

Veganism: A Moral Matter?

Food. We all have our preference, our likes and dislikes. Food can be a means of bringing people together and a focus of vigorous friendly debate. Does pineapple belong on pizza? Should a scone be served with clotted cream or jam or both? How do you pronounce 'scone' anyway?

Not all discussion around food is just friendly banter. The procuring and preparing of certain foods is significant on a religious level and the Bible contains passages in both Old and New Testaments that speak to these matters. For many people around the world food is a religious and, increasingly, also a moral matter. In recent years one particular food ideology has gained traction in our culture: veganism.

Introducing veganism

Veganism – to be distinguished from its slightly less dogmatic and assertive cousin vegetarianism – is not just about diet. It campaigns for the removal of animal products from food, cosmetics and clothing, among other things. At its core, veganism is a philosophy of life that recognises animals as of at least equal value to human beings, if not more so. Many of its proponents religiously practice its tenets and believe it should be enforced for the good of the world.

There are over 600,000 vegans in the UK, up from around 150,000 in 2006.¹ While this is only a small percentage of the population, vegans are well motivated to convert others to their cause – the well-publicised annual 'Veganuary' encourages others to go vegan (although with a lopsided sex demographic of 87% female in 2019).

Despite its relatively small number of adherents and some concerns over its medical advisability, veganism presents itself as the only moral dietary option. What, if anything, does the Bible have to say to veganism's claims and what, if any, pastoral implications are there in a context where there is growing interest and acceptance of veganism?

A brief biblical overview of meat vs plant-based diets

God created humanity with the capacity to eat and enjoy food. From the beginning, this diet appears to have been vegan:

And God said, 'Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. (Genesis 1:29-30)

Of importance to note is that this diet was the same across species – a carnivore diet did not exist from the beginning. With the Fall of mankind (Genesis 3), and the entrance of death and decay into the world it is possible that mankind's descent into wickedness and evil included going beyond the dietary parameters set by God in his creation covenant. It is evident in Genesis 4 that animal sacrifice was being practiced. Why not taste the meat of what would have smelled not dissimilar to our barbecues today? James Hughes suggests the possibility that in the days leading up to the Flood, as mankind grew in evil to the point it completely consumed them (Genesis 6:5), meat eating – even cannibalism – may have been practised.² He comments:

Some men may have eaten meat for either of the following reasons:

¹ Lora Jones, *Veganism: Why are vegan diets on the rise?*, BBC News, 2 January 2020 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-44488051> last accessed 09/06/2020).

² James Hughes, 'Why did God permit man to eat meat?' for Evangelical Presbyterian Church Toronto (updated version August, 2019), http://www.epctoronto.org/Press/Publications_JRHughes/Why_Meat_Web.htm (Last accessed 19/06/2020).

- They may have resorted to cannibalism. Cannibalism is found among the most degraded portions of mankind after the Flood, so it is not far-fetched to surmise that this same evil also occurred before the Flood. If men ate the flesh of other men, it is not inconceivable that they also found a reason in their invented religions to eat animal flesh.
- It appears that God introduced animal sacrifice after the Fall (Gen 3:21; 4:4,5) as a symbol of atonement from sin. It may be that men lusted after the 'food of God' and took animal flesh for food so that they could be 'like God'.

Regardless of the possibility that mankind ate meat prior to the Flood, God makes a covenant with Noah following the subsidence of the waters that specifically allows him to eat meat:

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. (Genesis 9:3)

Various environmental, nutritional and scientific theories have been suggested for this change,³ but the fact is we are not given a specific reason for it. Later in history, God makes a covenant with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with his law recorded on many of the pages of the Pentateuch. As part of this law, differentiation was made between 'clean' and 'unclean' animals in Leviticus 11. Meat-eating was thus a natural and acceptable aspect of Jewish diet.

Thus, while meat eating in the pre-exilic period was normal,⁴ we are reminded in the book of Daniel that it was not always righteous. The 'king's meat' allotted to the youths in Daniel 1 with which Daniel would not defile himself would have probably included unclean animals and was probably also dedicated to pagan gods. Thus, Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael requested and ate only vegetables.

In New Testament times, Jesus declared all foods clean. In the context of dismissing the complaint that his disciples ate with unwashed hands, Jesus signals the end of the Jewish food laws:

Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled? (Thus he declared all foods clean.) (Mark 7:18-19)

Jesus makes the emphatic statement that what an individual eats does not affect their spiritual standing before God. The point is reiterated in Peter's vision in Acts 10 in which he is shown a range of animals and is told to 'kill and eat'. Upon protesting that he has never eaten any unclean thing, Peter is told, 'What God has made clean, do not call common' (Acts 10:15). In 1 Corinthians 10:25 Paul instructs his readers to 'eat whatever is sold in the meat-market' and he tells Timothy to beware of people who 'require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving' (1 Timothy 4:3). Elsewhere both meat-eaters and vegetarians are urged to not judge one another on matters of food and drink, but to be conscientious, respectful and united in Christ (Romans 14; Colossians 2).

On the basis of these and other passages, it is impossible to make a case that God views veganism as a holier way of life. Thus any suggestion that meat-eating, veganism or any other dietary practice is morally superior is misplaced at best. That said, let us seek to grapple with veganism's moral claims.

Three areas where vegan ideology is right

This world, its systems and broken structures

Veganism expresses concern for the state of the world in which we live: one of abuse, exploitation, poor

³ Jim Stambaugh, 'Creation's Original Diet and the Changes at the Fall', Journal of Creation 5, no 2 (August 1991): 130-138; Hughes, 'Why did God permit man to eat meat?' gives a good overview of some theories as well.

⁴ 1 Kings 4:22-23 says that the daily provision for Solomon's court was 'thirty cors of fine flour and sixty cors of meal, ten fat oxen and twenty pasture-fed cattle, a hundred sheep, beside deer, gazelles, roebucks and fattened fowl'.

stewardship of resources, cruelty etc. This is not at all the way things were meant to be (vegans are conscious of some sort of moral objectivity).

Pastorally, identifying and interacting with the positives of vegan ideology is important for meaningful dialogue to take place. We can acknowledge that humanity and animals did, at one point, coexist with a plant-based diet; there was no abuse, exploitation or even death in the world. Ultimately we look forward to a new and better Eden – the new heavens and new earth of righteousness where there will be no more death.

Humanity is primarily at fault for the state of the world

Some who live on a vegan diet do so without the strict rules and restrictions of veganism. Nevertheless, proper veganism goes far beyond diet and is an all-encompassing ideology – see the website of PETA (People For the Ethical Treatment of Animals).⁵ Without arriving at all the same conclusions of vegan ideology, Christians can agree that humanity is responsible for the evil state of our world. Acknowledging the consequences of the Fall in Genesis 3 and confessing humanity's culpability for the world's brokenness can go a long way toward meaningful dialogue when engaging with the religious moralising of veganism.

We should take steps to see positive change in our world

We should never dismiss a sincere desire to see change for good in the world. Christians, recognising that salvation is by God's grace, affirm that we are born again to perform good works (Ephesians 2:10), acting honourably for God's glory (1 Peter 2:12), including what we eat and drink (1 Corinthians 10:31). Veganism argues that positive change can be attained through the mass adoption of the vegan lifestyle. PETA says that this would save

...nine billion animals from slaughter each year, but also would save humans from a diet known to cause heart disease, cancer and obesity. Instead of feeding grain to livestock, a plant-based diet makes sixteen times more grain available to hungry people. Eliminating intensive factory farming of animals would save precious water and topsoil; in addition, without the ozone-damaging nitrates resulting from billions of pounds of manure, our air would be cleaner and we would take a giant step toward fighting global warming. In this way, animals, humans and the environment are interconnected – we all stand to gain by not harming animals.⁶

Much debate can be and is had on the validity of these and other claims, but it is good to acknowledge, without necessarily agreeing on the conclusions, their desire to see the world made better.

Three problems with vegan ideology

I am not vegan. I have vegan friends, can and do cook vegan-friendly meals, and find some vegan food to taste good. During the COVID-19 crisis, the church I pastor, The Angel Church, has been a part of feeding local vulnerable, sheltering and isolated individuals. With only a couple of exceptions, these meals have been vegan. Prepared for £1 a head or less, the meals have been nutritious, tasty, and inexpensive. So am I now a vegan convert? No – fundamentally because I disagree with a range of conclusions of vegan ideology. I find particularly untenable three overarching claims:

Veganism says that animals and humans are of equal value

Biblically, it is clear that there is a difference between humanity and other living beings. Only mankind is 'made in the image of God' with a creative ability, responsibility, intellect, conscience and the capability of

⁵ www.peta.org (last accessed 19/06/2020).

⁶ 'Why should we worry about animals when there are so many problems involving humans?', PETA, <https://www.peta.org/about-peta/faq/why-should-we-worry-about-animals-when-there-are-so-many-problems-involving-humans/> (last checked on 19/06/2020).

dominion – things which reflects the character of the holy Creator in ways that animals do not. This, however, contradicts the vegan construct of ‘speciesism’. PETA clarifies:

Speciesism is the human-held belief that all other animal species are inferior. Speciesist thinking involves considering animals – who have their own desires, needs, and complex lives – as means to human ends. This supremacist line of ‘reasoning’ is used to defend treating other living, feeling beings as property, objects, or even ingredients. It’s a bias rooted in denying others their own agency, interests, and self-worth, often for personal gain.⁷

GoVeganWorld, another vegan campaign organisation filled London with posters on public transport last year with pictures of various young animals accompanied by the caption: ‘I’m me, not meat’.⁸ One featured a picture of a cow and its offspring declaring, ‘Dairy takes babies from their mothers. Go vegan.’ Another says, ‘It’s not a personal choice when someone is killed’. The campaign is designed to promote the view that humans and animals are really equals, something that a Christian worldview denies.

Veganism asserts that eating meat is unjust and immoral

In fairness, the vegans I know convey this belief in a friendly way. With some exceptions, their desire is to win people positively. I do respect that and their motives. While at a birthday party, a vegan friend of mine was trying to convert the waitress to the ‘good news’ of veganism. Afterwards he turned to me and said ‘A lot of people think I’m crazy when I tell them about veganism. But I’m sure you get that a lot too. We’re similar in that way.’ I couldn’t argue with that and thus began a substantial and friendly conversation about veganism, the gospel and mortality.

Is it true that some farming practices are quite brutal and cruel? Yes. Is this universally the case? No. Another ‘almost vegan’ friend confesses she sometimes eats eggs from some rescue hens that someone keeps running free in her back garden. There are good, sympathetic and sustainable farming practices which should be encouraged. Arguably, controlling the population of wild animals (game meat) is important to maintaining healthy and sustainable ecosystems.⁹

The killing of animals is not equivalent to murder and the eating of animal meat is not morally equivalent to cannibalism as veganism purports. Both the Old and New Testaments specifically permit meat-eating and the New Testament letters clearly indicate that abstaining from meat is a matter of individual conscience, except when associated with idol worship or offending another Christian’s conscience. God defines the standard of what is right and just and it is not ours to add to what he has revealed.

Veganism attains righteousness through diet and abstinence

Veganism often exhibits a self-righteous spirit that looks down on meat-eaters. I have been told that veganism ‘is about being a better person’, ‘being vegan helps you to be a good person’, and even ‘veganism has improved me spiritually’. As Christians, we cannot entertain the notion of achieving righteousness through any good work, much less by abstaining from certain foods and drink. Indeed, 1 Timothy 4:3 shows that believing abstinence from certain foods is a pathway to righteousness is giving heed to ‘deceitful spirits’ and ‘doctrines of demons’. The apostle Paul says to the church in Colossae:

Such restrictions indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-prescribed worship, their false humility, and their harsh treatment of the body; but they are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:23, Berean Study Bible)

Thus, the idea that a vegan lifestyle does anything to fix the problems of the world and the deep-seated

⁷ ‘What is Speciesism?’, PETA, <https://www.peta.org/about-peta/faq/what-is-speciesism/> (last accessed 19/06/2020).

⁸ For details on these campaigns visit GoVeganWorld.com.

⁹ Whit Gibbons, ‘Why is Hunting Good for the Environment?’ for Savannah River Ecology Laboratory, University of Georgia, November 2003. There are many resources available on this, not to mention logical reasoning - a vegan friend of mine acknowledges she doesn’t have the answers to the real problems posed ecologically were everyone to go vegan.

depravity of mankind is misguided. It may make one feel good about oneself and, for some perhaps, good health, but ultimately does not make us right in our relationship with God or our fellow man.

Conclusion

In the past year, veganism has gained momentum as another bandwagon from which to virtuously signal 'Look at me! I'm a good person.' In many cases veganism is guilty of the idolatry spoken of in Romans 1:25 where the creature is elevated and worshipped and the Creator denied. While there are Christians who choose to adopt a vegan lifestyle, and they should not be judged any more than meat-eaters over their dietary choice, we should be under no illusion that this makes one right with God.

It is important to understand social issues as presented by our ever-changing cultural landscape. Veganism is just the latest in a long list that Christians must investigate and respond to in a pastoral and biblical way while upholding the grace of God in salvation to everyone – vegan or meat-eater – who believes!

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