

# Introduction



## AMBIGUOUS PERMISSION, JOURNEYING SOULS, RESPLENDENT LIFE

Toward animals we manifest ancient ambivalence: awe, love, fear, cruelty. In their flight we envision the spirit's flight, against their strength and grace we gauge our own, with their bodies we sustain human life, and our infliction of suffering on them prompts the deepest religious perplexities. Whatever the sacred and the holy are thought to be, the human slaughter of animals questions it, renders it paradoxical, demands reflection.

Such questioning inescapably originates in religious traditions that first shape how the human relation to animals and to the sacred is thought and lived. Whatever the fundamental religious or metaphysical insights of a tradition, vegetarianism emerges illuminated by them, and in turn interprets and elaborates on them. Whether from the Orphic-Pythagorean belief in soul transmigration, Indian belief in the oneness of all things, the Buddhist recognition of impermanence and pervasive suffering, the Judaic-Christian sense of God's love for all creation, or the Sufi mystical sense of the unity of life, religious vegetarianism trails its origins in its very formulation.

The world's religious traditions do not speak with a single voice. No truth about how we should understand redemption, enlightenment, the nature of the holy, or our relation to animals is uttered independent of its own complex tradition. Similarly, religious arguments for vegetarianism draw on particular theologies, stories, or metaphors derived from specific material cultures and faith traditions and historically conditioned visions of necessity and possibility. Even rebellion against prevailing practice remains entangled with religious legacy. What truths there are to be known—of life's sanctity, of divine will, of the kinship of all creatures—are embedded in particular historical periods, particular

geographical settings, and particular cultural matrices. Even within individual spiritual traditions, defenders of vegetarianism speak in many voices. Thus the richness of the literature of this volume, with vegetarianism understood variously as spiritual discipline, respect for journeying souls, mercy toward God's creation, the redemption of our fallen selves, ecstatic affirmation of the identity of all life, compassionate kinship, and the eschatological perfecting of creation.

Glimpses from each of the traditions follow.

#### BIRDS AND LEAPING FISH

The ancient writings of the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition evoke a golden age of harmony between nature and humanity, a legendary counterpoint to present violence, wretched pain, and weariness. Described first by the Greek poet Hesiod in the eighth century BCE, this innocent age was marked by the gods' creation of a golden generation of mortals. Life was free of sorrow, hard work, and suffering; nature made abundant provision for human need. In successive generations, as hard work and pain increasingly became the human lot, the gods departed for Olympus, leaving human beings forsaken, defenseless against evil, and turned against both one another and their once benign nature.

This Orphic vision of the rise and fall of a golden age vividly depicts human violence as time-bound rather than necessary, a characteristic of present blighted generations rather than proof of an essentially broken human nature. Its dim memory of a peaceable harmony with nature expresses the constant hope that violence, both within human communities and toward animals, can be overcome. This hope, combined with the Pythagorean belief in soul transmigration, provides the twin foundations of Orphic-Pythagorean vegetarianism: the conviction that our original nature was nonviolent and at peace with other animals, and a respect for the fluidity of souls that course through smallest worm and fiercest beast. The writings of Hesiod, Porphyry, Ovid, Empedocles, and Philostratus explore these themes of a golden age and soul transmigration in detail. A look at the writings of Empedocles gives a representative sense of the richness of this particular tradition.

In the few fragments remaining to us, Empedocles speaks of divine decrees, of the birth "under this roofed cave" of human beings, of the pitiless day when first "the wretched deed of eating flesh" occurred, and of the terrible fate—the soul's wandering thrice ten thousand years—imposed by the pollution of bloodshed. The sorrow and groaning of defilement came to be the human lot, even though in the time that once was, no sin or pollution existed. But this defilement isn't inevitable. Empedocles, like all Orphic-Pythagoreans,

holds out the possibility of redemption. This possibility presumes an understanding of the cycle of transmigration, its cause as well as strategies for escaping it. The most important of these strategies is forbearance from violence—including the violence of slaughtering animals for their flesh.

Belief in transmigrating souls, from bush to bird to leaping journeying fish, as Empedocles says, evokes the fluidity of all living things and their common embodiment in flesh susceptible to pain and death. Woe to that human who inflicts suffering and death on beasts carrying within them transmigrant souls. “The force of the air pursues [the evil-doer] into the sea, the sea spews him out onto the floor of the earth, the earth casts him into the rays of the blazing sun, and the sun into the eddies of the air; one takes him from the other, but all abhor him.” And yet the “far-seeing sun, the serene harmonia, beauty and lovely truth”—the spiritual condition of the legendary golden age:—all these are recoverable if humans cease defiling themselves with blood. The purified father will see in each animal his son, the mother her daughter. No din of slaughter will impede the soul’s release.

The Orphic-Pythagorean vision has a pervasive sense of temporality as its mode of understanding violence and affirming hope. Nothing ordains that we must prey on the lives of other animals; nature is not destined to cruelty in the arrangements for its own perpetuation. Whatever is degenerate was once good and shall be—or at least *can* be—once more. A recovery of what once was good, that which is beyond “human sorrows or weariness,” always remains a spiritual possibility for humans.

#### ONE LIFE, ONE WORLD, ONE EXISTENCE

In the *Bhagavad-gītā*, Kṛṣṇa reminds us that every living being possesses a soul. To be free from sin, to escape bondage, delusion, and death, is to practice non-injury (or *ahimsā*) to the souls of all life. One who is enlightened realizes this truth: “Knowing and renouncing severally and singly the actions against living beings, in the regions above, below, and on the surface, everywhere and in all ways—a wise man neither gives pain to these bodies, nor assents to others in their doing so.” Kṛṣṇa’s words express the basic intuition that grounds the Indian spiritual tradition’s advocacy of a nonviolent diet.

In the twentieth century, Swami Vivekānanda, monk of the Ramakrishna Order, speaks from the highest ideals of Vedic wisdom to remind us of the spiritual underpinning of Kṛṣṇa’s words: that everything is One, that differences between the many orders of life are of degree rather than kind. “The amoeba and I are the same,” he asserts; “the difference is only one of degree. . . . A man

may see a great deal of difference between grass and a little tree, but if he mounts very high, the grass and the biggest tree will appear much the same.”

Vedānta denies both the notion of an essential separation between animals and humans and the belief that animals were created by God to be used for our food. From its perspective, “the lowest animal and the highest man are the same.” Were God partial to his human children, Vivekānanda writes, “I would rather die a hundred times than worship such a God.” Vivekānanda refuses to reconcile human weakness with holiness. Meat-eating is neither a biological necessity nor a divine ordination. Instead, it is an expression of self-indulgent desire, and we ought not to whitewash this fact. We know the ideal, and know equally well the cruelty involved in not following it. “Let us teach a religion which presents the highest ideal,” Vivekānanda pleads, rather than continuing to perpetuate the falsehood that spiritual weakness can be reconciled with holiness. Let us be raised up to God.

This sense of identity among all forms of life and its consequent principle of noninjury to life pervades Indian religious thought and practice. In the ancient *Dharmaśāstras*, of which the Laws of Manu form a part, the religious ideal is expressed early and with absolute clarity: “He who does not seek to cause the sufferings of bonds and death to living creatures, but desires the good of all beings, obtains endless bliss.” The spiritual discipline that flows from such principles is made plain in the *Ākarāṅga Sūtra*. The vow of the *Nirgrantha*, the Jain ascetic, is to renounce the killing of any living being, to be careful in walk, to search mind and speech for what might injure living beings, to root out “division, dissension, quarrels, faults and pains.”

The poetry of the fifteenth-century Indian Kabīr likewise defends the kindredness between humans and animals. His writings express anger at the unholiness and hypocrisy of animal slaughter and voice the conviction that such bloodshed is an impediment to human salvation. Kabīr mocks the man who ritually purifies himself and worships “according to rules,” but whose gluttonous appetite “causes a stream of blood to flow.” Animal slaughterers do not realize that “human flesh and the flesh of beasts is similar and their crimson blood is also the same.” Nor do flesh-eating humans recognize that the violence they inflict on helpless animals “will certainly take revenge.” Their own wickedness commits spiritual violence to themselves, and neither ritualized prayers nor pilgrimages nor alms can wash away the ensuing taint.

Excerpts from Mohandas Gandhi reflect Indian awareness of both the limitations of what is and the idealism of striving for what might be realized in the future. He argues that vegetarianism is a step in the right spiritual direction for both Christians who anticipate the kingdom of God and Hindus who seek the comprehensive *dharma* of nonviolence.

The Indian religious vegetarian tradition, unlike the Orphic-Pythagorean one, invokes no golden age, no distant past of tranquillity and peace among creatures. The path to salvation is conceived differently; the spiritual rhythm moves between the poles of delusion and knowledge, sin and purity. As the ancient Laws of Manu remind us, either we exist in bondage to delusion, or we do not. Either we understand that there is but one Life, one World, one Existence, or we do not. To know the oneness of life, to achieve enlightenment, is to practise noninjury to all life. Such atemporal rhythm—a rhythm more of consciousness than of time or history—pervades Indian writings on vegetarianism. What exists as most real is beyond history, and the self's striving must be directed toward this beyond in an embrace of the oneness of things. This in turn engenders perfect action and nonattachment. To be vegetarian is to acknowledge the truth that there is but one life.

#### R E L E A S I N G

In Buddhist cosmological visions, world systems, immense in time and space, arise and then dissolve. The karmic trajectories of human beings and animals, the order of their births and rebirths, occur in the realm of desire where humans and animals alike are prodded by ignorance and craving. Life fluidly moves between human and animal forms: Humans have been animals in previous lives and animals have been humans. As a recent commentator on Buddhism puts it, “The concepts of *karma* and rebirth situate one's humanity as provisional, as only a sign of previous good *karma*, and not as a permanent identity. . . . One is not really a human being, nor an animal, but a configuration of parts in a process of flux causing rebirth in different realms according to volition and acts.”<sup>1</sup>

In this rebirth system, as in Orphic-Pythagoreanism, compassion for animals is born from a sense of shared, kindred participation in the continuous flow of life. The *Lañkāvatāra Sūtra* leaves no room for doubt on this point. “There is not one living being that, having assumed the form of a living being, has not been your mother, or father, or brother, or sister, or son, or daughter, or the one or the other, in various degrees of kinship; and when acquiring another form of life may live as a beast, as a domestic animal, as a bird, or as a womb-born. . . . Let people cherish the thought of kinship with them, and, thinking that all beings are to be loved as if they were an only child, let them refrain from eating meat.” This position is reaffirmed by the twentieth-century American-born Zen master Philip Kapleau.

To what extent this compassion is to be construed as forbidding meat eating has been a matter of debate among Buddhist scholars and practitioners. The

Pāli texts of Theravāda (or southern) Buddhism suggest that the Buddha permitted meat eating in cases where the animal slaughter did not occur for that purpose. But the Mahāyāna (or northern) *sūtras* contradict this allowance, claiming that abstinence from all meat eating is an essential expression of compassion and the recognition of the Buddha-nature of all living beings.

According to the Mahāyāna Buddhism of East Asia, the underlying commonality that unites all forms of life consists of the spiritual element *tathāgathagarbha*, or Buddha-nature. All sentient beings, according to this doctrine of Indian origin, share Buddha-nature. Enlightened perception of *tathāgathagarbha* had great consequence for the Buddhist practice of vegetarianism and became established doctrine. The latitude that once existed—that animals not killed for one's own purposes could be eaten—no longer remained.

What remains, however, is the need to extinguish craving. Awareness of the Buddha-nature in all sentient beings is frequently clouded by the confusion and suffering born from desire. The Four Noble Truths stress the pervasiveness of craving as well as the insight that an end to suffering is attainable only when craving is destroyed, and nonattachment and compassion for all life embraced. Vegetarianism as *ahiṃsā* exemplifies both these ideals. The world itself will not be changed by the attainment of this enlightened insight; in Buddhism, there is no golden age, no fall, no ultimate restoration of harmony and peace among creatures. But the person who has come to know the Buddha-nature has a deep sense of the liberating promise of compassionate nonviolence, and labors to ease the suffering of all living beings. As Chu-Hung remarks in his eloquent essay, "Releasing life [from suffering] agrees with the teaching of the Buddha." And the karmic reward of such *ahiṃsā* is blessed release from the cycle of transmigration.

#### NEPHISH CHAYA

Jewish and Christian authors struggle with a religious heritage in which the highest ideals of compassion and love tensely coexist with the violent reality of animal slaughter. The uneasy conscience born of this dissonance is palpable when adherents of the two faith traditions defend vegetarianism. No belief in transmigrating souls or the oneness of all creation makes things easier for them. Their case must be painstakingly pieced together from hints and innuendoes gleaned from tradition and harmonized with scriptural authority. These harmonizations are sometimes obscure—critics may even say forced—but what is abundantly clear is the deep sense Jewish and Christian vegetarians have of the goodness of God's creation, the fullness of God's love for all creatures, the

intrinsic value of animals, and the possibility of a peaceable kingdom in which humans and animals might dwell together.

Although Jewish vegetarianism doesn't recognize spiritual equality between humans and animals, it does claim that animals belong to God rather than to humans, and consequently should be treated with reverence and respect: "The earth is the Lord's, and all that dwells therein." This insight prompts Rabbi Everett Gendler to designate beasts as "His"—that is, God's—beasts. The possessive pronoun doesn't suggest that animals are God's property so much as that they reflect something of divine nature and consequently are precious in the eyes of God. The first chapter of Genesis underscores this intuition when it describes both humans and animals as *nephish chaya* or "living souls." Animals are not merely animated lumps of clay whose only purpose is to serve humanity. They are *nephish chaya*, God-created beings of intrinsic worth whose existence testifies to the richness and graciousness of creation.

Jewish vegetarians argue that the primordial couple in Eden recognized the sanctity of animals, and that it was only after the Noachic Flood that fallen humans began to slaughter animals for food. But they also claim that such slaughter is only provisionally approved by God as a concession to human bloodlust. In this spirit Roberta Kalechofsky and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook interpret Jewish dietary laws, or *kashrut*. *Kashrut*, they contend, shouldn't be interpreted as an imprimatur for killing animals, but rather as a codified strategy on the part of a supremely patient God to reduce animal slaughter and awaken humans to its savagery. The spirit of *kashrut*, then, harkens back to the Edenic golden age when humans recognized animals as *nephish chaya*. Jewish vegetarianism seeks to recall and live the spiritual and practical implications of that recognition.

#### FEEDING ON ANIMALS, FEEDING ON GRACE

Sharing as they do a common heritage, Christian defenders of a nonviolent diet are troubled by many of the same ambiguities that vex Jewish vegetarians. Like their Jewish fellow vegetarians, for example, they believe that all life is a holy gift but not metaphysically identical; there exists a "close, vital kinship" between animals and humans, as Tom Regan says, but not the oneness taught in the Indian religious tradition. Moreover, Christian vegetarians agree with Jewish apologists such as Kalechofsky and Kook that carnivorousness is not God's original intention, but that God has reluctantly conceded to it—has granted "ambiguous permission," in Andrew Linzey's words—as a provisional measure. Spiritual progress in dietary matters, then, is a matter of going "forward," not "backward," to Genesis.

As we've seen, Jewish defenses of vegetarianism frequently appeal to the Edenic example of peaceful coexistence between beast and person. Christian vegetarians are sympathetic to this approach, but in preaching a nonviolent diet they also invoke the new dispensation that occurs in the Christ event. This event, which for the Christian is *the* exemplary embodiment of God's will, offers a new covenant, one of "grace" rather than "law." Grace reveals the primacy of love and compassion and, according to Christian vegetarians, that love and compassion must extend to all of God's creation. The traditionally presumed right to subjugate and rule the animal world, claims Linzey, does not "fit easily alongside the covenant of grace." At one time physical and historical necessity may have made the slaughter of animals for food a sober fact of life, but for the most part those days are over. Francis Clooney reminds us that the Christian Lord "has always chosen to be found in the context of the [eucharistic] meal." Christian vegetarianism offers the ideal of transfiguring every meal into a sanctified act of reverence and gratitude for God's bounty. Carol Adams puts the matter more starkly: one can feed on grace, or one can feed on animals, but not on both.

What's needed is a systematic rethinking of the spiritual implications of the new dispensation of grace. In Carol Adams's words, we require a "Christology of vegetarianism." Such a Christology would not be concerned with whether the historical Jesus was a vegetarian, but rather with the liberating promise Christlike love extends to humans, animals, society, and nature. Christians can no longer afford to alienate themselves from God by falsely naming sentient animals as mere "meat" and then treating them accordingly. Love is nothing if it fails to encompass all of creation. True *imitatio Christi* requires that we love as deeply and impartially as God does.

#### EVERY LIFE IS GOD'S

The Islamic tradition at first sight seems even more inhospitable to vegetarianism than Judaism or Christianity. The severity of Arabian desert life at the time of Islam's emergence, the near-absolute dependence on animal flesh for subsistence, and ancient strains in pre-Islamic fatalism of a harsh and unforgiving world order, appear to leave little room in either the *Qur'ān* or later Islamic writings for meditations on the value of animal life. But it would be a mistake to interpret this as an inhospitableness per se to vegetarianism. Infrequent as they may be, writings that recommend compassion and a sense of kindredness with animals are to be found, and they reflect deep undercurrents in Islamic spirituality.



The thirteenth-century Muslim mystic Rūmī speaks of inevitable retribution in his parable of hungry and destitute travelers who, in spite of wise counsel, slaughter and devour an elephant calf. Circling the gorged and sleeping travelers, the avenging mother elephant falls upon them, rending and slaying the murderers one by one. Rūmī points to a moral balance that reestablishes itself after slaughter unsettles it, reflecting belief in a well-ordered universe in which God punishes offenders. Just as belief in karma expresses the devout Hindu's faith in a moral law larger than human action, so the metaphor of the avenging animal expresses Islam's faith in divine retributive justice. Rather than endure violence and death passively at human hands, animals assert power over human salvation, thereby manifesting God's will that all life be recognized as kindred.

Sufi defenses of vegetarianism, represented in this volume by M. R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, focus less on retribution than on what the Bawa elsewhere calls the "resplendence of life": the mystical unity of all creation, the compassion and mercy of God, and the dignity and perfect eloquence of even the humblest of animals. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's interpretation of the meaning of *Qurbān*, the ritual slaughter of animals (which has an obvious resemblance to Judaic *kashrut*) is an illustration. "If a person is to take food for himself," the Bawa says, "he must remember that every life is the sole property of God. And if he would desire a life that is truly the property of God, he must first hand over all responsibility to God in *tawakkal-Allāh* (absolute trust and surrender to God)."

Because humans have forgotten that animal lives are lives like their own, God has laid down certain laws for slaughter. The *Qurbān*, with its emphasis on restraint and empathy with animal suffering, is meant to temper human passions and limit the extravagant sacrifices of pre-Islamic times. Paradoxical as it may seem, the true meaning of *Qurbān*, concludes Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, is the realization of what is right and the wisdom to avoid causing hurt and harm to other lives. As in Jewish and Christian vegetarian writings, God is here understood to give reluctant permission for animal slaughter as a way of conditioning unruly and violent human desire.

*Qurbān*'s check on human bloodthirstiness is a reminder that all life is a sacred sign of God's resplendent creation. As a creature in one of Bawa's parables tells a hunter, "Oh man, God created me and He created you. You are a man. God created you from earth, fire, water, air, and ether. I am an animal, but God created me from these same elements."

The Islamic scholar Al-Ḥāfiz B. A. Masri makes much of the Qur'anic spirit of compassion toward animals, its hymn to a unified creation. Several striking passages from the *Qur'ān* support Masri's emphasis on human beings and animals as created and equally loved by God. As we read in the *Qur'ān*

(6:38), “There is not an animal on earth, nor a bird that flies on its wings, but they are communities like you.” Through both a review of religious laws that mandate responsibility for the welfare of all creatures and an analysis of *Qurbān*, Masri confronts difficult issues in Islamic traditions of animal treatment. He concludes that the weight of passages from the *Qur’ān*, the *Hadīth*, and customary law disavows cruelty and exploitation of animals.

“THERE IS A FAULT IN THE  
CREATION, IT SEEMS”

One of the Indian readings in this volume is a discussion between Swami Prabhupāda, the founder of Krishna Consciousness, and Roman Catholic Cardinal Jean Daniélou. The two religious leaders are speculating about why Christians typically refuse to extend the commandment against killing to animals. At one point in their conversation, Cardinal Daniélou wonders, “But why does [a loving] God create some animals who eat other animals?” His answer to his own question is both haunting and poignant: “There is a fault in the creation, it seems.”

Swami Prabhupāda quickly dismisses this possibility. “It is not a fault,” he insists. “God is very kind. If you want to eat animals, then He’ll give you full facility. God will give you the body of a tiger in your next life so that you can eat flesh very freely. . . . The animal eaters become tigers, wolves, cats, and dogs in their next life.” The Swami’s point is that if there is a “fault in creation,” it originates nowhere but in the devourer of animal flesh and will be reprimanded and redeemed in the working out of karmic necessity. Restless rapacity is the destiny of the meat eater.

And yet the poignancy of Cardinal Daniélou’s question remains. If violence in nature and in us is abhorrent, must not creation, entangled in violence despite its beauty and sublimity, be flawed? Animal slaughter is just one of many ways nature is braided through with terror and death. But who can bear this terrible possibility—of a universe in which cruelty and pain exist without meaning, with no divine providence, no escape, no redemption in suffering?

The religious questions that arise so urgently from considerations of animal slaughter and our complicity in it are elemental. Is there nothing but savagery in the entangled web of spirit and of hunger? Is there no eschaton toward which we tend, no end to rebirth, no divine comfort, no stilling of the desire to kill? In response to these somber and bewildering questions, the literature of religious vegetarianism expresses hope that a peaceable kingdom might one day come to pass in which humans, with divine blessing and generous love, exist in harmony with animals and the natural world.

---

  
NOTE

1. Knut Jacobsen, "Humankind and Nature in Buddhism," in *A Companion to World Philosophies*, ed. Elliot Deutsch and Ron Bontekoe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 384.