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## Eating Ethically: 'Spiritual' and 'Quasi-religious' Aspects of Vegetarianism

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MALCOLM HAMILTON

**ABSTRACT** *Much contemporary belief and behaviour that is not ostensibly religious has yet been perceived to have religious overtones. A variety of terms such as 'invisible religion', 'implicit religion' and 'quasi-religion' have been used to characterise them. This article examines vegetarianism and especially vegetarianism based upon ethical concerns in order to ascertain the extent to which it can be said to exhibit religious or spiritual themes in its ideology and underlying motives. A number of 'quasi-religious' themes, including taboo and avoidance behaviour, reverence for life, the denial of death, reincarnation, observance of disciplines and the rejection of domination and oppression are found to characterise ethical vegetarianism. Support for these conclusions is found in the data from a survey of vegetarians carried out in the Reading area of South Eastern England, of which some results are presented and discussed. The article concludes with a discussion of the appropriateness of using concepts such as 'quasi-religion'. It is argued that although such terms are currently useful, they must in the longer term be replaced by concepts which do not imply that such behaviour is a form of religion or which characterise it always in relation to religion, but which recognise its own distinctive and essentially non-religious character.*

### Introduction

The terms 'quasi-religion' and 'para-religion' (Greil, 1993; Greil & Robbins, 1994) have recently joined a number of more familiar terms in the sociology of religion literature, such as 'invisible religion' (Luckmann, 1967, 1990), 'implicit religion' (Bailey, 1997) and 'surrogate religion' (Robertson, 1970). All of these terms strain to express the idea of something which is either rather like but not quite religion or which may not appear to be like religion on the surface, but reveals itself to be so on closer inspection. In this they share the inclusivism of functionalist conceptions of religion, which begin with Durkheim, and with the idea that certain phenomena can be 'functionally' religious (Luckmann, 1967; Yinger, 1957, 1969, 1977). This suggests, I argue, a conceptual and terminological lacuna or even crisis in current thinking in the sociology of religion. As such, they reflect the rapidly changing, diverse and diffuse character of 'religious' life and activity in contemporary societies. A variety of ideas, beliefs and practices seek to address those aspects of life, issues, concerns and puzzles which religion has traditionally addressed, but in a very different manner; undogmatically, individualistically and without recourse to notions of the supernatural.

Many of these ideas, beliefs and practices fall well short of what we would be happy to identify as quasi-religions, but yet seem to partake of the religious. We

find ourselves speaking of the quasi-*religious* rather than of quasi-*religions*; or we feel that even this is too strong a term and resort to talk of spirituality, the new spirituality, holistic spirituality or even quasi-spirituality often leaving aside the question of whether such spirituality is religious or not. Most discussions of developments which are 'sort of' spiritual or seem to manifest aspects of spirituality leave the term wholly undefined. One might even say that the appeal of the term 'spirituality', both to those who are directly involved in the developments to which it refers and to those who study them, is precisely that it is a term which is difficult to pin down and a term of uncertain denotation. It seems to capture the very ambiguity with which we are trying to deal in confronting a phenomenon which is 'sort of' like something but not quite that thing.

Whatever the merits of terms such as 'quasi-religion' and 'para-religion', they can only serve as temporary devices in the absence of something better. Rather than rushing into the invention of neologisms they will serve reasonably well for the moment, but I shall argue later that we shall need better ones in the longer term.

While I use the terms 'quasi-religion/religious', I use them in a somewhat different way from that of Greil. Greil defines para-religions as "ostensibly non-religious entities that share features in common with religious organisations as well as to [*sic*] secular projects which nonetheless deal with matters of ultimate concern" (Greil, 1993: 156). Examples given include sport, politics, nationalism, business, medicine and health food diets. Quasi-religion is defined as phenomena which would qualify as religions in terms of most sociological definitions of religion, but which "do not see themselves or present themselves unambiguously as religion", but rather "ride the fence between the sacred and the secular" (ibid: 157). Examples cited include Alcoholics Anonymous, Human Potential groups, New Age, Scientology and Transcendental Meditation. I consider, however, that the prefix 'quasi' better expresses resemblance without identity and I use this term to refer to what Greil terms 'para-religions'.

One broad area of belief and practice which falls into the category of the quasi-religious as defined here is that of the relationship between humans and the natural world and especially the ethical dimension of this relationship. Environmentalism, and especially non-anthropocentric, non-instrumental, non-prudential environmentalism, or in short deep ecology, is one aspect of this. Within this broad category of the human relationship with nature, or overlapping it at least, is also concern for animal rights. This often, but not necessarily, involves vegetarianism and it is with this as an example of a set of beliefs and practices that might be said to have a quasi-religious or spiritual dimension with which I am concerned in this paper. In particular, ethical vegetarianism and perhaps environmentally motivated vegetarianism might be expected to manifest such a character more than vegetarianism motivated by health concerns or by dislike of meat.

While vegetarianism might be said to exhibit a quasi-religious character, like so many of the contemporary movements and developments which share this quasi-religiosity, it is not an organised movement or activity but shares the characteristics of the audience cult the client cult (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985), which are acephalous and highly segmented (Gerlach & Hine, 1976). These things are usually very diffuse and diverse and they involve a wide range of

individual choice regarding understandings, interpretations and practices. They are often part of a milieu characterised by 'epistemological individualism' (Wallis, 1984).

## **Vegetarianism**

Exactly what constitutes vegetarianism or a vegetarian diet is not an uncontested matter. Some who avoid only red meat will define themselves as vegetarians, while others would only apply the term to those who avoid both red and white meat and some only to those who avoid fish and shellfish also. There is often a progression from avoidance of red meat through ceasing to eat white meat and then fish and shellfish. Some move on to abstinence from some or all animal products, although many are unable to sustain this in the long term. Many of those who categorise themselves as vegetarians eat meat on occasions, and it is probably very variable across respondents as to what frequency of consumption is acceptable in order to warrant the appellation of vegetarian.

Despite such complexities it would seem that vegetarianism has been increasing in a number of countries, especially Britain, the United States and Northern Europe for some time. Although difficult to estimate, various surveys have put the number of vegetarians between 4.5 and 7% of the population of the UK. If one includes those who eat fish, but not red or white meat the figure rises to around 12%. The number of vegetarians would appear to have approximately doubled in the UK during the last ten years or so. In the United States, the only other country for which reasonably reliable figures are available, estimates based of self-definition vary between 3 and 7%.

Motives for adopting a vegetarian diet vary considerably. Opposition to the killing of animals and the infliction of unnecessary pain and suffering upon them, either as a consequence of practices used in their rearing or their slaughter, or because meat is felt to be unhealthy, are the two most common reasons. Other reasons frequently encountered include dislike of meat, concern for the impact of meat production upon the environment and world food production, religion, and social reasons, for example conformity with the dietary patterns of partners or family. None of these are mutually exclusive and it is very common for vegetarians to cite several in explaining their dietary habits. Research has shown that where someone adopts a vegetarian diet from a particular motive, it is not unusual for them to add further reasons later on (Amato & Partridge, 1989; Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Beardsworth & Keil, 1993).

In Amato and Partridge's survey, 43% stated a single or predominant motive, the remainder having multiple motives. The most frequently stated reason was that of ethical concern (67%) followed by health concerns (38%), spiritual and religious reasons (17%), and gustatory or aesthetic reasons (12%). A large proportion stated both ethical and health concerns (43%).

## **Ethical Vegetarianism**

Whether this takes the form of anti-speciesism (Singer, 1976), respect for animal rights (Regan, 1984) or a sense of community and identity with the animal world (Clark, 1977), ethical concern seems to be the main reason for vegetarianism today.

Ethical beliefs of this kind do not, of course, alone make vegetarianism religious or quasi-religious. An examination of the underlying reasoning and attitudes of these contemporary proponents of vegetarianism, who have developed the intellectual basis for it, or who have concluded from logical and philosophical argument that it is a binding moral imperative, might reveal that the character of their ethical stances does entail something that might look religious, quasi-religious or spiritual, especially in the case of Clark. But while Singer has been very influential, the others have been less so, and it is doubtful whether many ethical vegetarians have adopted their dietary practices solely as a result of reading and being convinced by the arguments of Singer, Regan or Clark. It is more likely that their adoption of this form of diet owes more to the 'gut reaction' they have to the graphic depiction of the treatment of animals in these works and elsewhere.

In any case, I present here a set of observations about the attitudes, ideas and practices of vegetarians that have been reported in empirical studies, critically to examine explanations of ethical and other forms of vegetarianism, to set out some alternative hypotheses, and to examine the extent to which these facts and hypotheses warrant us seeing ethical vegetarianism as in some way or other religious, quasi-religious or having religious undertones (or overtones).

### **Vegetarianism as Taboo Behaviour**

A striking aspect of accounts of the process of conversion to vegetarianism is the frequently reported experience of revulsion towards meat that accompanies it or results from it (Amato & Partridge, 1989: 70–71; Beardsworth & Keil, 1992: 267–268). This does not seem to correspond with the ethical motivation expressed by most vegetarians nor with health considerations. It is certainly understandable that the experience of meat for the first time for what it is, namely part of a dead and slaughtered animal, might be thought to lead to a sort of moral revulsion against eating it, but the accounts emphasise disgust at the idea of meat itself, especially red meat and its bloodiness. It is not easy to see why it is that the conviction that taking the life of an animal is wrong should in itself necessarily lead to or be associated with disgust at the thought of eating the animal. Many ethical vegetarians are not disgusted by cooked meat, miss not eating it and some even crave it, especially bacon when they smell it cooking—'bacon nostalgia' as Beardsworth and Keil (1997) put it.

Such sentiments suggest that a type of belief and behaviour commonly regarded as religious in nature that might also be applied to vegetarianism is perhaps that of taboo, especially if we take this to include avoidance of the flesh of certain animals (the cow in India, the pig among Jews and Muslims, the clan totem, and so on), the killing of animals and similar ritual avoidances and observances.

A feature of things which are commonly taboo is that they are anomalous with respect to categories and boundaries (Douglas, 1966). Anomalous things are taboo either because they are seen as sacred or because they are seen as impure and polluting. Ambivalent emotions are felt towards things which are marginal in terms of taxonomic systems or which transgress important boundaries, and such ambivalence often leads to these things being subject to taboo restrictions. Twigg, drawing upon such anthropological work, focuses, in her seminal articles

on vegetarianism (Twigg, 1979, 1983), on the anomalous and marginal nature of meat, especially red meat and the blood in it.

Twigg stresses the ambivalence generally felt towards meat and the symbolic power of blood. Meat is seen as a food which gives strength and vigour. It is associated with masculinity, forcefulness, muscularity and athleticism. In its raw state, however, it is too potent and seen as dangerous. It must be cooked to reduce its potency to manageable proportions. Cooking transforms it and it is particularly significant that this transformation removes its bloodiness. Vegetarians, however, treat not just raw meat as taboo, but all meat: for them it is still too dangerous and polluting a substance to ingest even when cooked. Twigg interprets vegetarianism as a form of taboo behaviour reflecting an underlying, and by implication, unconscious reaction to meat. She is silent, however, on the question of how this relates to their expressed motives of ethical and health concerns. An examination of this relationship can reveal more about the possible quasi-religious nature of vegetarianism. Twigg's claim implies that these deeper underlying reactions to meat are rationalised in the case of ethical vegetarians in terms of rights, compassion for animals, identity between the human and animal world, and so on.

This seems problematically reductionist and precariously close to saying that the moral beliefs of vegetarians are a mere rationalisation of these deeper underlying emotions. This is not necessarily the case. A close relationship between the immoral and the repugnant is very common. Many things that we regard as morally wrong are, it is true, very tempting; naughty but nice. However, there are many actions which we regard as both morally wrong and deeply repugnant; cannibalism, for example. This may be because we are disgusted by what we consider to be grossly immoral, but equally because we tend to regard what we find repugnant as also wrong. Repugnance and immorality are not necessarily distinct. Our language reveals this very clearly in using words which express repugnance for actions which are regarded as immoral; they are 'dirty', 'filthy', 'disgusting', 'vile', and 'foul'. Such usage is not, I would suggest, entirely metaphorical; we are literally disgusted by certain immoral acts. To be repelled by something due to feelings of disgust while simultaneously giving an account of the avoidance of that thing in terms of moral values is thus not incompatible nor a rationalisation. It may be incomplete, but it is not contradictory.

To return to Twigg's point about the anomalous status of meat we might generalise it to the animal itself. Animals can be seen as anomalous, situated as they are on the boundary between culture and nature, the human and the non-human, especially warm and red-blooded animals which copulate, give birth to live young which they suckle, and manifestly experience pain and suffering, in short mammals. Animals, and especially red-blooded mammals, are very like us, but they are not human. Or to put it the other way round, we are very like them; we, too, are animals, yet different from them (Leach, 1964; Tester, 1991).

What has this to do with the quasi-religious status of vegetarianism? Leach states that taboos define the self against the other. Vegetarianism can be seen, along with environmentalism, with which it is increasingly connected, as being about defining the self, defining who one is, what sort of being one is, what it is to be human and the relationship one has with the non-human, the other. It

can be seen as a statement which expresses ambivalence towards animals and their anomalous position in a contemporary culture which no longer views animals as clearly part of nature against culture or which sees humans as set apart over and against non-human animals. The rise in vegetarianism would thus reflect the increasing attraction of a non-anthropocentric view of the animal world (Thomas, 1983).

### **Reverence for Life**

This non-anthropocentric ethos is, perhaps, a product of the conjunction of massive urbanisation and removal of the majority of the population from the experience of animal husbandry and the slaughter and butchering of animals; the concealment of the truth about meat, that it is actually animal flesh, through its sanitised packaging and marketing. This conjunction is a very recent phenomenon; earlier urbanisation was not accompanied to the same extent by concealment which is a consequence of modern means of distribution and marketing through supermarkets and hypermarkets. This has removed most of the population from the experience of witnessing death and corpses at a time when funerary practices and modern culture similarly seem to seek to deny the reality of death. Vegetarianism, too, can be seen to some extent as a reaction to the application of technology to the production of meat which, of course, involves the treatment of animals, those things with which we increasingly recognise a kinship, almost as if they were inanimate objects. I refer to factory and battery farming, to the severe restraint placed upon animals in such production methods, their treatment as mere pieces of biological equipment used for the manufacture of protein. Again this confuses categories and boundaries.

Eder perceives an anti-industrial and anti-bourgeois ethos in vegetarianism which he characterises as one of the escape movements that have accompanied modernity from the beginning. Rather than crudely anti-industrialist, however, vegetarianism has been part of a counter-current within and integral to modernity which seeks to constitute it alternatively (Eder, 1996: 136). Certainly, urbanisation, industrialisation and technology upset the order of the world and have led to a decline of the anthropocentric view in which animals existed to serve the needs of humans. A new basis of order is required, a new conception of our relationship with nature and with the animal world. The response has been, on the part of some at least, to elevate animals to the status of equality with humans. Science denudes nature of human significance; some seek to recover this significance through ethics.

Ethical vegetarianism expresses the conviction that to be fully human is to have reverence for all life, especially sentient life. This includes a rejection of violence. Traditionally, ethical vegetarianism has been associated, as Twigg points out, with pacifism (Hitler was, of course, an outstanding exception in this regard) as well as a host of unorthodox, radical and oppositional stances. In stating that to be human one should express reverence for all life that is like our own by abstaining from acts of violence towards other sentient living things, ethical vegetarianism can clearly be seen to be taking a position that could be called quasi-religious. In this it is as much motivated by the need to define what it is to be human as it is by concern with the welfare of animals. As Tester (1991) argues, animal rights, although assimilating animals to the category of the

human and vice versa, is also, and perhaps more importantly, about differentiating humans from animals as moral creatures who are alone capable of compassion.

We might go further than this, however, and stress that meat in itself operates for vegetarians as a symbol of violence. Avoidance of it does not only remove the vegetarian from complicity in acts of violence against animals, but expresses the rejection of such violence and an affirmation of commitment to the preservation of life. The avoidance of meat for many motivated by a concern with animal rights constitutes a form of boycott. By not purchasing meat they do not contribute to the demand for it and perhaps a few less animals are slaughtered as a consequence. But this is a very dubious argument. It is unlikely that the action of boycotting meat makes any real difference. It is probably the case that many who cite this reason for boycotting meat will still refuse to eat it even in contexts where no saving of animal life could result. An example would be where the animal is already slaughtered and butchered, the meat already purchased and cooked and served to guests at a dinner party in ignorance that one or more of them are supporters of animal rights and vegetarian in diet. To refuse to eat this meat and to partake only of the vegetables is not only to risk insulting the host, but could not make any difference whatsoever to the suffering of animals. It is the act of refusing to consume the meat in itself which is important, not the ultimate consequences of not consuming it. The difficulty that vegetarians have in consuming the meat even at the risk of insulting the host testifies to a more deeply-rooted antipathy to the idea of consuming meat as an action which is in itself somehow wrong, even if the potential consumer could have no complicity in causing harm or inflicting pain upon the animal consumed.

### **Denial of Death**

If vegetarianism expresses a reverence for life and a rejection of violence, it may also express a denial and rejection of death. Meat may symbolise not only violence and aggression, but also death. The bloodiness of red meat in particular is a symbol of death. For ethical vegetarians, it stands as a horrific reminder of the pain and suffering of the animal. This is perhaps why many people stop short of full vegetarianism, but avoid eating red meat while being happy to consume white meat—chicken, turkey, etc. While Elias (1978) certainly has a point in noting how the civilising process required a progressive removal of the whole animal from the dining table in order to disguise the origins of the meat, it is significant that this is not true in the case of birds. Clearly, the size of the animal must be taken into account. The smaller households of the modern era that replaced the large medieval households of nobles had no need to serve a whole pig or deer; a smaller cut from the animal was sufficient. In the case of birds, however, a whole animal was required to feed the family and the whole animal was and still is served at the dining table. Those who avoid red meat frequently experience the whole animal before them on the dining table and show no need to disguise the origin of what they are eating. What they avoid is the red bloodiness of mammals.

For health vegetarians, consuming dead animals is seen as almost a form of contamination. As Twigg (1979) puts it, the ingestion of dead animals is an



ingestion of death itself. The harmful nature of meat in the view of many vegetarians comes from the belief that dead flesh contains harmful substances and is well advanced in the process of decomposition by the time it reaches the oven or cooking pot. Eating it builds up dead and harmful matter in the body. For Twigg, again it is the anomalous status of the carcass that underlies its problematic character for vegetarians in that it represents an unresolved contradiction between that which was once alive, but which is now dead.

There is, however, more to it than that. Death is problematic in a culture which places a heavy emphasis upon this-worldly pleasures and pursuits, bodily health, fitness and attractiveness, and which seeks to extend material life for as long as possible. Whatever meaning is given to life in the hedonistic and this-worldly value system of contemporary culture, it is grossly threatened and undermined by the fact of inevitable death. That which reminds us of death tends to be taboo, hidden, and avoided.<sup>1</sup> Twigg adds to her point about the ambivalence of the dead animal body that it presages one's own death and decomposition. Vegetarians, both the ethical and health varieties, seem to have a particular horror of death, a deeply rooted necrophobia. Their reverence for life is extended to all living sentient things. No action is justified which results in the loss or shortening of the life of any sentient creature and the more those creatures resemble ourselves, the more their lives must not be threatened by our actions.

There is another sense, I believe, in which carcasses and meat as symbols of death and finality are found unsettling for some in contemporary culture. The use of animals, living sentient creatures, as mere mechanisms for the production of food, factory farming, their mass slaughter and butchery, robs their lives of any meaning. That they can be and are routinely treated as mere objects, despite their sensibilities, is a terrible reminder of the possibility that our lives, too, may lack meaning, the more so if one questions the boundary between human and animal. Vegetarians may see in the dead bodies of animals, in their butchered carcasses, the potential senselessness and meaninglessness of life including their own. By making animals our equals and by extending rights to them they seek to eliminate that threat of meaninglessness. In doing so they are engaged in an activity which shares much with religion at the heart of which is the search for meaning.

## Reincarnation

Death may be rejected in a variety of ways: by seeking material immortality, through belief in an afterlife, in a heaven or paradise, or by belief in reincarnation. In Hinduism, vegetarianism, motivated by the doctrine of *ahimsa*, is closely related to belief in reincarnation and transmigration. Since reincarnation in animal form is possible, animals cannot be treated differently from humans; their lives and feelings must be respected. Buddhism inherited very similar beliefs from Hinduism and exported them over a wide area of Asia. Pythagoras and his followers believed in reincarnation and were also vegetarians. They, too, avoided meat because they believed that the souls of humans could be reincarnated in animals. The Cathars of Southern France believed in spiritual progress towards perfection through a succession of incarnations and 'the Perfect' among them ate no meat and were forbidden to take life. There has been a long-term

and widespread historical association between reincarnation and vegetarianism. Such notions were, of course, very thoroughly eradicated by Christianity where it prevailed.

The religious justification of vegetarianism in terms of reincarnation might be seen as, in fact, a philosophically sophisticated rationalisation. The reality may be that there is an underlying affinity between these beliefs. Both ethical vegetarianism and belief in reincarnation/transmigration incorporate the animal into the human world or extend the boundary of the human to the wider community of sentient beings. Both see animals as belonging to the same moral community and express the unity of sentient life.

It is striking that assent to a belief in reincarnation has been increasing in western post-Christian societies in recent years and now stands typically at around 20 to 25% of their populations. Vegetarianism is also, as we have seen, increasing in parts of the western world. However, there is, of course, no belief, as far as I am aware, in transmigration. Yet it is significant that the contemporary proponents of vegetarianism, Singer, Regan and Clark, all attack the boundary between the human and the animal. It would be a short step for those who embrace these ideas and the idea of reincarnation to accept transmigration.

### **Discipline and Observance**

Religions throughout the world impose certain disciplines and observances upon their followers and these often involve dietary practices. The Jewish dietary law is the most obvious example. Vegetarianism can be seen as a form of self-discipline and a set of observances that express the identity of the practitioner and his/her moral standing. In some ways the dietary abstentions of the vegetarian express his/her apartness and distinctiveness, as the dietary taboos of Jews and followers of other faiths often do.

For vegetarians, there may be a particular gratification which stems from being different from others and/or morally superior. They are, through their diet, a select group reminiscent of O'Toole's Maoists and De Leonists who derived satisfaction from knowing that only they were in possession of a true understanding (O'Toole, 1977). There is a sectarian tinge to vegetarianism. The concern to be among the select is demonstrated in the hierarchy of status and prestige that seems to obtain between vegetarians, vegans and—at the very top—fruitarians, reflecting the hierarchy of foods themselves defined by Twigg (1983) in terms of a reversal of the status these foods have in the dominant meat-eating culture.

A noticeable feature of much vegetarian practice is the tendency to become very sensitive to the rules of the diet and punctilious about observing them beyond what seems necessary to achieve ostensible aims. The example of refusing meat served by a host mentioned above is relevant here. Another tendency of this kind is to elaborate and expand the rules of observance to accommodate new circumstances that come into awareness. Consumption of dairy products, for example, may be relinquished when it is realised that their production involves the slaughter of unwanted animals, their mistreatment in factory farming and so on. There is often a compulsion towards the adoption of a vegan diet which, however, most find impossible to accomplish. Observances may extend beyond diet, as in the case of avoiding wearing leather shoes or

garments (and, of course, fur), or there may be a sense of guilt that while this should be observed, it cannot be observed in practice. There is more than a hint of sin in such concerns and practices and of a sense that we cannot avoid sinning a little or live an entirely pure life; we are all doomed to be sinners to some degree.

### Rejection of Domination and Repression

As a symbol of violence meat also symbolises domination. Fiddes has explored this theme in some detail (Fiddes, 1991). According to Fiddes, meat symbolises power over nature and the natural world. The high prestige of meat, especially red meat, is related to this capacity to symbolise domination of nature by humans and by culture. The recent rise in vegetarianism is, therefore, due to a weakening of the desire to feel dominant over nature; it is related to the rise of environmentalism, the desire to establish a harmonious relationship with nature in place of domination of it. Contemporary vegetarianism reflects this clearly in its emphasis on equality with animals, respect for their rights and so forth.

However, I take issue with Fiddes's interpretation. The reason that meat was a highly prestigious food, I would argue, was that it was a high-status food only consumed in any quantity by the wealthy and powerful. The mass of the population before the modern era rarely ate meat, as the mass of the peasantry rarely do in under-developed countries today. In Europe, in the middle ages, meat, especially red meat, was associated with aristocracy, landed gentry and their militaristic and hunting culture. It was this, also, that tended to strengthen the association of meat with power and aggression. The decline of this way of life and the cheapening of meat as a commodity by modern production methods increasingly devalued it as a particularly prestigious food and its wider availability and consumption undermined, to a considerable extent, its special qualities associated with power. This was reinforced by urbanisation and concealment of slaughter and butchery.

The rise of vegetarianism may reflect a progressive movement away from the culture of violence in which meat played a role as a symbol of high status and all that went with it. It was not so much a symbol of power over nature, but of the status and lifestyle that gave power over other human beings. As Eder puts it, the "vegetarian life is the negation of social power" (Eder, 1996: 134). The heavy meat-eating military *élite* were the controllers of culture and society rather than of nature. Franklin (1996) has pointed out that during the eighteenth century, the most avid fox-hunters in England were cavalry officers who, at the time, were becoming increasingly anxious about the future of the role of cavalry in modern warfare. Their regiments encouraged them to hunt and gave them leave during the hunting season in order to do so. Franklin describes their way of life as a "vestigial culture of violence belonging to an earlier, less civilized epoch and an increasingly outdated military technology" (Franklin, 1996: 440).

It is also significant, perhaps, that in India where Hinduism places a strong prohibition upon the taking of life, including animal life, vegetarianism is central to the way of life of certain castes. It is the priestly Brahmin castes, in particular, which observe this practice, while the traditionally aristocratic Kshatriya rulers and warriors, whose caste *dharma* involves the taking of life, are usually meat eaters.

We observe today many lingering associations of meat, namely with masculinity, muscularity, vigour, strength, endurance and aggression. A vegetarian diet is thought to induce passivity, weakness, and lassitude. Athletes and boxers, therefore, eat steaks to keep up their strength. For sports which involve maximum exertion, competitiveness and aggression, a high proportion of red meat in the diet is often considered to be essential.

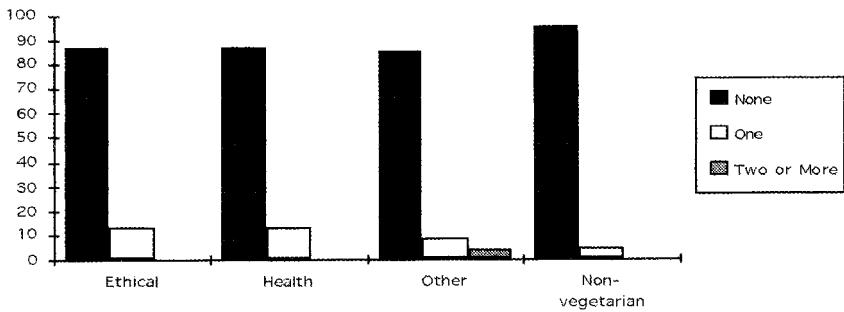
In a more egalitarian and democratic climate, power over and domination of others, even extending this to animals, are upheld less and less as ideals and are increasingly seen as almost immoral. The liberal and politically correct decay of boxing and often, indeed, any form of competitive sport in which some are winners and most are losers. One wonders if there might be a higher incidence of vegetarianism among such people.

It is the symbolic association of meat with masculinity and violence which leads Adams (1990) to interpret the prestige attached to red meat as a symbol not of human domination of nature, but of male dominance over women and of patriarchy. In some ways this seems closer to the truth than Fiddes's hypothesis, since it perceives that symbolic meanings given to such things as meat really concern social identities and relationships. Its weakness is that it ignores the fact that meat consumption is as much, if not more a class and status matter as it is a gender-related matter. If meat is traditionally associated with masculinity, this simply reflects the fact that it was of course men of the dominant classes or status groups who exercised power over others, both male and female, and men belonging to such groups that engaged in military and violent pursuits. This is why Adams's claim that the slaughtering and butchering of meat symbolise male aggression towards women lacks credibility; more credibly, however, it could be seen to express (male) aggression towards (male) enemies.

The association between meat eating and violence has the corollary for Adams that vegetarianism should be and is in fact associated with pacifism, an observation that Twigg (1979) also makes, as noted above. Adams traces this connection in autobiographies written by women, also drawing out the link with feminism. This is a rather selective point to make, however, since—as pointed out above—there tends to be an association between vegetarianism and many unorthodox and radical causes. Research carried out by the author shows that vegetarians tend to buy the whole alternative package (Hamilton, 1993; Hamilton *et al.*, 1995). This research also supports many of the hypotheses stated above and it is to this empirical data that we now turn.

### The Reading Survey

Most of the points made above are based on empirical studies of vegetarianism and vegetarians, which are admittedly sparse and limited. Further empirical support for some of them can be given from data gathered in a survey of followers of alternative diets—whole food, health food and organically produced food consumers—in which vegetarians and a control group of those who were orthodox in diet were included.<sup>2</sup> The survey was carried out in the Reading area during 1992/93 and used a structured questionnaire. About 200 vegetarians participated in the first stage of the survey and of these 125 participated in a later follow-up telephone survey. It was only at this follow-up stage that their reasons for adopting vegetarianism were asked. Of these 125 respondents, 31



**Figure 1.** Type of vegetarianism, by involvement in sects and cults.

stated moral reasons for originally adopting vegetarianism, 36 health reasons and 48 other reasons including gustatory, social, ecological, economic, and a variety of others.

Evidence for a quasi-religious orientation on the part of vegetarians is found in the degree to which they participate in alternative therapies, human potential groups and activities, new religious movements, sects and cults, and New Age, compared to non-vegetarians. The histograms show the degree of participation in these activities/groups for differently motivated vegetarians. While most had more than one reason for being vegetarian, they were asked which was the main reason at the time they converted to vegetarianism and this was used as the basis of classification.

Figure 1 shows the degree of participation in various sects and cult movements for differently motivated vegetarians. All vegetarians show higher involvement in sects and cults than non-vegetarians, but there is little difference between the types of vegetarians according to motive in this respect. The total number of different sects and cults in which respondents had been involved was taken to indicate the degree of inclination towards this type of religiosity.

Use of alternative therapies of various kinds, while not directly indicating quasi-religiosity or spirituality, is often associated with a view which does not separate mind from body, nor either of these things from spirit, whatever that might be. They expound a holistic philosophy very much in tune with the contemporary current of alternativist and New Age ideas, spiritual healing, and so on. To that extent, use of such therapies may indicate a propensity towards a quasi-religiosity or holistic spirituality. Figure 2 shows the degree of participation in various forms of alternative therapy.

Use of alternative therapies is quite high for vegetarians, but low for non-vegetarians; the pattern for non-vegetarians is the reverse of that for vegetarians. One might expect those vegetarians motivated primarily by a concern with health to be more inclined to use alternative therapies than those who avoid meat for ethical reasons, and in this sample that is the case. However, other types of vegetarians are even more inclined to use alternative therapies.

Involvement in those groups and activities that might be labelled, for want of a better term, 'human potential' is probably a better indicator of quasi-religiosity or holistic spirituality than is use of alternative therapies. These self-development, mind expansion groups and techniques often make specific reference to

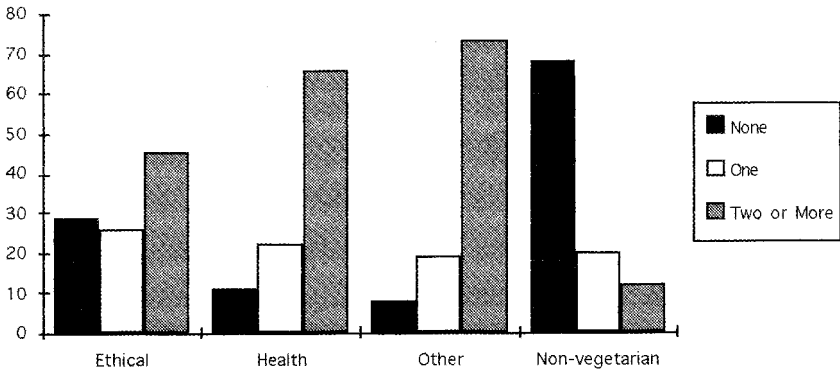


Figure 2. Type of vegetarianism by use of alternative therapies.

the spiritual over and above the material life or to goals and aspirations which are to do with self-realisation, forms of enlightenment and the search for deeper significance. Figure 3 shows the degree of involvement in them of variously motivated vegetarians.

Vegetarians are clearly more involved in human potential activities than non-vegetarians. Differences between the various types of vegetarian are not great, but the ethical vegetarians are a little less involved in human potential than other types of vegetarian. This might reflect a therapeutic dimension of human potential which appeals to health-oriented and other vegetarians.

There are several magazines devoted to the themes of the groups and techniques that I have called human potential. Reading such magazines on a regular basis is another indication of quasi-religiosity. Figure 4 gives the figures for this type of activity. Much the same picture for reading human potential magazines is seen as for involvement in human potential groups, but somewhat more marked.

Milton Yinger (1969) has developed a measure of what he calls 'non-doctrinal religiosity', that is to say a fundamental propensity to think in a religious way about experience, independently of any specific or concrete form of this propensity; before, that is, it receives any expression in formulated beliefs, practices or organisations. Whether Yinger's measure succeeds in this is a matter of debate.

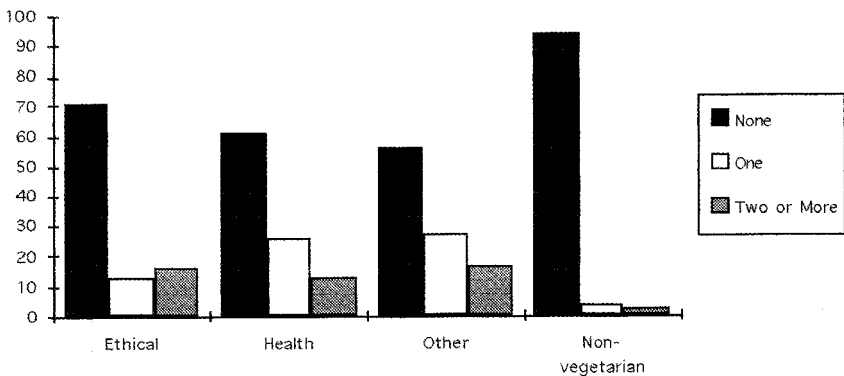


Figure 3. Type of vegetarianism by involvement in human potential groups.

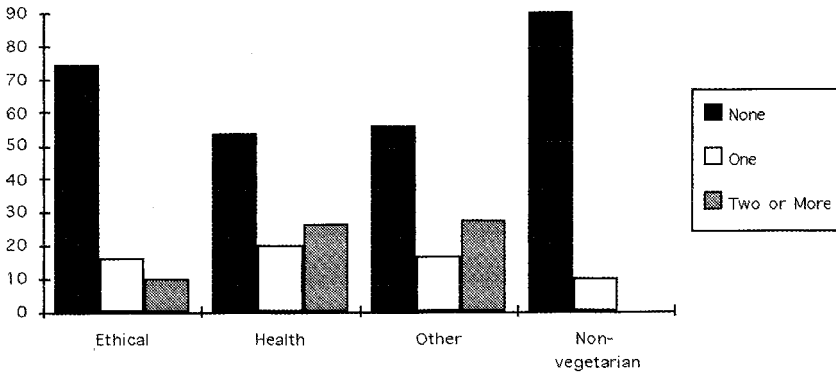


Figure 4. Type of vegetarianism by readership of human potential magazines.

Tests of it suggest that it is not as independent of traditional Christian and other established belief as intended, but it may indicate something. Figure 5 presents, in simplified form, the scores of respondents grouped into high, medium and low, for each type of motivation for adopting a vegetarian diet. Ethical and health-oriented vegetarians are very similar on this measure being roughly normally distributed. Ethical vegetarians score, perhaps, slightly higher, but only very slightly. Other types of vegetarians, however, score more highly than either ethical or health vegetarians, while non-vegetarians are shifted towards lower scores on the index.

We have mentioned the anti-violence stance of vegetarianism. An empirical indication of this can be seen in the responses to questions related to nuclear weapons, capital punishment and abortion, which the following table shows. Figure 6 gives the proportion of respondents supporting CND, opposed to all nuclear weapons, opposed to capital punishment for murder, even if of a police officer on duty or carried out by terrorists, and in favour of allowing abortion in a wide range of circumstances.

With the exception of the issue of abortion, all these indicators suggest that vegetarians are more strongly opposed to the use or threat of violence for almost any purpose or in any circumstances than are the dietary orthodox. Ethical vegetarians show, for the most part, somewhat greater support for CND and

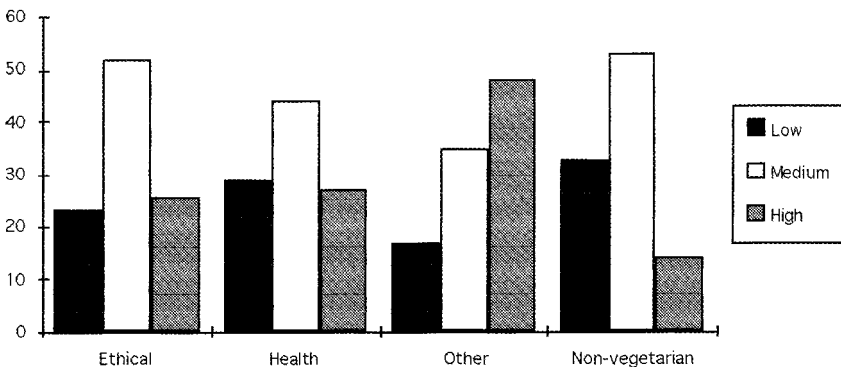


Figure 5. Type of vegetarianism by Yinger's non-doctrinal religiosity score.

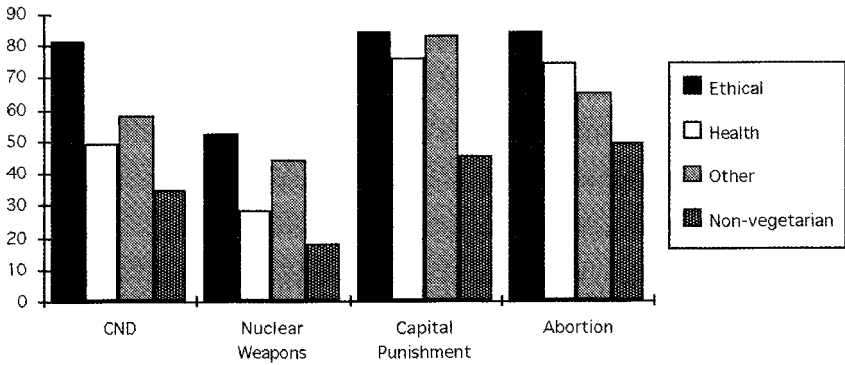


Figure 6. Type of vegetarianism by attitudes to CND, nuclear weapons, capital punishment, and abortion.

opposition to nuclear weapons and capital punishment than health or other types of vegetarians. However, vegetarians generally take a 'liberal' stance on the issue of abortion and ethical vegetarians are the most 'liberal' in this respect.

The results regarding the issue of abortion are perhaps surprising. It might be thought that to be against violence and the taking of life would mean being pro-life on the abortion issue. Part of the explanation might be that vegetarians, typically liberal on most issues, are forced to come down on one side or the other on this issue and feel compelled to respond in a way congruent with their liberalism rather than with their opposition to violence. This does not explain, however, why their liberalism should outweigh their pro-life sentiments. Part of the explanation might be that vegetarians are not inclined to see the foetus as fully a person and/or do not perceive abortion as an act of violence, but rather as a clinical operation.

Finally, if vegetarianism challenges the traditional boundaries between human and animal and between culture and nature, we might expect vegetarians to be more pro-environmentalist than others. The last figure presents data on support for various environmental groups and causes.

Clearly, one does not have to be a vegetarian to love cuddly, furry animals, as the levels of support among non-vegetarians for the World Wide Fund for

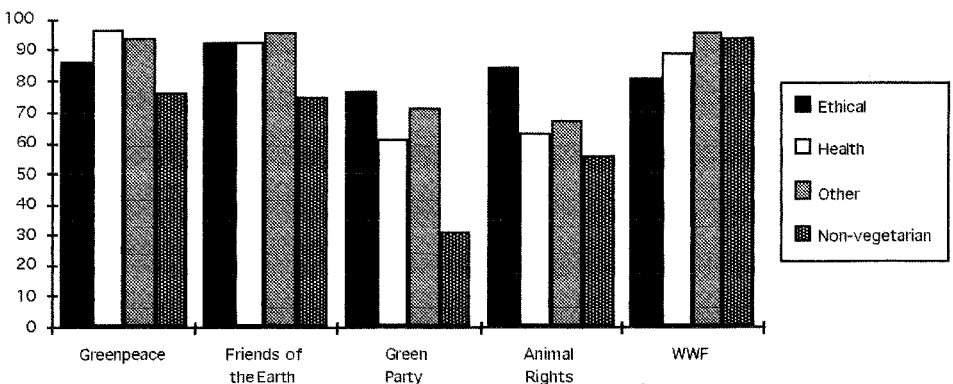


Figure 7. Type of vegetarianism by support for environmental groups and causes.



Nature demonstrate, but being a vegetarian is certainly more closely associated with being pro-environmentalist. While differences between vegetarians and non-vegetarians on most of these measures are not great, they are more marked in the case of support for the Green Party. Ethical vegetarians are not noticeably different from other vegetarians in environmental matters, but are more concerned about the issue of animal rights to which, of course, we would expect them to be particularly attuned.

## Discussion

Ethical vegetarians do seem to differ somewhat from other types of vegetarian, but apart from use of therapies, attitudes to violence and animal rights, these differences are slight and on many measures there is no appreciable difference. On nearly all measures they are closer to other vegetarians than they are to the dietary orthodox. Two reasons for this might be proposed. The first reason is that, although their primary or original reason for becoming vegetarian may have been ethical, not all vegetarians state a single motive and, as time passes, tend to acquire other reasons for following their diet. There may be a number of processes governing convergence of motives and associated attitudes and values.

Firstly, one might refer to a process of deviance amplification. To be a vegetarian is in sociological terms to be deviant and in a respect which very clearly separates vegetarians in one of the most basic aspects of life and on very frequent occasions. Vegetarians either eat differently or because of that may often eat separately from non-vegetarians. Having to accept being unorthodox in this respect it may be easier to adopt unorthodox ideas in other respects against the more usual tendency to conform to the norms of behaviour of those around us.

Secondly, since vegetarians and others who follow distinctive diets often have to defend their views and behaviour against those who are critical of them, they may resort to a range of reasons and justifications. Someone who adopts a vegetarian diet, for example for ethical reasons, may also come to use ecological arguments, since this strengthens their case. This in turn leads to the adoption of views associated with environmental radicalism and so on.

Finally, there is the possibility that dietary alternativism is part of a complex and varying, yet interrelated set of beliefs, attitudes and orientations. It is part of a general alternative and dissenting outlook for many people in contemporary society and its followers 'buy the whole package' so to speak. In favour of this interpretation is the fact that the deviance amplification theory does not account for the particular form or direction of the deviance. The deviant dietary behaviour does not in itself necessarily entail attitudes which are more oriented towards health or environmental concerns. The justification thesis again does not easily explain why certain particular additional arguments are adopted rather than others. It might be possible, for example, to strengthen one's case for vegetarianism by becoming a Buddhist, by emphasising the importance of abstemiousness, of disciplining the body, by upholding ascetic ideals and associated beliefs of a conservative and anti-liberal character, or whatever.

The second reason for the similarity between ethical, health and other vegetarians is that stated motives are not the only ones and there are deeper processes

at work. For example, the pursuit of health in contemporary culture is, it has been argued, not as instrumental, pragmatic, and mundane as one might think. Health has become an overriding value, a metaphor for all that is desirable (Crawford, 1980, 1984). Health, fitness and beauty represent a kind of this-worldly corporeal salvation. Concern with and pursuit of health in a holistic sense has become a vehicle for expressing meaning and of spiritual empowerment (Beckford, 1983; McGuire, 1988). As Twigg points out, vegetarianism "offers a this-worldly salvation in terms of the body" (Twigg, 1979: 24). In so far as this is true, we should not, perhaps, expect health-motivated vegetarians to be that different from ethical vegetarians. Health-motivated vegetarians may be making use of one means of expressing and maintaining a sense of meaning in life, while ethical vegetarians use another. To the extent that this is true, the distinction between ethical and health-oriented vegetarians in terms of anthropocentrism versus non-anthropocentrism or in terms of a "rhetoric of entitlements" versus a "rhetoric of rights" (Ibarra & Kitsuse, 1993; Maurer, 1995) may be somewhat artificial. As Beardsworth (1995) points out, vegetarianism may be a virtually all-purpose solution to the anomie that results from modern food production methods in meeting the anxieties surrounding the palatability, nutritiousness, and safety of food as well as the ethics of its production. To be concerned about the welfare of animals is to be as much concerned about oneself and one's own moral state, while health vegetarians often believe that to eat an animal that has been violently killed is to ingest violence into oneself and therefore to become violent and aggressive.

## Conclusion

Aspects of vegetarianism are like aspects of religion. Vegetarianism may be said to be quasi-religious. Use of the terms 'quasi-religion', 'quasi-religious', etc. of course highlights the fact, as argued above, that we do not have a satisfactory term for the type of phenomenon that is the concern of this article. If such beliefs and behaviour are becoming more prevalent in contemporary life, we shall need to do better than to rely on terms which indicate that they are like religion, but not really religion. We shall need to develop a conceptual tool kit, to find a vocabulary, defined in such a way as to characterise such phenomena in terms which reflect their own distinct and particular characteristics rather than in terms borrowed from a different if related type of discourse. The things to which we wish to apply the term 'quasi-religion' are to be characterised not simply in terms of what they share with something else, namely religion, but distinctive characteristics of their own. This is not to say that insights learned from the study of religions cannot be very usefully applied to the understanding of such phenomena.

In other words, we shall have to acknowledge that boundaries do exist, or at least that it is necessary to erect them, if we are to be clear and avoid confusions. As Cochran (1994) points out, the problem with terms, such as 'quasi-religion', is that an imaginary entity is created when what we are really dealing with is a relationship. If we create a new imaginary entity, we shall only generate two boundaries where before there was only one.

An analogy which comes to mind here is that of the marsupial cat, the quoll or *Dasgurus viverrimus* and related species. The marsupial cat resembles an

actual cat in some respects, but is not, of course, a cat at all. Neither is it a para-cat or a surrogate cat. It is certainly not invisible. I have no idea what it would mean to think of it as implicitly a cat, nor is there very much point in calling it a quasi-cat. It is what it is. We learn very little about it, if our thinking remains fixed in terms of cat analogies. Similarly, what I have called quasi-religions: they are what they are and we shall understand more about them, if we treat them as such and not primarily as things which are like something else, but which they are not. Just as the features of the marsupial cat suggest to us an evolutionary development and an adaptation to environment similar to that of the true cat, so the features of the quasi-religious suggest to us ideas about their significance and how we might understand them.

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## NOTES

1. Walter (1991) has argued that the perception that death is a taboo subject in our culture is something of a myth. While acknowledging that it is to a large degree taboo in public contexts he claims that in private discourse it is not so and that it is a subject which people are willing to talk about. The fact that there appears to be a reluctance to publicly acknowledge the reality of death, however, certainly points to death being problematic in our culture. The fact that one can always find people willing to talk about it in private does not invalidate this point.
2. The project of which this survey was a part was funded by the Research Endowment Trust Fund of Reading University to whom thanks are due; the project was carried out in conjunction with Professor P. A. J. Waddington, Dr A. Walker, and Ms S. Gregory.

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