

*Christianity
and
Vegetarianism*

*Pursuing the
Nonviolence
of Jesus*



by Fr. John Dear, S.J.



My name is John Dear, and I'm a Catholic priest, a peace activist, a writer, and a vegetarian. I've traveled the world promoting peace and nonviolence and served as the executive director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the largest and oldest inter-faith peace organization in the United States.

“... the life of a lamb is no less precious than that of a human being.”
—Mahatma Gandhi

I'd like to reflect with you about Christianity and vegetarianism.

When I look at the world today, I see a culture addicted to violence. As I write, there are more than 30 wars being waged. There are more than 1 billion people suffering from malnourishment and its effects. There are more than 2 billion people without access to clean water, barely surviving in dire poverty. According to the United Nations, about 60,000 people, mostly women and children, die every single day from starvation and starvation-related diseases. Right here in the U.S., we see executions, rampant homelessness, and injustices of all kinds, including racism and sexism. In the U.S. alone, we kill more than 9 billion land animals each year by slitting their throats, sometimes while still conscious. We kill more than 15 billion sea animals, by suffocation, bodily decompression, or crushing every year.

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. I remember what Dr. King said the night before he was assassinated: “The choice before us is no longer violence or nonviolence; it's nonviolence or nonexistence.” That's where we stand today, on the brink of a new culture of nonviolence or the brink of nonexistence.

Nonviolence begins with the insights that all life is sacred, that all human beings are children of the God of peace, and that as God's children, we are under certain obligations. Of course, we should never hurt or kill another human being, wage war, build nuclear weapons, or sit idly by while millions of human beings starve to death each year. Nonviolence invites us, also, to reevaluate the way we treat animals in our society. While we resist violence, injustice, and war, and while we practice nonviolence, seek peace, and struggle for justice for the poor, we are also invited to break down the species barrier, extending our belief in Christian compassion to the animal kingdom by, among other things, adopting a vegetarian diet.

As I look at the world and reflect on this urgent question of violence and nonviolence, I turn, as a Christian, to Jesus. Gandhi said that Jesus was the greatest practitioner of nonviolence known in history. If we know anything about Jesus, it is that he rejected and resisted violence and practiced nonviolence. As the soldiers were taking him away to torture and execute him, another victim of the death penalty, his last words to his community of friends were, “Put away the sword.” After his execution, God raised him from the dead, and he returned to his friends with the greeting of peace, inviting them to follow him into God's reign of peace and justice. He invites us to follow him as well.

Since 1982, I have been attempting to take seriously Jesus' call of nonviolence. I have organized demonstrations, been arrested for acts of civil disobedience, and taken every opportunity to speak out, in books and articles and retreats, from college auditoriums and inner city streets to pulpits across the country, about Christian nonviolence. 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 injustices that we inflict on so many people.

When I began my journey of Christian peacemaking 20 years ago, I read several books about Mahatma Gandhi, that great teacher of peace and leader of revolutionary nonviolence.

Gandhi was seeking personal and spiritual wholeness. He had lived and worked for justice in South Africa, struggled nonviolently for India's independence, and spent two hours of every day in meditation and prayer. He vowed to live simply, speak the truth, and practice nonviolence. He refused to eat meat saying that "the life of a lamb is no less precious than that of a human being."

Vegetarianism As a Way to Help End World Hunger

At about the time I was studying Gandhi, I read a powerful book by Frances Moore Lappé called *Diet for a Small Planet*. Lappé argued that we could help end world hunger by redistributing our wealth and resources to the poorer people of the world, cutting back on our militarism, and becoming vegetarians. She pointed out that more and more basic grains around the world, instead of going to local communities of malnourished people, are grown and given to animals who are used for their milk or eggs and later slaughtered, or who are raised only to be slaughtered for meat. In both instances, the animal products are consumed by the people of the developed "First" World and their few rich emissaries in the developing world, rather than by the starving masses.

"While people suffer and die of starvation in Central and South America, these regions ship their grain to the U.S. to feed our cows, pigs, and chickens so that we can satisfy our desire for animal flesh, milk, and eggs."

Ten years ago, China was a net grain exporter, and it seemed certain that it would continue to export grain. But instead, as a direct result of increasing consumption of animal products, primarily pigs, China is now one of the world's top grain importers. The practical effect on people is only beginning to be felt in China. According to groups like the Worldwatch Institute, all developing countries that rely on animal agriculture will experience similar consequences, and the resulting increase in starvation and misery as well. It is profoundly disheartening to remember that during the famine in Ethiopia in the mid-1980s, and during the famine in Somalia in the early 1990s, those countries continued to export grains to Europe to feed its cows, pigs, and chickens so that First-World people could eat meat. Likewise, while people suffer and die in Central and South America, the countries there ship their grains to the U.S. to feed our cows, pigs, and chickens so that we can satisfy our desire for animal flesh, milk, and eggs.

Frances Moore Lappé argues rightly that we should all work to eliminate hunger and protect the environment and that one important step we can each take is to become a vegetarian. To me, working to abolish hunger, war, and violence is a basic moral and ethical duty for everyone. Furthermore, for me as a Christian, it is a basic religious and spiritual obligation—a commandment, required by God. Frances Moore Lappé helped me to make the connection between justice, solidarity, and the life of nonviolence, and I quickly became a vegetarian. I hope that others will, too, and that we can all take another step toward a more nonviolent, more just world.

The Biblical Vision of Compassion and Nonviolence

There are other good reasons for becoming a vegetarian, and I'd like to review a few of them, including the witness of the scriptures, a basic reverence and compassion toward God's creatures, responsible stewardship of the Earth, and respect for one's own health.

In God's initial and ideal world, represented in the book of Genesis by the Garden of Eden, there was no suffering, no exploitation, and no violence at all. People and animals were vegetarians, 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 beautiful, nonviolent, non-exploitative world, God, describes it as "very good." This is the only time in the narrative that God calls creation "very good" instead of merely "good"—and this immediately follows God's command with regard to vegetarianism.

But after the Fall, people waged war, held one another as slaves, ate meat, and committed every atrocity imaginable. After the flood, when the world's vegetation was destroyed, we are told, God allowed humans to eat meat. Scholars argue that within the context of the story, this was only a temporary permission, based on human violence and sinfulness: God gives us free will and allows us the freedom to reject God and God's way of nonviolence, but God tried to help us to become less violent by commanding people to observe God's laws. In the Mosaic legal system, then, there are more than 150 laws regarding meat-eating, but the vision of Eden is still the ideal and the goal. Indeed, Leviticus strictly prohibits the eating of anything with fat or blood. Many argue that Moses's law actually forbids the eating of flesh entirely, because it's impossible to get blood totally out of meat.

The best example of a vegetarian in the Bible is Daniel, the nonviolent resister who refuses to defile himself by eating the king's meat. He and three friends actually become much healthier than everyone else through their vegetarian diet. They also become 10 times smarter, and "God rewards them with knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom." Throughout the marvelous stories that follow, we hear of someone who remains faithful to God, refuses to worship the emperor's false gods and unjust ways, and practices steadfast nonviolence. This marvelous story begins with divine approval of vegetarianism.

The book of the prophet Isaiah proclaims the vision of the Peaceable Kingdom, that new realm of God where everyone will beat their swords into plowshares, refuse to study war, enjoy their own vine and fig tree, and never fear again. Several passages condemn meat-eating and foresee a day when people and animals will adopt a vegetarian diet, when "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid ... They do no violence, no harm, on all my holy mountain." (Is. 11:6-9) Of course, God's covenant is always with "all flesh," animal and human, and in the conclusion to Isaiah, God speaks of those who kill animals in the same way as those who murder people and heralds the dawn of a new day of peace.

According to the prophet Hosea, God says, "I will make a covenant on behalf of Israel with the wild beasts, the birds of the air, and the things that creep on the earth, and I will break every bow and sword and weapon of war and sweep them off the earth, so that all living creatures may lie down without living in fear."

All these beautiful visions of the prophets reach their fulfillment, according to Christianity, in the life of Jesus. Jesus is "the new Adam," who returns us to the totally nonviolent Garden of Eden. He is "the Prince of Peace," who ushers in God's vision of nonviolence, mercy, and justice. Jesus spent his life healing the broken, liberating the oppressed, calling for justice, practicing nonviolence, and confronting the structures of oppression by turning over the tables of injustice. By the time he was 33, the ruling authorities had had enough, and they executed him.

As I consider what it means to be a Christian today, reflecting on the radical, nonviolent life of Jesus, I believe that today Jesus sides with the starving, the homeless, the refugees, and the children of the world, who continue to be crushed by first-world greed and warmaking. If Jesus lived in our culture of violence, he would do everything he could to confront the structures of death and call for a new culture of peace and life. He would want us to change every aspect of our lives, to seek complete physical, spiritual, emotional, and ethical wholeness, to become people of nonviolence, children of the God of peace. Anglican priest, theologian, and Oxford professor the Rev. Dr. Andrew Linzey suggests that following Christ means casting our lot with the most oppressed. In his book *Animal Theology*, he says that today, no beings are more oppressed than the animals who are treated so badly by the meat industry. I conclude that, as Christians, we must side with the poor and oppressed peoples of the world and with animals.

In fact, the Gospels are full of favorable references to animals and reveal that Jesus had a great reverence for animals and nature. As Lewis Regenstein points out in his book *Replenish the Earth: A History of Organized Religions' Treatment of Animals and Nature*, Jesus calls his followers “sheep.” He compares his concern for Jerusalem with a hen’s caring for her brood. He likens himself to animals, such as a lamb and a dove, because of their innocence and meekness. “Behold the birds of the air,” Jesus says. “They do not sow, they do not reap, nor do they gather into barns, yet your heavenly God feeds them”(Mt. 6:26). “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?” Jesus later asks. “And yet not one of them is forgotten by God.”(Lk. 12:6)

Indeed, in John’s Gospel, Jesus describes himself as a “Good Shepherd” and notes that a good shepherd lays down his life for his flock of sheep. Dare we conclude that Jesus supports the ultimate act of compassion and love, to die nonviolently, even to protect animals?

Jesus embodied nonviolence and compassion. The rest of us are called to follow in his gentle footsteps. Yet few have approached him. I think of St. Francis of Assisi, who walked among the poor, preached peace, and, in particular, loved and celebrated all of creation, including 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,” he said, “you will have people who will deal likewise with other people.”

Rev. Dr. Linzey suggests, like St. Francis, that human beings 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 suggests that the Gospel call to service includes selfless service and justice not only to the poor and oppressed, but to all creation, including animals. In this, we become more Christlike.

Many early Christians advocated vegetarianism, including Tertullian, the great advocate of nonviolence; St. John Chrysostom, the patriarch of Constantinople; and St. Jerome, a doctor of the church and an early translator of the Bible. The theologian Clement of Alexandria urged Christians to become vegetarians, saying, “It is far better to be happy than to have your bodies act as graveyards for animals.”

It is clear that for the first three centuries after Christ, a Christian could not kill or participate in war. Christians were nonviolent. Some scholars argue that most early Christians were also vegetarians and that meat-eating was not officially allowed until the fourth century, when the church embraced Constantine and the Roman Empire. Then, just as Christians rejected Jesus’ nonviolence and devised the heresy of the so-called “just war theory,” they deliberately approved meat-eating.

Regardless of this past practice, though, the question we Christians have to ask ourselves is how can we become more Christlike and more faithful to the nonviolent Jesus. Where in our lives could we be more merciful, more compassionate? In our own times, Christians around the world are waking up to the Gospel imperative to pursue peace and justice for all people, to reject war, and to practice the active nonviolence of Jesus. They are also rethinking our mistreatment of animals and the rest of creation. Many are becoming vegetarians. In 1966, the Vatican newspaper wrote for the first time, “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.” Other bishops began to include cruelty toward animals under the basic sin of violence. In December of 2000, the Vatican newspaper pointed out that the Catholic Catechism says it is “contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly.” The article went on to question the way animals are raised and killed for food today.

Theologian Thomas Berry sums up the growing trend among Christians: “Vegetarianism is a way of life that we should all move toward for economic survival, physical well-being, and spiritual integrity.” In other words, one more way we Christians can welcome Christ’s reign of nonviolence is by becoming vegetarians.

“If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would go vegetarian.”
—Paul McCartney

So, when we sit down to eat, when we say our grace and invoke the blessing of Jesus, we should also choose to adhere to his life of compassion and nonviolence by maintaining a vegetarian 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.

Yet the reality today for God’s creatures is neither compassionate nor merciful. Our treatment of God’s animals is cruel and gruesome. Each year, the United States raises and kills about 9 billion land animals and slaughters another 15 billion sea animals. Laying hens, raised for their eggs, spend their entire lives crammed into wire-mesh cages not much larger than file drawers and stacked in warehouses with tens of thousands of other birds. Conditions are so horrendous that their feet often grow through and around the wire. One-third of the birds suffer broken legs on the packed and painful ride to the slaughterhouse, which often entails days without food and water, through all weather extremes. One egg represents 34 hours of suffering for a hen, not to mention the ride to the slaughterhouse and slaughter itself. Two hundred and fifty million male birds are suffocated or ground to death. They are useless for the egg industry being a different strain of bird from birds for meat.

Meanwhile, chickens, pigs, turkeys, dairy cows, and beef cows are genetically bred and fed drugs to make them grow faster, separated from their families at birth, and mutilated without any painkillers. Chickens have their beaks chopped off with a hot blade. Cows and pigs are castrated. Cows have their horns ripped out of their heads. Pigs have their teeth pulled out with pliers and their tails chopped off. They all suffer the mental and physical anguish of living in tiny spaces with no relief, no ability to act on any of their natural desires and needs, and no hope for escape. They are transported without food or water to a hellish death. Dairy cows and other animals who can no longer walk are dragged from the trucks, breaking more bones in the process. They are killed by being hung upside down and bled to death from a slit throat, often skinned and hacked to bits while still conscious. “If slaughterhouses had glass walls,” as Paul McCartney says, “everyone would go vegetarian.”

If these farmers, slaughterhouse workers, and truck drivers treated dogs and cats in this manner, they would undoubtedly be prosecuted for animal abuse.

It is important to remember also that most animals raised for food are like “Frankenstein” animals. They have been genetically bred to grow so quickly that their hearts, lungs, and limbs often cannot keep up. Chickens, for example, now grow more than twice as quickly as they did just 30 years ago and are slaughtered before they are even 2 months old. On average, cows give about four times as much milk as they would naturally, and many give 10 to 13 times as much milk, their udders literally dragging on the ground. Turkeys have been genetically bred so that they can’t even mate naturally anymore. In fact, a few years ago, The Washington Post published a Thanksgiving story about turkeys entitled, “Techno-Turkey: Serving Up Science for Dinner.” We are playing Dr. Frankenstein with God’s creatures. We are pursuing our demonic addiction to violence with our unimaginable cruelty not only to one another but to God’s creatures as well. Gandhi said you can judge a society by the way it treats its animals. And yet, every single day, we inflict pain, suffering, and death on millions of God’s animals.

Tolstoy insisted that “vegetarianism is the taproot of humanitarianism.” Vegetarianism proves that we’re serious about our belief in compassion and justice, that we’re mindful of our commitment, day in and day out, every time we eat. We are reminded of our belief in mercy, and we remind others. We begin to live the nonviolent vision, right here and now.

Over the centuries, the human race has grown slowly in its awareness of and respect for human rights, including the right to life itself. It is now generally understood that oppression and exploitation of human beings because of their race, gender, religion, age, and physical ability are unacceptable. As we continue to grow in our moral consciousness, we will learn to abolish war, nuclear weapons, and violence itself.

We will also learn to protect the earth and break down the species barrier while embracing our responsibility toward all creatures. Albert Einstein called human bigotry against other species an “optical illusion of consciousness.” Our task, he said, is “to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures.”

The great humanitarian and theologian Dr. Albert Schweitzer, in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, stated, “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.”

Many Christians who agree that harming a dog or cat is wrong think nothing of harming cows, pigs, chickens, fish, and other creatures. We need to understand that if we’re eating meat, we are paying people to be cruel to animals. For the simple reasons that all animals are creatures beloved by God and that God created them with a capacity for pain and suffering, we should adopt a vegetarian diet.

Vegetarianism As a Way to Protect the Earth

Another reason for becoming vegetarian is to help protect the environment. Mainstream environmental groups such as the Sierra Club, the Union of Concerned Scientists, the Worldwatch Institute, and the National Audubon Society are drawing attention to the environmental havoc generated by raising animals for food and commercial fishing. In fact, one cannot be a meat-eating environmentalist; it’s a contradiction in terms.

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The harsh reality is that raising animals for food is steadily polluting and depleting our land, water, and air. In the U.S., 20 times as much energy is required to produce a calorie of animal flesh as the amount needed to produce a calorie of vegetable food. We wastefully cycle 70 percent of all we grow, such as soy, corn, wheat, and other grains, through animals, rather than eating these foods directly. Likewise, more than half of all the water used in the U.S. is used to raise animals for food, which is why meat-eaters require at least 14 times as much water for their diets as do vegetarians. Also, the intensive production of animals for meat requires about 25 times as much land as the production of the same amount of food from vegetable sources.

And that’s not all. It’s not just inefficient to eat animals. The 9 billion land animals that we raise for food in the U.S. excrete 130 times as much waste as the entire human population of the United States—130 times! And there are no waste treatment systems for animals. That stuff is swimming with bacteria, hormones, antibiotics, and pesticides. Quite simply, it’s toxic waste, and it is the number one source of water pollution in the U.S.

Meanwhile, the fishing industry is steadily ruining the world's delicate marine ecosystems. The fishing industry drags driftnets that are miles long along the bottom of the ocean, destroying everything in their path. Factory trawlers are vacuuming the oceans of sea life at an alarming pace. Thirteen of the 17 major global fisheries are either depleted or in serious decline. The other four are "overexploited" or "fully exploited." These same trawlers dump unprofitable, often dead, animals back into the oceans, along with massive debris and spent fuel.

A former cattle rancher named Howard Lyman, now executive director of EarthSave International, urges people to become vegetarians, arguing that, among other things, meat-eating is destroying valuable and irreplaceable topsoil. He's the person who was sued, along with Oprah Winfrey, by Texas cattlemen after he discussed the possibility of mad cow disease in the U.S.—the jury ruled in his favor. Lyman points out that our soil used to be teeming with life, but now it is lifeless brown dirt. In fact, 85 percent of topsoil erosion in this country is due to raising animals for food.

So, if you're reusing bags, using a shower saver, turning off lights when you leave the room, and trying to walk and bicycle, rather than drive, that's great! But to become even better stewards of the earth and God's creation, we also need to take the next step and become vegetarians.

Recently, I asked a young Christian friend why he became a vegetarian. He said that the change took place when he learned of the environmental destruction caused by the corporate meat industry. He could not in good conscience and good faith continue eating meat knowing that he was supporting the destruction of the planet. It went against everything he wanted his life to be about. He said: "We are destroying the ecosystem by creating massive chicken, cow, and hog factories; poisoning the water; and tearing down the rain forests—all to produce meat. We're destroying the entire ecosystems of most poor countries. This whole corporate meat business is destructive. If millions of us become vegetarians, we will reduce the demand and help save the planet."

Vegetarianism As a Path to Health and Wholeness

Another basic reason to become a vegetarian is to promote good health. God has given us our bodies as gifts, and we need to treat them well, so that we can serve others and be instruments of God's peace. Up until about 15 years ago, it was assumed by most physicians that human beings had to eat meat to survive. Nowadays, not only is everyone in agreement that our bodies thrive on a vegetarian diet, but medical groups like the American Dietetic Association (ADA) and the American Medical Association (AMA) have concluded that vegetarians are actually healthier. Vegetarians tend to weigh less and suffer at a fraction of the rate of meat-eaters from heart disease, cancer, and stroke—America's three biggest killers. Meat is entirely devoid of carbohydrates and fiber, the nutrients we need to keep our bodies in good working order. But meat does have heavy doses of artery-clogging saturated fat and cholesterol.

In particular, the only two researchers who have ever successfully reversed heart disease, by far America's biggest killer, include an exclusively vegetarian diet as a part of their health programs. On the Dr. Dean Ornish and Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn programs, patients become "heart attack proof," to quote Dr. Esselstyn, by getting their cholesterol levels lower than 150, the level below which no one has ever been documented as having had a heart attack. The average vegan cholesterol level is 128. It's also worth noting that vegetarians, on average, weigh 10 to 30 percent less than meat-eaters, and people on Dr. Ornish's program lose an average of 20 pounds in the first year—and they keep it off.

People who consume animal products are 40 percent more susceptible to cancer and are more likely to suffer from stroke, appendicitis, arthritis, diabetes, and food poisoning. Additionally, meat contains pesticides and other chemicals up to 14 times more concentrated than those in plant foods. If we want to live a healthy, wholesome, full life, we are wise to become vegetarians.

The Rev. George Malkmus, a Baptist preacher in North Carolina, argues that Christians should set an example of good health. What does it say about our faith when we Christians are dropping over dead from diet-related, preventable diseases at the same rate as everyone else in this country, he wonders. He thinks that vegetarianism, because it makes us healthier, makes a good evangelical tool. I agree. God wants us to be healthy, to live life to its fullest. Likewise, Rev. Robert Schuller, pastor of the Crystal Cathedral and star of the Hour of Power, recommends what he calls the “Garden of Eden diet.” It’s the diet God called us to in the Garden, he says, the diet intended for us, to help us lead long and productive lives. He cites vegetarian fitness superstar Jack LaLanne as one example of what a diet based on grains, beans, fruits, and vegetables can do for our vitality.

Vegetarianism As a Way to Support Human Rights

Another reason for becoming vegetarian is simply to support basic human rights. A vegetarian diet is the only diet for people who care about the suffering of other people. Domestically, slaughterhouses are dens of death not just for animals, but for the unfortunate people who work in them. Slaughterhouses have the highest rate of injury, the highest turnover rate, the highest repeat-injury rate, and the highest rate of accidental death of any industry in the country. In fact, slaughterhouse workers have nine times the injury rate of coal miners in Appalachia.

A few years ago, the Center for Public Integrity, a Congressional watchdog group, released a report called, “Safety Last: The Politics of E. Coli and Other Food-Borne Killers.” This report points out that slaughterhouses are continually searching for replacement workers and have to bus people up from Mexico and Central America to slaughterhouses in Iowa, Minnesota, and elsewhere. “Just as easily as the meat-packing companies court and transport immigrant labor to their Midwestern plants,” the report says, “they betray them, turning them and their families over to the immigration authorities. And in the ultimate act of cruelty and corruption, the companies then seek out the lucky ones that escaped the immigration raids to hire them back to stand on the killing floor.” The same point was made in a more recent book called *Fast Food Nation*, by investigative journalist Eric Schlosser.

Should Christians support this unjust treatment of workers? Of course not. Jesus put it simply: “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.” He insists that we side with the poor and oppressed—and that includes the undocumented, the immigrant, the refugee, and the factory worker—in their struggle for justice. We can and should withdraw our financial support for this violent and unjust industry by becoming vegetarians.

Conclusion

As we look back on very recent history, we see an astonishing array of positive social changes. Many good and thoughtful 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 end of the 1800s in the United States. Women were given the right to vote less than 100 years ago. The very first child abuse case was prosecuted in this country, also, less than 100 years ago. In each case, the Bible was used to bless and defend injustice. But, thank God, we have taken steps toward justice. Yet, unfortunately, we continue to use the scriptures to defend violence and justify war, executions, animal abuse, and nuclear weapons as if God, wanted us to be violent and kill. I am convinced that God is a God of peace and nonviolence and that Jesus wants us to be people of peace and nonviolence.

“... the time will come, when [people] ... will look upon the murder of animals as they now look upon the murder of men [and women].”

—Leonardo da Vinci

We have come a long way in the last century, but we still have a long way to go. We need to abolish hunger, poverty, war, nuclear weapons, animal abuse, the death penalty, racism, sexism, and every other form of violence. I think that centuries from now, people of faith and conscience will look back at our times in shock and amazement that we ate meat, permitted people to starve, treated one another

so unjustly, waged war, built huge nuclear arsenals, and remained hell-bent on destroying the planet. If we are to survive, as Dr. King said, we need to become people of nonviolence. One simple first step is to adopt a vegetarian diet.

“Nothing will benefit human health and increase [our] chances for survival,” Albert Einstein concluded, “as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet.”

Despite all the problems of our times, I remain hopeful. More and more people are seeing the wisdom of nonviolence, including the wisdom of vegetarianism. In the U.S. alone, more than 1 million people adopt a vegetarian diet every year. As these trends gain momentum, they will have dramatic and positive consequences for our health, our environment, animal welfare, human rights, and, indeed, our disposition toward compassion and nonviolence.

“The time will come,” Leonardo da Vinci said, “when [people] ... will look upon the murder of animals as they now look upon the murder of men [and women].” I am convinced that society will look back on human arrogance and cruelty toward other animals with the same horror and disbelief that we presently reserve for atrocities committed against human beings. And as we stop eating meat and become vegetarians, we take another step into God’s way of nonviolence. We will be blessed.

Let me conclude with a quote from author Lewis Regenstein:

“There are compelling moral, spiritual, and scriptural reasons to abstain from meat. The raising, transporting, and slaughtering of food animals entails enormous mistreatment and suffering of literally billions of creatures each year, in addition to the massive damage to the environment. Indeed, raising livestock is more destructive in depleting topsoil, groundwater, and energy resources than all other human activities combined, as well as causing enormous environmental damage such as clearing of forests, destruction of wildlife habitat, and pollution of rivers and lakes. And the consumption of meat and dairy products ... is linked to high rates of cancer, heart disease, strokes, and other potentially fatal health disorders. Therefore refraining from eating meat helps prevent cruelty to animals and promotes protection of the environment and the health of one’s body, the ‘Temple of the Lord.’ For all these reasons, a vegetarian diet is one good way of maintaining a lifestyle consistent with the humane and ecological spirit of the Scriptures.”

A Few Last Questions

Having said all that, I’m sure there are a few questions hanging in the air, such as, “But, John, didn’t Jesus eat meat?” Some biblical scholars conclude that Jesus didn’t eat meat. All agree that Jesus wants us to practice perfect compassion throughout our lives. As we’ve seen, the world we live in today is a world of poverty, starvation, violence, and environmental destruction, and eating meat only entrenches these problems.

“Nothing will benefit human health and increase [our] chances for survival as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet.”
—Albert Einstein

So the real question is, what would the nonviolent Jesus want us to do today, in such a world of rampant violence? I believe that he would want us to do everything we can to help end violence and turn this into a world of nonviolence and compassion. That would include becoming a vegetarian.

Others ask, “But doesn’t God condone animal sacrifice?”

The Hebrew scriptures are filled with stipulations of when and how to slaughter animals, but I do not think that justifies eating animals. The Mosaic law was trying to reduce violence. The Bible is filled with laws permitting war, polygamy, slaveholding, and other forms of violence, but these laws mitigated evil practices that were already occurring. God’s laws about them were, at the time, 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. He let us know that he prefers the sacrifice of our own hearts and lives for the sake of justice and peace. He is far more radical than any of us can imagine.

“We need to understand that if we’re eating meat, we are paying people to be cruel to animals.”

As Gandhi said, Jesus practices the revolution of nonviolence par excellence. He reveals that God is a god of nonviolence and wants us to enter that life of nonviolence. The Christian Gospels quote the prophets, call for peace, and uphold God’s original vision of the Garden of Eden. They insist that Jesus called us to live here and now in the reign of God, a reign of peace and nonviolence that includes compassion toward one another, all creatures, and the earth itself. The point, Jesus said, was not sacrifice, but compassion; not violence, but nonviolence.

In a world of massive violence and suffering, why not take whatever steps we can to become more compassionate, more nonviolent, more faithful to the peacemaking Christ? Why not become a vegetarian, 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. The only reasons to keep eating meat are selfishness and gluttony, which are not exactly Christian ideals. We can all do better than that.

The time has come to take another step with Jesus on the road of nonviolence. The time has come to be a vegetarian. Thank you for listening and for reflecting with me on these questions. May the God of peace bless us all and help us to become, like Jesus, people of compassion, peace, and nonviolence.

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To explore the issue of Christian vegetarianism further, please read *Animal Theology*, by Rev. Andrew Linzey, *God’s Covenant With Animals*, by Rev. J.R. Hyland, *The Lost Religion of Jesus*, by Keith Akers, and *Of God and Dogs*, by Stephen Webb.

To join the Christian Vegetarian Association, please visit www.ChristianVeg.com

For more information, please consult berVegan Advocacy, online: WatchVegan.Video