from meat as a form of temperance, along with alcohol and tobacco. But his ideas did not catch on with Christendom generally. The Seventh Day Adventists began promoting Biblical vegetarianism for health reasons 125 years ago. Again, other Christians did not follow, nor do most Adventists today, as only 41 percent are vegetarian.²²

In the past half century, there has been an upsurge in what Richard Wade refers to as “animal theology.”²³ Various kind-hearted Christian writers, both liberals and conservatives, have written that the Bible, whether read literally or poetically, requires Christians to exercise compassion towards God’s creatures. Leading lights include Andrew Linzey, Carol J. Adams, Lisa Kemmerer, Jay McDaniel, Richard Alan Young, Will Tuttle, Richard Baukham, David Clough, Mary Eberstadt, Stephen R. Kaufman, Stephen H. Webb, Mary Lou Randour, the late Norm Phelps, the late JR Hyland and, of course, Matthew Scully and Charles Camosy.

Some of these writers do not hang their thesis on specific Bible verses; rather, they see the Bible in general as a metaphorical and inspirational seed bed for an expanding ethic of compassion whose blooms are still growing and unfolding. However, compared to many other texts in the canon of world literature, the Bible does rather a poor job of this. Because it is such a mixed bag, it also gives inspiration to the defenders of power, prejudice, and privilege (see above commentary on Trump).

Some theological vegans, seeking more literal Bible provenance, share Camosy’s belief in a vegan Eden. They base this on a reading of the first of the Bible’s two contradictory Creation narratives, wherein God gives Adam and Eve dominion over the animals and provides green plants for Man and beast to eat.²⁴ Because meat is not mentioned, these authors infer that God intended humans (and other animals) to eat only plants, green ones at that. This would preclude not only meat, dairy and eggs but also yeast (and hence fermented foods such as bread, beer, and wine) and fungi, such as mushrooms and truffles. It follows that our dominion over animals was not meant to be oppressive or intemperate, but benevolent and sober, “a dominion of love,” to quote Phelps.²⁵

As previously stated, the existence of livestock and animal hides at the time of the Fall casts some doubt on this animal-friendly view of Eden, but even if veganism was God's original intention, He soon changed His mind. As is evident in so many pages of the Old Testament, He sanctioned animal sacrifice, mass slaughter, and the rearing of livestock for enslavement and consumption.

When Adam and Eve's eldest sons offer burnt sacrifices to God, He is pleased with Abel's barbecued lamb but displeased with Cain's wheat. Jealous Cain murders Abel and is then banished by God, who clearly views the killing of humans very differently from that of lambs.²⁶

Nine generations on, He sends the Great Flood to blot out 99.9 percent of all living beings (those who couldn't swim) in retribution for the sins of one species. Afterwards, in a new beginning on the cleansed Earth, He again gives humankind—Noah and his descendants—dominion over all other creatures. This time he leaves no room for debate about the kind of dominion He has in mind:

The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth, and on all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you.²⁷

Christian vegans tend to downplay that passage and focus instead on the bit where God enters a covenant with Noah which includes all the other creatures. Much is often made of the covenant's inclusiveness without mentioning that it relates to just one narrow topic: floods. God promised to never again drown all living things. He thereby freed His non-human creatures to focus all their fear and dread on Man instead of pluvial events.

To be fair, the Old Testament does have occasional animal-friendly passages — “the righteous man has regard for the life of his animal”²⁸ — but such sentiments are thinly spread among pages stained with blood.

Progressive theologians prefer to focus on the New Testament, whose compassionate, forgiving Jesus Christ seems easier to work with than the testy, punishing Jehovah. Indeed, compared to the intellectual gymnastics and tendentious interpretations required to make the Old Testament sound animal-friendly, the New Testament would seem a much simpler task, focusing as it does on the deeds and sayings of one man.

But the whole Jesus narrative is just as human-centered as the Old Testament. Animals are mere props. At one point, Jesus mentions that God keeps track of all his creations, including each and every sparrow, but then hastens to add that one human is worth many sparrows.²⁹ Nowhere does Jesus express misgivings about livestock farming and fishing.

Several times he approvingly uses the Old Testament metaphor of God as a shepherd who cares for his sheep, knowing them by name, rescuing them when lost, and even being prepared to die for them. The imagery is certainly compassionate, but the sheep are only symbols. The real sheep of Jesus's time had a different fate: to be bled alive, eaten, and skinned, and never once does Jesus decry the practice.

When animals appear in the actual narrative rather than in a sermon, they rarely fare well. In deference to a demonic mob, Jesus runs 2,000 possessed pigs over a cliff and is then, himself, run out of town.³⁰ He eats fish and honey.³¹ He sits down to Passover lamb.³² He supplies fish to 5,000 people.³³ And he drinks wine which has probably been filtered in the traditional way with animal products such as egg white or fish gelatin. Nowhere does he beseech his followers to abstain from animal exploitation or consumption.

Because of its predominant ethos of oppression and indifference toward other animals, the Bible is a hard ship to turn around. This is why the tortured theology of Christian veganism has not, to date, convinced many Christians to abstain from meat, dairy, eggs, fur, and leather. Quite the reverse. As shown, Christians continue to be under-represented in the vegan and vegetarian populations and over-represented among meat-eaters.

Now a return to Franklin Graham. His dietary change has not come about because of a theological revelation causing him to see animals as sentient beings with rights and agency. Graham does cite the Bible, but it is a passage describing how ten days of plant eating improved Daniel's appearance.³⁴ Vanity is what this is all about. Graham is experimenting with a vegan diet for the base reason that most people have for changing their eating habits right around the New Year: to lose weight as part of a health regimen. Here is an excerpt from his revelatory post of 27 December 2016:

We only have a few days left to prepare for a New Year's resolution. ... I don't know about you, but I have some extra pounds I'd like to get rid of. ... The problem is, I love Quarter Pounders with cheese, barbecued ribs, brisket, steak, and I find I don't do very well at moderation! Therefore, beginning January 1, I'm going to try something drastic—I'm going on a vegan diet. ... Do you think I'll survive? Everyone is betting I won't last two days. Remember in the Bible, Daniel went on a complete vegetable diet and after 10 days his appearance was better than the others who hadn't. ... What do you think—how long will I last?³⁵

Graham makes no mention of the unimaginable terrors that his God's creatures go through to become meat and dairy for human beings. Although he did tweet a roasted pig's head and express dismay that he once ate such things, it reads more as a "yuck" comment than an ethical reflection.³⁶ Missing are pleas for compassion that, one would think, a just god would command.

Perhaps this is because such talk could open a Pandora's box for the thinking Christian: the troubling question of why, if meat eating is cruel and unethical, God allows it at all. Some Christians even consider ethical veganism to be a heresy because it calls God's moral judgment into question. This might explain why the early Christian vegetarians championed their meat-free diet on health and temperance grounds rather than moral ones, and why Graham's focus is on weight and health, not morality. In this self-centered version of veganism, animals are nothing more than fatty food items to be avoided while the billions of sentient beings slaughtered for human pleasure remain invisible.

Closing thoughts on theological veganism

The Bible-based case for veganism seems tenuous at best and non-existent at worst, relying on debatable interpretations and inferences and lacking a single clear injunction from God to go vegan — which, remember, is not just about food but about abstaining from animal exploitation and consumption in general.

Conversely, the Biblical case for animal exploitation is strong. The Bible was written by and for herding people. It has clear unambiguous injunctions to kill animals, to sacrifice them, to bleed them, to punish them, to eat them, and even obliterate them en masse.

In kind, the most likely outcome of theological proselytizing on veganism will be to reconfirm the mainstream view that, if the Bible is indeed the authority on which to base our ethical judgments, then God obviously wants us to dominate, enslave, eat, and wear our fellow animals — and to also, just by the way, enact a raft of regressive social policies.

Don't enter that ring. Tit-for-tat, Bible exegesis is a no-win game, for contesting speciesist theological beliefs is just too difficult within a religious framework, a framework which, for both sides, remains anthropocentric and spiritually self-centered with the paramount obligations and duties being between humans and God, not between humans and other animals. It is far better to bypass the theology altogether and appeal directly to Christian hearts rather than heads. After all, Christians are human too, with the same capacities for empathy and compassion that drive non-Christians to be vegans. Showing the brutality and suffering that goes into their daily lifestyle choices might have more impact than a carefully crafted sermon.

Of course, this is no simple feat. Awakening the compassion and empathy of humans for other animals is an enormous challenge for secular veganism too. Much debate and research is expended on the best ways to go about this, with underwhelming results so far. Only 7.4 percent of the secular population in the US is vegetarian or vegan.³⁷ But this is still five times higher than the 1.5 percent of Christians who abjure meat.

Clearly, alongside the huge commercial, political, and cultural forces stacked against veganism, just being Christian is an additional obstacle. So, rather than rearrange the deck chairs on Christianity's animal Titanic, the better strategy is to de-emphasize the role of religion altogether. Just as Christians do not have a theology of low emissions car purchases, energy efficient air conditioning, or silent lawn-mowing, so too should theology be removed from decisions about humane eating and clothing.

Instead, those within religious communities should encourage Christians to focus on the real world impacts of their choices and make their decisions based on the goodness of their hearts. As in the secular world, there is no magic pill for accomplishing this goal, but it will at least reduce the numbing role of religious doctrine as an impediment to compassionate change. To state the point as bluntly as possible: if a Bible-believing Christian is vegan, s/he is so in spite of, not because of, the Good Book. If theological vegans are waiting for their Lord to lead the way to animal rights and liberation, Christians will continue to dominate other species until the end of days.

FOOTNOTES

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