

Vegan, Catholic – What Gives?

I'm both vegan and Catholic. That fact has a strange ability to surprise and mystify, even offend; people who know me first as a vegan register surprise that I could endorse such a "conservative" religion. People who learn I'm Catholic before learning I'm vegan don't see how traditional religion can coexist with a commitment to animal rights. Yet while the secular, non-vegan world often makes me feel singularly freaky, I am not Frankenstein's monster. These identities—"vegan," "Catholic"—are not haphazardly cobbled together into an abominable affront to churchgoers and activists alike. In fact they are not really separate identities at all. When you meet me, you are meeting the Catholic and the vegan at once, no matter when and how you learn to apply those labels. My soul is all one piece, no awkward and unnatural seams.

How did this happen?

I went vegan halfway through high school, after a childhood in Catholic school and church every Sunday. I never personally felt my religion conflict with my veganism until college. Then in my junior year I held a short internship at The Fund for Animals, an animal advocacy group staffed entirely by ethical vegans. Interestingly enough, the challenge that veganism and Christianity were incompatible came from them and not from other Christians or even non-Christian omnivores. In a stunning reversal, my new co-workers embraced me for my veganism (of course), but couldn't accept my religion. Virtually everyone I had ever met had done the opposite, questioning my vegan identity with everything from curiosity to dismissal to downright hostility, while accepting my Catholic identity without batting an eye.

I understood why the new vegans in my life were troubled to find out I'm Christian. The Bible certainly presents an anthropocentric worldview: humans are the pinnacle of creation, the one species specifically created in God's own image in the Old Testament, and the one species God is specifically concerned with saving, on a cosmic scale, in the New Testament. Doesn't that imply it's wrong to put other animals' interests ahead of human interests (like, say, having a juicy steak dinner)? Sure, Genesis has God tell us "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. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food (1:29-30)." Sounds nice and vegan, right? We're all just eating plants. But by Gen 9:2, God seems to have changed his mind about that inter-species peace, love and harmony. He tells Noah: "The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea: into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you..." Basically, Noah, you go ahead and eat animals. (Does Anthony Bourdain read the Bible? This should be his favorite verse.) And even Jesus gets in on the animal abuse in the New Testament tale of the Gadarene demoniacs, when he allows some demons to enter a herd of pigs. The demons drive the pigs into the sea of Galilee where they drown—an apparently acceptable price to pay for the mental health of the humans the demons formerly possessed (See Matt 8:28-32, Mark 5:1-13). For the animal activists I was meeting, the Bible and Christianity presented nothing more than convenient excuses for religious folks to exploit animals and still feel good about themselves. After all, if Noah and Jesus were doing it back in the day, why shouldn't we keep it up?

I hadn't hit this roadblock before; no one had ever argued against animal rights to me based on scripture; no one had ever argued against Christianity to me based on animal rights. I lacked the background and the confidence to defend my lifestyle on either front and simply kept my mouth shut, feeling frustrated and doubtful all around. Was this what they call a "crisis of faith"? If I couldn't be vegan, did I want to be Christian?

It was shortly after that intern experience that I picked up the book *Animal Gospel* by Andrew Linzey, an Anglican theologian at Oxford. This was the perfect book for me at the time, as I tried to reconcile what others perceived as two separate identities. Aside from some annoying concessions to animal welfarists (who do not take the recognition of animals' interests to their logical conclusion), Linzey supports veganism, and makes a pretty persuasive argument, rooted in Christian texts and theology, that animals have an intrinsic value apart from how humans might benefit from their existence. The crux (har har) of his argument is the figure of the suffering Jesus Christ, a figure to which Christianity demands a proactive response from its followers. Christians are asked to see their god, Jesus, in the suffering of others in the world, and to take steps to relieve that suffering; Linzey argues that it is neither blasphemous nor counterintuitive to extend this idea to non-human suffering. In fact, Christians do this every time we invoke Jesus as the Lamb of God.

There's more. And here is where I must stress that I am Catholic, and not simply Christian. Catholics are not literalists; we'll take our scripture with a grain of salt and a heaping helping of tradition and scholarship. It may seem obvious to you and me and sane, rational people (I don't want to include myself in that category necessarily) that the Bible is a text that can be interpreted in different ways, and it doesn't provide an easy concise answer to every moral dilemma. It's difficult to get a literalist to admit that, but I do think we can plant the seed in most people's heads (to use a favorite vegan metaphor) that Christianity can't just be about what's in the written word. The biblical canon is the result of a long and sordid history, influenced by political expediency as much as spiritual or factual truth. But even beyond taking that historical stance, it seems obvious to me that Christianity needs to evolve beyond what's in the Bible in light of personal experience and growing awareness. Allow me to demonstrate. I ask you, does Jesus support slavery? (If you say yes, then this must be where we part.) If you say no, then congratulations! We have an accord. Now find me a biblical quote to prove it.

Go ahead. Take your time. I'll wait.

Not so easy, is it?

There's some nice stuff in Paul's letters about distinctions like slave or free, Gentile or Jew, male or female having no significance in Christ (check out Galatians 3:28, e.g.). And emancipation certainly gets a workout as Paul's metaphor of choice when he talks about the benefits of becoming Christian. But that's spiritual servitude versus spiritual freedom. Unless you're doing some extrapolation and interpretation, there's nothing to explicitly condemn slavery as an institution.

Yet we're a long way from Paul and the Roman empire, and today it doesn't take an ethical Einstein to realize that buying and selling human beings, treating them as property, falls far short of the Christian ideal. Just because sincere Christians in ages past didn't notice this – maybe they were too busy

avoiding the gladiatorial arena or the bubonic plague or good old fashioned starvation; maybe the folks whose livelihood rested on the backs of slaves were too good at interpreting religious texts to support their side – it's no reason Christians today can put moral blinders on. We can't pretend slavery is okay. Our hearts know better. And our hearts were here before the Bible told us so.

And if every Bible were burned tomorrow and our memory of it wiped away, our hearts would still be here. When confronted with cold hard facts that reveal cold hard injustice, we're pulled toward a response, whether or not we know a biblical text that corresponds to this set of circumstances. The point is that not every evil around today is explicitly condemned in the Bible – some evils the Bible may even tacitly approve. But when you get down to it, to be authentic Christians who can live with ourselves, one another, and God, we can't ignore such evils.

I probably would not be a vegan today if I were not Catholic. Funny to say, but it was my Catholic upbringing and the moral training I got in Catholic school that woke me up to the fact that my personal actions matter and have serious consequences. My Catholic education also helped me see that I do not want to hurt others, no matter the cost to my coolness or social standing. I'd rather be the weird girl with moral integrity than fit in with the crowd. In other words, being Catholic taught me to listen to my heart, to my conscience, and be prepared to follow it. When I faced the cold hard fact that literally billions of animals suffer and die every day for human food, it was that Catholic education that nudged me to switch from omnivore to vegetarian and ultimately to vegan when I was 16. I was able to make the argument to my skeptical family and friends that God gave me a conscience so I could follow it. That was a concept they could understand, since they had also made personal decisions (e.g., not buying sweat-shop sneakers) based on matters of conscience and values perfectly amenable to what they heard in church on Sunday. Hence, for me, Catholicism actually reinforced veganism.

The wonderful and unexpected thing is that veganism has come around to reinforce Catholicism – I understand my relationship with the world, with others around me, and with God in a different (and better!) way because I am vegan. Vegans often endure guilt-trips from omnivore families and friends for somehow ruining holidays like Thanksgiving because we don't want to participate in tearing a corpse apart. This has old roots. There's a trend in anthropology that sees meat-eating as the foundation for human community, centering on the division of an animal's body after a hunt or following an animal sacrifice in agricultural societies. It's a theory that advocates of so-called "humane" meat have picked up on. The green magazine *Plenty*, for instance, features a farmer's blog wherein the farmer waxes poetic about this very subject, lauding the sense of community he feels as he drives around town dropping off chunks of animal carcass to his local customers. As a Catholic and a vegan, I feel privileged to know that human community doesn't need to be built on that kind of violence and exploitation. In the Catholic Church, the Eucharist is the central feature of our worship service—the communion that draws people together once a week (or at least twice a year on Easter and Christmas) and gets us out of our little worlds to come spend time with people we might otherwise never give the time of day. The bread and wine we all partake of at mass is literally (for Catholics) our god, and connects us not only with one another, but the whole of creation. Instead of getting together to slaughter an animal, Christians get together to share some bread and wine. And that's a communal meal that's doubly vegan.

In ancient, pre-Christian Mediterranean religion, animal sacrifice required the “consent” of the animal, who was drugged or otherwise mollified so no signs of unwillingness were evident to the watching public. In this way, the violence inherent in the sacrifice was partially concealed by the victim's apparent willingness. A similar sentiment is alive and well today, in omnivores who justify their meat-eating through "respect" for the animals who "give up" their lives for humans, whether that respect is manifested in a ritual thanking the animal's spirit, "humane" slaughter laws, or just a vague sense that eating meat comes with being part of "the circle of life." Veganism strips all of this away. Respect for the sacrifice and the victim's implied consent cease to be concerns because veganism requires no sacrifice. Indeed, some animal activists explain veganism precisely in terms of consent. Animals can't communicate consent the way humans do. We can't ask a cow how she feels about us taking her milk instead of letting her nurse her calf. We can't explain what a fish stick is to a tuna and ask him whether he minds being turned into one. This "language barrier" makes it wrong to use animals, similar to other wrongs like slavery and rape wherein the wrongdoer ignores the victims' consent or non-consent.

Now let's consider this from a Christian perspective. In contrast to ancient Judaism and ancient paganism, the central worship act of Christianity is the consumption of the body and blood of the god himself, embodied in a plant-based meal, bread and wine. Traditional Judaism had its followers slaughter a lamb at the feast of Passover; in the Christian story, Jesus becomes *the* Lamb, for once and for always, with no ongoing call for bloodshed. Christians may re-enact his sacrifice in liturgy week after week, as a symbol of that sacrifice's ongoing effects, but we can do so without demanding that another living being stand in as Jesus-the-victim. Unleavened wheat wafers and some fermented grapes will do us just fine. As for the touchy issue of sacrifice and the special callousness on my part that would allow you to undergo suffering for my benefit, I return to that issue of consent. If you, under no compulsion or deception, willingly undertake some suffering that benefits me, there's no crime in my acceptance; nor would there be a crime in your allowing me to undergo some suffering for you if I decided, on my own steam, that I was willing to do so. Now let's think about an omnipotent and omniscient god. Is there any way for humans to compel or deceive such a god? No. So there's no stronger show of consent to me than the Christian Gospel story. God decides to take the form of a human being in order to be born, only in order to suffer and die so hundreds of generations can gather in community and symbolically eat his flesh and blood, instead of the literal flesh and blood of animals who had no such choice or sweeping understanding of what their suffering and death could mean. In one fell swoop, this Gospel redefines community and communion in contrast to the Mediterranean religions around it.

Do I sound smug? That's not my intention. I'm trying to give an honest presentation of what Catholicism means now, nearly nine years after deciding to go vegan. I don't mean to intimate that early Christian communities were crawling with animal rights activists, but such is the effect and damn me (pun intended) if I don't love Jesus the better for it.