

A Christian Rationale for Vegetarianism

By Kristin Johnston Largen

Abstract: This article lays out an argument for vegetarianism based on a Christian theological rationale, specifically on a new articulation of a Christian anthropology for the 21st century. What I suggest is that an exploration of what it means to be human in a contemporary first world context leads to the conclusion that vegetarianism is a logical expression of one's understanding of oneself as a Christian, and one's exercise of one's Christian faith and discipleship.

Key Terms: vegetarianism, Christian anthropology, animal rights, animal ethics, *imago Dei*

Sowing the Seeds of Love

When I was in the sixth grade, I asked my parents if I could become a vegetarian; and my parents, who were both born and raised in a small Iowa town and every year bought a side of beef for our downstairs freezer, said no. I accepted their decision and waited. As soon as I graduated from high school and went off to college, I began my practice of vegetarianism and have continued it ever since.

At that time, at the age of twelve or so, I certainly had no theological rationale to defend my desire; and even if someone had offered me one, I'm sure I wouldn't have been able to understand it. All I knew then was that I loved animals, and I didn't want to eat them. In the decades that followed my initial declaration for vegetarianism, I have read extensively in this area, and I now can articulate a variety of reasons—theological and otherwise—why one can and/or should become a vegetarian. However, to be honest, when it comes right down to it, all of these theological and philosophical arguments only augment, but do not sur-

pass, my original conviction: I love animals, and so I don't want to eat them. It is a deep-seated belief, based on who I understand myself to be as a human being, how I understand myself to be in relationship to non-human animals, and finally and most importantly, how I understand myself as created in love and grace in the image of God.

In this article I argue for a vegetarian practice grounded not in specific ethical doctrines, but based on a particular articulation of Christian anthropology: that is, I base my argument not on what we should or should not do, but on who we are—or more specifically, who God has created us to be. I proceed as follows. First, for those readers who might be unfamiliar with animal ethics and animal theology, I introduce the reader to two well-known ethical arguments that are often used to justify vegetarianism, as articulated by two key scholars in this field. Then, I turn to my own argument, where I argue for a vegetarian practice based on three key components of what it means for humans today to exist as *imago Dei*, that is, bearing the image of God: relationality, solidarity, and love.

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A Contextual Caveat

Let me begin with one brief caveat: the argument I make here is primarily directed toward first world Christians who have the means and the freedom to make decisions regarding their eating habits. While there might be aspects of my argument that could be universally applied, I am not making that type of argument explicitly, for several reasons. First, I recognize the fact that many indigenous populations have very different over-arching relationships with animals that create the possibility for very different types of interactions that simply are not possible in an industrialized, globalized country like the United States. Let me offer an example. It is very different, I would argue, when an arctic Native American tribe hunts a whale than when Japanese commercial fishing boats engage in the mass destruction of entire pods of whales. While one may believe that even in the case of the Native American tribe, an argument should be made against whaling, it must be conceded that such an argument, will, by necessity, be very different from the one mounted against commercial whalers. In this article I will not be talking directly about indigenous peoples and the varied relationships they have with non-human animals. That is a topic for another day.

Second, I also recognize that the working poor, and especially the homeless, often depend on others for their food, and in many cases they do not have the freedom to choose not to eat animals. They must eat what they can afford, they must eat what is given to them, and they must eat what is available to them. Any argument for vegetarianism that wants to be comprehensive across socio-economic boundaries must take a critical look at much larger societal issues that include, but are not limited to, the role of racism and classism in American society, the American culture of fast food, the influence of the farming industry and government subsidies, and the politics behind the cost and availability of certain foods both locally, regionally, and nationally. These are all important issues, but they, too, are considerations for another day.¹

Finally, let me emphasize that even if the reader of this article is not a vegetarian and not interested in becoming one, she will still find valuable the discussion of the overall issues of what it means to be human in today's world, and how that affects how Christians see themselves in the larger global context, particularly in one's relationship to non-human animals, broadly conceived.

Two Ethical Proposals

Typically, discussions of vegetarianism are set in an explicitly ethical context, rather than a theological one—Andrew Linzey's extensive body of work is the most notable exception to this rule, and I will be referencing his arguments later in the article. This is not to say that there is a hard and fast distinction between ethics and theology; in fact, they are intimately related, and what is said in one discipline heavily influences what is said in the other. Any theological argument for vegetarianism cannot ignore what the ethicists have said on this topic. For this reason, I think it is helpful to briefly introduce two influential ethical arguments that advocate the practice of vegetarianism within a larger framework of a call for a more just treatment of animals overall, and a more compassionate relationship with them.

Animal Rights & Utilitarianism—Peter Singer

Ethical discussions of vegetarianism typically are combined with a variety of other issues relating to the treatment of animals, such as hunting, animal research, and factory farming practices, which are all grouped under the broad category of animal rights. Among the scholars working in this field, two names are consistently cited: Tom Regan and Peter Singer. Both have been very influential in the development of ethical reflection on animals in the 20th century, and both have been writing on this

topic for roughly thirty years. I have chosen to use the work of Peter Singer as my example.

Peter Singer's most well-known book—the book that arguably began the animal rights movement—is titled *Animal Liberation*, first published in 1975. There he lays out his argument, which is based primarily on utilitarian concerns focused on pain and suffering, and an animal's level of sentience.² In that book and ever since, Singer has consistently argued against 'speciesism,' which he defines as "the idea that it is justifiable to give preference to beings simply on the ground that they are members of the species *Homo sapiens*."³ The rejection of speciesism has the following ramifications for Singer and others who share this line of reasoning: "The rejection of speciesism therefore does not require us to say that all lives are of equal worth, or that all interests of humans and animals must be given equal weight, no matter what those interests may be. It requires us to make only the more limited and defensible claim that where animals and humans have similar interests—we might take the interest in avoiding physical pain as an example—those interests are to be counted equally. We must not disregard or discount the interest of another being, merely because the being is not human."⁴ This is a utilitarian argument, extended to include all members of the animal kingdom, not just humans. So, when we are looking to "maximize the expected satisfaction of interests in the world, equally considered,"⁵ we must take into account not just human satisfaction and dissatisfaction—human pain and pleasure, for example—but non-human animal satisfaction as well. For Singer, the standard is, "If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for disregarding that suffering."⁶

Incidentally, regarding the practice of vegetarianism, this line of reasoning has led Singer to some interesting speculation regarding what, if any, animals are OK to eat. The question revolves around where the line of sentient suffering falls along the animal kingdom. Originally, he thought it would be permissible to eat oysters and clams, arguing that without a central nervous system, they do not have the capacity to feel pain. Thus, Singer drew his vegetarian line between shrimp and oysters. In his later work, however, he decides, "While one

cannot with any confidence say that these creatures do feel pain, so one can equally have little confidence in saying that they do not feel pain . . . Since it is so easy to avoid eating them, I now think it better to do so."⁷

In the context of Singer's overarching argument against speciesism, vegetarianism is interpreted as a form of protest and political action against both the killing of non-human animals, and perhaps even more importantly, the inflicting of suffering upon them, which is inescapable in most factory farming practices. As Singer describes it, "Vegetarianism is a form of boycott,"⁸ as it is a clear expression of one's unwillingness to participate in a system in which millions of animals are routinely tortured, exploited, and brutally killed. Thus, Singer locates vegetarianism in a larger practice of resisting animal cruelty, and resisting the myths that defend such cruelty as either necessary or not as bad as they appear.

Finally, since Singer's treatment of vegetarianism is based in an ethical rationale, it is important to note that, for Singer, there are other key reasons for practicing vegetarianism that go beyond simple care for animal well-being. First is the environmental argument. Calling vegetarianism "a practical, living refutation of a common, yet utterly false, defense of factory farming methods," Singer lays out the wide range of disastrous environmental effects factory farming causes, such as wasteful energy usage, water contamination, deforestation and pollution, just to name a few. He also challenges many of the beliefs that undergird the system of factory farming, such as: factory farming contributes to the world hunger problem [false]; and people can only get the number of calories they need to survive by eating meat [false].⁹ Second are the health benefits of a vegetarian diet for the people who practice it. Singer includes in his argument for vegetarianism such benefits as longer life spans, fitter and 'more zestful' lives, and a new relationship to food not 'tainted' by flesh.¹⁰ Singer himself notes how his own relationship with food and cooking was transformed once he began growing many of his own vegetables in a backyard garden, and began cooking Asian and Indian recipes using more exotic, flavorful spices.

The Feminist Ethic of Care—Carol Adams

Another ethical argument for vegetarianism that originates from a very different perspective and is motivated by different concerns, is a feminist ethic of care. Feminist ethic of care theory can be traced back to a book published in 1982 by Carol Gilligan, titled *In a Different Voice*. Gilligan argues from a feminist perspective that women understand morality differently than men. For women, she suggests, morality is linked to care and responsibility, whereas for men, morality is linked to justice and rights. She writes, “The psychology of women that has consistently been described as distinctive in its greater orientation toward relationship and interdependence implies a more contextual mode of judgment and a different moral understanding.”¹¹ Even though most feminists today would reject this universalizing of women’s nature, many have built on Gilligan’s research and developed her argument in the context of the ethics of our relationship to animals. Applied to animal ethics, a feminist ethic of care rejects using abstract principles to make sweeping ethical decisions about animals, and recognizes that the diversity of the animals with whom we come into contact demands attention to individual particularities.¹²

Those who articulate a feminist ethic of care critique a variety of aspects of the ethical theories of Regan and Singer. Among these, one of the most trenchant and compelling is the absence of value given to feelings and one’s emotional response to animals. Feminists argue that the utilitarian argument in particular “devalues, suppresses, or denies the emotions” by claiming that the feelings we have toward animals cannot and should not be part of a rational ethical defense.¹³ Instead, feminists argue for a more holistic understanding of our relationship to animals, in which the compassion we feel for animals is just as important in making an argument as a philosophical conviction.

My example in this area is Carol Adams, whose work linking feminist thought and animal ethics first came to the fore in her book, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, published in 1990. There, she argued

that “meat is a symbol of patriarchy,”¹⁴ and that vegetarianism is associated with weakness, women, and passivity. Still today, there is some truth to her claim that “men who decide to eschew meat eating are deemed effeminate; failure of men to eat meat announces that they are not masculine.”¹⁵ What is distinctive about her work is her insistence on placing the questions she asks about the relationship we have with animals and our treatment of them, explicitly in the context of the patriarchal society in which we live. She is convinced that the latter fundamentally and profoundly shapes the former; thus the former cannot be discussed without also addressing the latter.

Let me note three key points that ground her overall argument. First, Adams rejects outright the fiction of an autonomous subject, which she sees as the foundation of rights theory. She writes, “the male ideal of the autonomous individual, on which rights theory is based, is fraudulent,”¹⁶ emphasizing the inherent relationality of every human being which instead makes utilitarian calculations impossible. When we are all fundamentally interconnected, it is impractical to quantify ethical decisions based on an assessment of ‘how many’ will be affected by certain decisions. Instead, we all are always affected, though some might be more directly affected than others.

Second, Adams refuses to pit our care for humans over and against our care for animals, as though there is only a limited amount of care to go around; the assumption that caring for animals necessitates a reduction of care for our fellow humans. Adams repudiates a “hierarchy of caring that assumes people first have to care about other people before they care about animals and that these caring acts are hostile to each other. “In fact,” she writes, “violence against people and that against animals is interdependent. Caring about both is required.”¹⁷

Finally, in the same way that Adams resists a hierarchy of caring when it comes to human and non-human animals, she also resists the practice of ‘comparing’ suffering, and trying to determine whose suffering is worse. Adams emphasizes that suffering is not ‘generic,’ and that trying to measure suffering is both unhelpful and counterproductive. She writes, “It is not for us to compare suffering.

We should *acknowledge* suffering, but not compare it. Acknowledging grants the *integrity* of the suffering, while comparing assumes the *reducibility*, the objectification of suffering.”¹⁸ For Adams, any suffering is too much suffering; and we cannot and should not try to compare human suffering and animal suffering, using one to justify or excuse the other. Instead, we must work to end all suffering, human and animal alike.¹⁹

Defining an Anthropology

Developing a theological rationale for vegetarianism is not new, and its roots extend deep into the Christian tradition, with some arguing persuasively that a case for vegetarianism can be made from Scripture. For example, in the created order before Noah, humanity was only given plants for food, not animals; and in the peaceable kingdom imagery of Isaiah, perhaps the most vivid and memorable illustration of the biblical hope for a transformed, renewed and restored creation in the kingdom of God is that of the lion and lamb lying down together. Andrew Linzey argues that, in the Bible, “Killing for food appears essential in the world as we now know it influenced as it is by corruption and wickedness. But such a state of affairs is not as God originally willed it. Even when we kill under situations of necessity we have to remember that the lives we kill do not belong to us and that we are accountable to God. Moreover, God’s ultimate will for creation shall prevail. Whatever the present circumstance, one day all creation, human and animal, shall live in peace.”²⁰

However, while one can point to isolated figures advocating vegetarianism in the history of the Christian church, such figures were never the norm and did not do much to influence the development of Christian doctrine. In the West, the vegetarian ‘movement’ didn’t really begin until the 19th century [heavily influenced by certain Christian groups], with the word ‘vegetarian’ being coined in the 1840s, and the founding of the Vegetarian Society in England occurring in 1847.²¹ Since that time, Christian discussion of and advocacy for

vegetarianism has only increased; and since the environmental movement of the 1970s, that increase has been ever more rapid as our eating habits have been directly linked to other destructive environmental practices.

While this link is undeniable, I do not rely on that line of argumentation. Instead, my argument is based exclusively on the belief that because Christians are made in the image of God, and called by God to a life of relationship and love with all God’s creation, Christians should not eat animals. This is an anthropological argument; that is, it is based on a particular understanding of who Christians are, which itself is based on a particular understanding of who God has created us to be. My argument proceeds along the following lines. First, I describe how our inherent relationality as human beings necessarily includes subject/subject relationships with animals. Second, I argue that this subject/subject relationship moves us to stand in solidarity with animals against their suffering and exploitation. Finally, I argue that just as Christians are called to love our human neighbors, we are also called to love our animal neighbors; and, as I intuited as a young girl, loving someone means not eating him/her.²²

Relationality: Seeing Animals as Subjects, not Objects

The first argument I make for a Christian vegetarian practice is grounded in the claim that humans were created to have ‘I-Thou’ relationships with non-human animals, rather than ‘I-It’ relationships. Animals are fellow subjects to whom we owe care, consideration, and respect rather than objects that we can manage, harvest, and manipulate to serve our best interests. Animals were created by God with love and care, just as we were, and thus animals have intrinsic value, just as we do. Andrew Linzey expressed this idea well in an interview with *Satya* magazine: “In God’s eyes, all creatures have value whether we find them cuddly, affectionate, beautiful or otherwise. Our own perspective—in a

way—is neither here nor there. Theology, at its best, can help to liberate us from our own anthropocentric limitations.”²³ What Linzey is pointing to is that seeing animals as fellow subjects—fellow ‘Ts—allows us to move beyond relating to them only in terms of what they can do for us, and how we can use them to our benefit.

I and Thou

Martin Buber, in *I and Thou*, writes powerfully about the difference between an ‘I-Thou’ relationship and an ‘I-It’ relationship. The former word-pair denotes a world of genuine relation, the only world, in fact, in which human beings can find their true existence. This is the relationship into which God calls us, in which God meets us; and it is from this relationship that every other authentic relationship flows. Buber writes, “Man [*sic*] becomes an I through a You.”²⁴ By comparison, the ‘I-It’ word-pair denotes only a broken existence, characterized by detachment, lack of love, object-manipulation, and the use of others as a means to an end. This ‘relationship’ is no real relationship at all.

Buber is very clear that the ‘I-Thou’ relationship characterizes our connection not only with God and with other humans, but with the entire created world. Buber gives this example of “the world of relation” connoted by this ‘I-Thou’ designation. “I contemplate a tree. I can accept it as a picture . . . I can feel it as movement . . . I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance, with an eye to its construction and its way of life . . . Throughout all of this the tree remains my object and has its place and its time span, its kind and condition. But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It.”²⁵ If this can happen with a tree, surely it can happen with a duck, a deer, or a dolphin.

Sallie McFague’s “Loving Eye”

Staying with Buber’s description of the visual contemplation of creation leads me to another theolo-

gian who also explores the concept of relationality through the metaphor of ‘seeing.’ Sallie McFague, in her book *Super, Natural Christians*, makes an important distinction between what she calls the “arrogant eye” and the “loving eye.” The “arrogant eye” points to the typical way a Westerner relates to nature: from a distance, as a spectator, through a camera lens with what Sigmund Freud called “scopophilia—subjecting other people to a curious, controlling gaze, seeing them as objects.”²⁶ (Incidentally, McFague notes that the most extreme example of this type of ‘seeing’ is pornography, which, it seems to me, makes the connection Carol Adams and other feminists describe between the treatment of women and animals in a patriarchal society all the more fitting.)

In contrast to the “arrogant eye,” McFague posits the “loving eye.” This metaphor suggests a relationship built on much more than simply sight, a relationship that is constituted by love and touch, a relationship that is at the heart of what it means to exist in any form. Noting the difference between the “eye of the mind” and the “eye of the body,” McFague asks if, instead of seeing ourselves as lone individuals, gazing out upon nature from the top of a hill, kings of all we survey, is it not more appropriate “to see the self as coming from the womb, licked and touched into existence, oneself reaching out to touch and responding when touched: created, surrounded, and supported by others, by other people, other lifeforms, other things?”²⁷ We do not exist ‘apart from’ but only as ‘a part of creation, and we cannot fully realize our humanity without recognizing, nurturing, and celebrating that relationship.

In my view, this claim about the inherent relationality of human existence, and the inclusion of non-human animals in that relationality, grounds the claim that vegetarianism is not a form of self-denial, abstinence, or physical mortification. Instead of vegetarianism symbolizing a lack or a deficiency, vegetarianism symbolizes a life of abundance and generosity—a life lived out of surplus, rather than scarcity. Understood this way, vegetarianism becomes a deeply spiritual practice springing from love, a sense of connectedness, and the experience of God’s grace. Marti Kheel writes that in adopting

a vegetarian (or even more, a vegan) diet, “We are not denying ourselves the pleasure of meat, nor are we conquering our beastly nature.”²⁸ Instead, we are embracing what Carol Adams calls “spiritual vegetarianism. Neither joyless nor legislating. Neither spartan nor puritan, but joyful and free.”²⁹

Animals are animals, they are not ‘meat,’ and they are not ‘food.’ They are individuals with personalities, desires, fears, and joys. They demonstrate a variety of ways of interacting with the world, and they make different claims upon us. Relationships with animals, like relationships with people are not all the same—they are complicated, and they vary from person to person, from animal to animal. However, regardless of the differences, one thing is clear: animals are fellow subjects, created and called good by God, and we cannot realize our full humanity without them.

Solidarity: Standing with Animals against their Oppression

Entering into a subject/subject relationship with animals not only leads us into a new way of seeing them, it also opens our eyes to a new way of seeing ourselves. Affirming this relationship suggests a different way of articulating the uniqueness of the human species, a different way of living out our existence as *imago Dei* that doesn’t depend on a hierarchy of being, control or domination. Andrew Linzey describes this new vision of human distinctiveness well. He argues that humans are indeed unique among animals, but their uniqueness lies not in their capacity for reason, dominion, intelligence or morality. Instead, as humans have been created in the image of a God who freely chose suffering as a means to salvation, we therefore have been created to be ‘the servant species.’ He writes, “Drawing upon the idea of a God who suffers, I argue that human uniqueness can be defined as the capacity for service and self-sacrifice. From this perspective, humans are the species uniquely commissioned to exercise a self-sacrificial priesthood,

after the one High Priest, not just for members of their own species, but for all sentient creatures. The groaning and travailing of fellow creatures requires a species capable of co-operating with God in the healing and liberating of creation.”³⁰

Linzey sketches out an argument for a kind of servant-priesthood of all believers that contains the following three movements: first, a movement away from the idea that God’s suffering only relates to humanity—instead, “God suffers in all suffering creatures;” second, a movement away from the idea that ‘priesthood’ relates only to the God/human relationship—instead, “priesthood is a participation in God’s redeeming presence in the world;” and third, a movement away from the idea that the definition of what priesthood looks like in the world can be adequately explained with recourse only to human existence—instead, it demands “the exercise of Christ-like power and service to the whole creation.”³¹

I wholeheartedly endorse Linzey’s basic insight here, but I propose a slight modification. Instead of using the language of servanthood and self-sacrifice—concepts which feminist theologians have shown to be dangerous in their capacity to further oppress those already living lives of unjust suffering and sacrifice—I want to use the language of solidarity. Instead of seeing Jesus’ life through the lens of suffering, I suggest we view it through the lens of solidarity; and following that, see our own humanity through this lens as well. Just as Jesus spent his ministry reaching out to the marginalized and oppressed, standing with the outcast and despised, and eating with sinners and prostitutes, so too are those who claim his name for themselves today called to stand in solidarity with those who are violated and exploited.

In the 21st century First World context in which we live, clearly animals must be included in this category of the violated and exploited. However, lest there be any doubt, let me emphasize the point Carol Adams made above: I am not advocating that this position of solidarity demands that we chose animals over people—certainly Christians also are called to stand in solidarity with those human beings whose lives are characterized by violence, grinding poverty, and injustice. What is required

of us is ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’—we can and should stand in solidarity with both human and non-human animals.

One of the theologians who writes eloquently about the need for solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed is Ada María Isasi-Díaz. In her book, *En La Lucha*, she elaborates on what it means to be in true solidarity, specifically with Latinas.

Effective solidarity with Latinas is not a matter of agreeing with, being supportive of, or being inspired by our cause. Solidarity starts with recognizing the commonality of responsibilities and interests that all of us have despite differences of race or ethnicity, class, sex, sexual preference, age. Solidarity has to do with recognizing and affirming, valuing and defending a community of interest, feeling, purposes and actions with the poor and the oppressed. The two main, interdependent elements of solidarity are mutuality and praxis. Mutuality keeps solidarity from being a merely altruistic praxis by making clear that if it is true that solidarity benefits the poor and the oppressed, it is also true that the salvation and liberation of the rich and the oppressors depend on it. Solidarity is truly praxis, because in order for a genuine community of interests, feelings, and purposes to exist between the oppressed and the oppressor, there must be a radical action on the part of the oppressors that leads to the undoing of oppression.³²

What this vision of solidarity requires of us is two things. First, the concept of solidarity encourages us to recognize that human well-being is intimately linked to animal well-being. We see this in a variety of ways. Humans cannot be well when our destructive manipulation of animal populations dramatically increases pollution and environmental destruction. Humans cannot be well when our societies do not take cruelty to animals seriously. Humans cannot be well when restaurants are constantly on the lookout for the next ‘exotic meat’ to serve on their menus, and when hunters can, for a price, kill even the most critically endangered animal species for sport. Christian solidarity calls us to stand against these and all oppressive practices,

and speak out on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves.

Second, the concept of solidarity moves us into action, reminding us that it is not enough to think animal exploitation is wrong, we need to do something about it; and, in the context in which we live today, one of the most tangible, productive responses we can make is to take ourselves out of this system of exploitation by refusing to eat animals. While some may argue that it is OK to eat animals who were raised by small family farmers, and allowed to graze freely and then killed as humanely possible, the fact still remains that eating animals in our culture sends a message that tacitly supports the current system in place whereby the vast majority of animals are processed into meat. This encourages restaurants and companies to continue to get their hamburgers and chicken breasts as cheaply and as quickly as possible, never mind the cost to the animals themselves. The most visible, dramatic way of rejecting this system and standing against it is vegetarianism. That is the logical end to this call for solidarity with animals.

Loving God, Loving our Animal Neighbors

We have come full circle, back to the love with which I began. Building on all that has been said previously, interpreting our humanity—what it means to be created *imago Dei*—through the lens of relationality and solidarity, we are led to the culminating point of such a vision, love. I want to conclude by arguing that a central part of what it means to be made in the *imago Dei* is our capacity and need for love. I want to extend that bond of love to the animal kingdom and suggest that we are called to see not only other humans, but also non-human animals as objects of our love and affection.

Let me offer an easy entry into this argument, one that is foremost in my mind, having just watched the annual Westminster Dog Show last night. Most Americans have a visceral disgust at

the thought of eating a dog or a cat. There is no inherent reason for this, as we eat many other animals without such revulsion, except for the fact that so many of us have dogs and cats as pets. For many of us, that means that these animals share our homes, our couches, our food, and in some cases, even our beds. We come to know them as unique individuals, and in knowing them, we come to love them; and, obviously, once you have loved an animal, it is very difficult to eat him/her.

However, a Christian theological rationale for vegetarianism cannot simply stop here, with the love we have for our pets motivating us to avoid eating some animals, but not others. Ultimately, this logic is not enough to sustain the more universal argument I am trying to make. Let me give two examples of how quickly such an argument breaks down. First, in an article published in *Social Theory and Practice*, the author, Jeff Jordan, argues for vegetarianism under the rubric of friendship. He writes, “Employing the widely accepted idea that one can befriend certain animals, conjoined with a plausible moral principle, vegetarianism follows.”³³ Unfortunately, while this argument holds up well with his primary animal exemplar, dogs, it fares less well when thinking about pigs and sheep [an objection he attempts to refute]; and absolutely fails when it comes to wild animals with whom ‘friendship’ is not possible nor even desired, if it requires such taming as to fundamentally change the nature of the animal. For example, many cultures find shark fin soup to be a delicacy, to the point that overfishing of sharks has caused a dangerous drop in many populations. I cannot imagine being ‘friends’ with a shark—does that mean it is, then, OK to eat them? Many people who love their Jack Russells and therefore would not dream of ever eating any breed of dog quite easily eat fried chicken and sausage without a second thought—they are not ‘friends’ with chickens and pigs, and therefore have no emotional attachment to them.

The other problem with this argument is that one culture’s ‘friend’ is another culture’s ‘food’—and who is to determine which culture’s ethic should prevail. Matthew Scully notes this problem in his book, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, in his chapter

on whaling and commercial fishing. At an International Whaling Commission meeting, held in Adelaide, Australia, one of the Japanese delegates (under fire for Japan’s consistent violation of the international ban on commercial whaling), Mr. Komatsu, says, “Here in our host country, four or five million kangaroos are slaughtered every year for meat consumed domestically, for leather products exported to Europe and America, and for the diversion of the country’s famed ‘weekend hunters’ firing from careening trucks.” Scully goes on to note that Mr. Komatsu then wonders, “How would the Australian delegates care to see that on film, or the British delegates some footage of their own abattoirs, or the New Zealanders their lambs at slaughter, or the Americans their industrial hog farms?”³⁴

In other words, every culture has a certain affinity with specific animals that causes outrage when those animals are mistreated. Americans, for example, have a special appreciation for marine mammals that makes whaling highly unpopular. They do not typically have this appreciation for pigs and cows, which allows their mistreatment and slaughter to pass without much notice.

For both of these reasons, a different articulation of love is needed—specifically, a Christian understanding of love that encompasses not only one’s friends but one’s enemies, not only one’s neighbors but strangers, too. A Christian doctrine of love goes beyond loving someone for her intelligence, grace, or beauty; it goes beyond loving someone for how he can make your life better; and it goes beyond loving someone for the things you have in common, or for how s/he makes you a better person. This is because a Christian understanding of love is not based on the qualities inherent in another—the things that draw our love—but rather on the love God has for this one.

Christians love our human and animal neighbors not only because Christ calls us to do so, but even more, because Christ, living in us, makes it possible to do so. Jesus Christ calls us to see his face in the face of all of our brothers and sisters—not just the ones we like, not just the ones who make us happy or feel good—and thus when we love them, we love him, too. There simply can be no love of God without love of neighbor; and the

love to which we are called is not a selective love, which chooses certain neighbors worthy of love and deems others OK to ignore or hate. Instead, it is as comprehensive as the love God showed for all God's creatures in the creation and redemption of the universe; and if God loves all God's creatures, we should love them, too. This is the vision of Christian love which we are called to embody as bearers of the *imago Dei*.

Saying 'Yes'

The late Richard John Neuhaus, in a short piece in *First Things*, defended his essay on Matthew Scully's book, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* [cited earlier]. Apparently, some readers took issue with the fact that Neuhaus even read Scully's book, let alone that he felt it was worthy of a review. In the course of Neuhaus' defense, he noted what a friend says about her practice of vegetarianism: she calls it "a testament of hope"—hope for the future, in which a new reality 'rightly ordered' will reign.³⁵ It is with such a testament of hope that I want to close this article.

I know that many remain unconvinced by any of the arguments I have proposed linking one's Christian faith to the practice of vegetarianism; and that many will continue to extend their Christian beliefs about relationship, solidarity and love only to other human beings, and not to animals. For many, the very concept of humans as uniquely created in the image of God allows them to justify drawing a thick black line between human and non-human animals, keeping their faith practices firmly on the human side of the line. I know this is true today, and I know it will be true tomorrow—and yet, I continue to actively hope for change, trusting that God has a different vision for us, that the Holy Spirit is at work creating something different within and among us, and that, in the end, God has something wondrously, radically different in store for us in the kingdom. And this hope both encourages and inspires me to live differently, to live as though the vision I hope for were really true now.³⁶

Andrew Linzey believes that "vegetarianism is implicitly a theological act. It's not about saying 'No,' but about saying 'Yes'."³⁷ I think this 'yes' is a fitting last word to all I have said: 'yes' to God, and to God's vision for creation; 'yes' to animals, and to a relationship of love and respect with them; and finally 'yes' to ourselves, to becoming the people God created us to be, unique bearers of the image of God in today's broken world.

Endnotes

1. For one helpful article on the relationship between vegetarianism and race/class, see Cathryn Bailey, "We Are What We Eat: Feminist Vegetarianism and the Reproduction of Racial Identity," *Hypatia*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Spring 2007).

2. Singer has been criticized on several fronts for his style of abstract, emotionally-disengaged logic: Matthew Scully, in *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2002), described it as "Peter Singer's hard utilitarian calculus" (p. 139).

3. *In Defense of Animals, the Second Wave*, edited by Peter Singer, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 3.

4. *Ibid.*, 7.

5. Gaverick Matheny, "Utilitarianism and Animals," in *In Defense of Animals, the Second Wave*, edited by Peter Singer, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 14

6. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, second edition, (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1990), 171.

7. *Ibid.*, 174.

8. *Ibid.*, 162.

9. *Ibid.*, 164.

10. *Ibid.*, 178–180.

11. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 22.

12. *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*, edited by Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 3.

13. *Ibid.*, 6. In addition, Josephine Donovan's chapter in this volume, "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory," elaborates on this argument.

14. Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1999), 37.

15. *Ibid.*, 34.

16. Carol J. Adams, "Caring about Suffering," *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*, 199.

17. Carol J. Adams, "The War on Compassion," in *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*, 21–22.

18. Carol J. Adams, "Caring about Suffering," in *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*, 212.

19. As a part of the larger discussion of a feminist ethic of care, one important criticism, raised by Grace Clement, suggests that both an

ethic of care and an ethic of rights are needed in animal ethics. Based on her understanding of the difference between wild and domesticated animals, and the very different relationships we have with animals that fall into these two broad categories, she advocates “a justice approach in interaction with and influenced by a care approach.” See Grace Clement, “The Ethic of Care and the Problem of Wild Animals,” in *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*, edited by Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 302.

20. Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology*, (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 129.

21. Tristram Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), xvi.

22. Even though I am speaking here within the Christian tradition, from a Christian perspective, I would be remiss if I did not note the importance of vegetarianism in many Eastern religions, particularly those in India. In *The Bloodless Revolution*, for example, Tristram Stuart notes that the arguments for vegetarianism that developed in Europe in the 17th, 18th & early 19th centuries were heavily influenced by the reports of European travelers to India and their discovery of the widespread vegetarianism that was practiced there. Stuart writes, “The impact of Indian vegetarianism vitally influenced a shift away from the Bible’s mandate of unlimited dominion. It encouraged people to imagine that broadening the sphere of ethical responsibility was beneficial for humans as well as for nature itself. Indian philosophy—and principally the doctrine of *ahimsa* (no-harm)—triggered a debate that has evolved over time into the modern ecological crisis.” Tristram Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), xxi.

23. Rynn Berry, “Christianity and Animals: An Interview with Andrew Linzey,” *Satya*, February, 1996.

24. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1970), 80.

25. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 57–58.

26. Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 84.

27. Sallie McFague, 92.

28. Marti Kheel, “Ecofeminist Perspectives on Vegetarianism: Beyond the Model of Abstinence,” paper presented at the American Academy of Religion meeting, Chicago, IL, November 1–3, 2008.

29. Carol J. Adams, “Feasting on Life,” *Ecotheology* 9 (2000), 40.

30. Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology*, 45.

31. *Ibid.*, 57.

32. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 58.

33. Jeff Jordan, “Why Friends Shouldn’t Let Friends Be Eaten: An Argument for Vegetarianism,” in *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (April 2001), 309.

34. Matthew Scully, in *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 149.

35. Richard John Neuhaus, *First Things*, April 2003, 74.

36. Stephen Webb, in “Whatever Happened to the Sin of Gluttony? Or: Why Christians Do Not Serve Meat with the Eucharist,” [*Encounter* 58.3, Summer 1997] applies this vision of hope to an understanding of the Eucharist. He writes, “The eucharist can be seen as the perfect meal, an anticipation of the eating and drinking that God has prepared for us in the world yet to come . . . Just think for one moment about how inappropriate it would be to serve meat during the eucharist . . . this communal meal, inclusive and joyous, means that sacrificial victims are no longer needed.” This is why it can be argued that the eucharist is “the perfect vegetarian meal.” [p. 249].

37. Rynn Berry, “Christianity and Animals: An Interview with Andrew Linzey,” *Satya*, February, 1996.