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## Theological and Moral Aspects of Vegetarianism

This article presents the increasingly popular phenomenon of vegetarianism from the perspective of moral theology. After synthetically describing the different types of vegetarianism, this study identified what motivates people to refrain from the consumption of meat and animal products. Vegetarians' sensitivity to the fate of livestock as well as their ascetic motivations do not incite any moral objections, but rather can be considered a moral ideal. Responsibly practicing vegetarianism poses no threats to human health. The main objections to vegetarianism pertain to the ideologies and doctrines that motivate people to practice it; for, these ideologies oppose a Christian understanding of creation.

**Key words:** animal rights, moral theology, veganism, vegetarianism, animals.

### Introduction

Vegetarianism has become a more widespread phenomenon in Poland. According to a study conducted in 2013, more than one million Poles, who constitute more than 3% of the entire Polish population, practice vegetarianism. There is also a large group of Poles who aspire to practice vegetarianism, yet occasionally consume meat and fish products.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Instytut Badania Opinii Publicznej Homo Homini. *Ilu jest w Polsce vegetarian?* Wyniki badania Instytutu Badania Opinii Homo Homini dla LightBox (How Many Vegetarians are There in Poland? The Homo Homini Opinion Research Institute's Findings for LightBox). September 16, 2013, <http://www.lightbox.pl>.

Different forms of vegetarianism exist and depend on the type of food products consumed or avoided. Among the various types of vegetarianism, the most common form is *lacto-ovo-vegetarianism*, according to which it is possible to consume vegetables, fruits, and some animal products such as milk, milk products, and eggs, while meat and seafood are avoided. Lacto-vegetarians, on the other hand, avoid the aforementioned animal products in addition to eggs. Another category of vegetarianism known as *veganism* excludes the consumption of all animal products (i.e., milk, dairy, and eggs). The least common, less well-known, and strictest forms of vegetarianism are *raw foodism*, which entails a diet limited to raw (uncooked) and unprocessed foods, and *fruitarianism*, which is a diet consisting of fruits, seeds, and nuts. Finally, there are also two variations on vegetarianism known as semi-vegetarianism: the first, *pollo-vegetarianism*, allows for the consumption of chicken, while the second, *pesco-vegetarianism*, permits the consumption of fish. Individuals often temporarily practice these two forms of vegetarianism before following stricter forms that exclude meat.<sup>2</sup>

While people practice vegetarianism for a variety of reason, this study will analyze four of the main motives behind this lifestyle choice. In order to remain a living science, moral theology must critically assess phenomena that are characteristic of the modern world. The increasing interest in vegetarianism, which could even be termed a kind of “sign of the times,” is such a phenomenon.

## Man’s right to use animals to realize his own rational aims

From the earliest times man has consumed both animals and animal products, especially meat, to sustain himself. Man initially obtained these products through hunting wild animals. Later and to this day, he has relied on breeding livestock as the primary means to provide food for himself.

Biblical tradition recognizes that man has a right to kill animals for two reasons: 1) to offer them as a sacrifice to God and 2) to obtain food.<sup>3</sup> These two are in accordance with the theological and moral assertion

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<sup>2</sup> See A. Zwoliński, *Wegetarianizm* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo GOTÓW, 1996), 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> See W. Chrostowski, “Status zwierząt w Biblii,” in *Forum Teologiczne* 6 (2005): 18.

that man may not to treat animals arbitrarily and that man has a right to use animals to realize his own rational aims only insofar as these aims follow natural law. Therefore, man's existential need to acquire food permits him to kill animals.<sup>4</sup> However, this right also obliges man to treat animals with kindness and sensitivity, which means that man must not only refrain from inflicting unnecessary pain on animals,<sup>5</sup> he must also provide suitable breeding and slaughtering conditions that minimize animal suffering and stress. To this end, developed the Five Freedoms to describe the ideal conditions in which to raise livestock. Specifically, these conditions must ensure that animals are adequately fed, hydrated, and comfortable; able to behave as they would in nature; and free from pain, injury, illness, stress, and fear. In practice, this means that breeders must properly handle livestock, have knowledge of their needs, select and train qualified personnel, satisfactorily maintain facilities, provide round-the-clock care, and slaughter animals in a humane manner.<sup>6</sup>

## Motives for practicing vegetarianism

Although biblical, moral, and theological traditions allow for breeding and slaughtering animals, some Christians freely choose to become vegetarians and, thereby, refrain from consuming animal products.

### Ascetic motives

Referring directly to Christ's teaching in Matthew 6:1-18, Christian tradition regards fasting as one of the most important good deeds. Fasting is also an incredibly worthwhile ascetic practice that helps man in his battle against every kind of disordered attachment and desire.<sup>7</sup> Fasting itself can take on a variety of forms. For example, one can refrain from consuming alcoholic beverages and abusing drugs, limit television and computer use, or more intensively practice charity toward others. Among the different forms of fasting, the most common

<sup>4</sup> See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 92; J. Wróbel, "Zwierzęta ich prawa," *Prawa człowieka. W 60. Rocznice Powszechnej Deklaracji Praw Człowieka: Przesłanie moralne Kościoła*, eds. K. Jeżyna and T. Zadykowicz (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2010), 99-101.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>6</sup> See J. El-Jai, "Rola bioetyki w kształtowaniu humanitarnego podejścia do zwierząt," *Zeszyty Filozoficzne*, no. 14-15 (2009): 231.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Gocko, K. Kołtun, "'Trzy dobre uczynki' w ujęciu teologii moralnej społecznej," *Seminare: Poszukiwania naukowe* 34, no. 3 (2013): 50-51.

is to refrain from eating meat or limiting the amount of food that one consumes. To assist the faithful on their path to deeper union with Christ, the Church obliges the faithful to fast and strictly regulates this obligation by determining when, from what, and to what degree the faithful should abstain.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the Fathers of the Church, including John Cassian, recommend moderate but continuous fasting. According to the Church Fathers, fasting should be adapted to the liturgical year, meaning fasting should be more intense on fast days and less intense on feast days and celebrations, when individuals may consume more varied and nutritious meals. The Church Fathers recommend the practice of continuous fasting because it safeguards a person against excessive laxity, which can occur after a prolonged and severe fast and can, in turn, lead to the sin of gluttony.<sup>9</sup> This type of ascetic practice takes place even today in some monasteries and convents that follow a strict rule of life. For example, Camaldolese monks and nuns completely refrain from eating meat, which is given only to those who are ill. Additionally, they do not consume dairy products and eggs on all Fridays of the year and during the forty days of fasting that precede the feasts of Christmas and Easter.<sup>10</sup> While many contemporary moral theologians are reticent to do so, a few have timidly encouraged the faithful to practice periodic fasting at the very least, particularly during the season of Lent,<sup>11</sup> as a form of abstaining from that which is not necessary.

Studies have shown that refraining from consuming certain animal products can also serve as an expression of one's solidarity with others, particularly the poor and hungry. It is well known that highly developed countries' economies, which are known to be both expansive and brutal to people, animals, and the environment, are largely responsible for world hunger.<sup>12</sup> For instance, industrial breeding based

<sup>8</sup> Por. S. Mojek, "IV przykazanie kościelne: wstrzemięźliwość od spożywania mięsa i post," *Przykazania kościelne dzisiaj. Przesłanie moralne Kościoła*, eds. J. Nagórny and J. Gocko (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 2001): 168.

<sup>9</sup> See B. Caseau, "Chrześcijańska praktyka postu w starożytności oraz wczesnym średniowieczu," *Communio* (Polish Edition) 24, no. 4 (2014): 32.

<sup>10</sup> See *The Constitution of the Congregation of the Camaldolese Hermits of Monte Corona* (Ohio: 2002), <http://www.camaldolese.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/constitution.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> See I. Mroczkowski, *Czy człowiek w raju był wegetarianinem?* <https://pl.aleteia.org/2017/03/14/czy-czlowiek-w-raju-był-wegetarianinem> (06.18.2017).

<sup>12</sup> See J. Gocko and K. Kołtun, "Trzy dobre uczynki," 51; S. Jaromi, "Czyńcie sobie ziemię kochaną," *W drodze*, no. 6 (2017): 59.

on artificial propagation and feeding requires considerable amounts of water, feed, and energy—resources known to contribute to pollution.<sup>13</sup> In fact, eight kilograms of vegetable protein is necessary to provide consumers with one kilogram of pork. This output is significant when a person considers that approximately 80-90% of the world's cereal and legume production is spent on farm animal feed, while the meat from the animals fed nourishes barely 30% of the human population, leaving the remainder of the population to suffer from a shortage of, among other things, products used in breeding livestock.<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, vegetarianism provides an effective means to reduce animal consumption and, consequently, fight world hunger.

As demonstrated above, vegetarianism and its variations provide Christians with a mode of fasting that is valuable not only as an ascetic practice that helps in the battle against sinful tendencies and facilitates an individual's spiritual development, but also as an expression of solidarity with the poor. Nevertheless, fasting requires great effort because it comes to an individual neither naturally nor automatically. A person must have the right intention and resolve to remain steadfast in his sacrifice of certain foods or pleasures.

### The desire to reduce animal suffering

Rather frequently, individuals refrain from eating meat and other animal products because of their concern for the fate of livestock. Even if animals live in optimal breeding and slaughtering conditions, they still experience stress and pain. From a moral point of view, this suffering is always an evil because animals, unlike humans, are spiritually and personally unable to perceive, interpret, and make sense of suffering and, therefore, understand how it is a call to moral perfection.<sup>15</sup>

Man's dignity is made manifest in relation to other living creatures. Man expresses his elevated dignity at the very least in his kindness toward animals and sensitivity to their misery. Among men, some particularly sensitive individuals feel impelled by their consciences to cease eating meat, since it is always obtained through animal suffering, while others go further by excluding from their diets every kind

<sup>13</sup> See R. Ziemińska, "Moralne argumenty za vegetarianizmem," *Przegląd Filozoficzny* 24, no. 2 (2015): 198.

<sup>14</sup> See B. Grabowska, "Czy wszyscy powinniśmy zostać wegetarianami?," *Wschodni Rocznik Humanistyczny* 11 (2015): 336.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Wróbel, *Zwierzęta*, 102.

of animal product obtained from living creatures raised in artificial conditions.

It is important to note, however, that the Church approaches those who practice vegetarianism as a means to reduce animal suffering with reservation. Although theoretical scholarship on the question of the relationship between humans and animals is not lacking, translating doctrine on this subject into pastoral practice is, on a practical level, problematic. As a result, people who practice vegetarianism or veganism for the aforementioned reasons are, unfortunately, often misunderstood or even condemned by individuals within the Church. On the other hand, some moral theologians treat vegetarianism as a noble aim, while others consider it a moral ideal exemplified by those who are willing to make a sacrifice for either health or spiritual reasons.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of whether theologians oppose or support vegetarianism, it remains a voluntary and optional practice among Christians because, at this point, the Church can neither treat meat consumption as a moral evil, nor morally oblige every person to follow a vegetarian lifestyle.<sup>17</sup>

A complete refusal to consume all animal products is not the only means to ensure a better fate for livestock; another option is to buy food products from private farms or breeders that strive to ensure that their livestock live in optimal conditions. However, this option costs more and is less readily available to consumers.<sup>18</sup>

## Doctrinal reasons

The doctrinal and ideological motivations underlying the practice of vegetarianism are so varied that this study cannot describe them all. However, these differing doctrines and ideologies assert that the consumption of meat or other animal products constitutes a serious moral offense and should, therefore, cease.

Throughout Christian antiquity, Manichaean beliefs and practices pervaded the culture. One such Manichean practice was to refrain from eating meat. This practice, however, did not arise out of human sensitivity to the fate of animals. On the contrary, Manicheans believed that animals were pervaded by evil, and they avoided consuming animals so as not to consume the evil they embodied. In this way, Manicheans' avoidance of meat was not a means to practice temperance, but rather

<sup>16</sup> See I. Mroczkowski, *Czy człowiek*.

<sup>17</sup> See K. Akers, "Vegetarianism and Christianity—Are They Compatible?," *The Ark*, no. 234 (2016): 17.

<sup>18</sup> See J. El-Jai, *Rola bioetyki*, 231.

an expression of contempt for God's creation (animals). Obviously, the Manichean motivation to refrain from eating meat is contrary to the Christian faith, since Christians believe that every creature that comes from God reflects some aspect of His Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. In this way, the created world is the sacrament of God's presence through which God can give Himself to man.<sup>19</sup> As a result of the resolutions of several synods, Manichean influence within the Church declined drastically. Nevertheless, a Manichean worldview has persisted throughout the centuries and is currently supported by the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement.<sup>20</sup>

In recent decades, a growing animal rights movement, whose main ideologues are Peter Singer and Tim Regan, has arisen. Within the movement as a whole there are various ideologies, each based on differing premises. Nevertheless, all ideologies uphold that humans and animals are equal because of their ability to sense and feel. According to this ideology, since both humans and animals seek to avoid pain and suffering, they have the same rights. As a result, when man ascribes certain rights to himself and thereby denies these rights to animals, he commits a racially motivated abuse often referred to as species chauvinism. Some supporters of the ontological equality between man and animals accept such assertions.<sup>21</sup>

While the Church does not oppose all movements that support animals, it warns against ascribing to animals the same rights as humans. For, unlike animals, man is a unique being on whom God has bestowed a special dignity and who consciously, freely, and responsibly realizes himself. This dignity is the basis of man's particular duties. For this reason, people should speak analogically about animal rights or about man's duty toward animals. For, as described above, the nature and scope of man's rights are different,<sup>22</sup> and, although some theologians have stipulated that people should cease eating meat, man cannot be obliged to practice vegetarianism.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, those who switch to a vegetarian or vegan diet are often influenced by Eastern philosophical systems of thought or by

<sup>19</sup> See J.J.F. de Farias, "Kosmos 'przebóstwiony': Przyczynek do sakramentalnej teologii świata," in *Communio* (Polish Edition), no. 6 (1992): 133.

<sup>20</sup> See J. Salij, "Kontrowersyjni przyjaciele zwierząt," *Forum Teologiczne* 6 (2005): 102-104.

<sup>21</sup> See J. Wróbel, *Zwierzęta*, 92.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-95.

<sup>23</sup> See K. Remele, *Vegetarisches Essen ist Christenpflicht*. <http://www.katholisch.de/aktuelles/aktuelle-artikel/vegetarisches-essen-ist-christenpflicht> (06.24.2017).



religious traditions based on pantheism. Those who popularize this kind of vegetarianism promote a great interest in Eastern thought and opposition to Western civilization.<sup>24</sup> People should be cautious with regard to these trends because they lead to the dangerous phenomenon of religious syncretism.

## Health impacts of vegetarianism

A large percentage of people of who practice vegetarianism choose to do so for health reasons. Perhaps this is why the following quote from Bernard Shaw is a favorite among vegetarians: "Think of the fierce energy concentrated in an acorn! You bury it in the ground, and it explodes into an oak! Bury a sheep, and nothing happens but decay."<sup>25</sup> According to this quote, vegetation brings forth life and health. Health is a gift from God that makes it possible for man to flourish and realize his vocation. Therefore, man should seek to take particular and adequate care of his health, and vegetarianism is considered one way to do so.

Up until recently, specialists, doctors, and nutritionists have agreed that meat and animal products are an indispensable means for humans to obtain essential nutrients. Conversely, when meat and animal products are left out of a human diet, the body does not receive many of the essential amounts of nutrients that it needs to function. While recent studies have tried to disprove this hypothesis, it does not mean that a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle is safe for everyone to follow.

When an adult prudently practices a vegetarian lifestyle, then vegetarianism can have many health benefits. Before embarking on this lifestyle, however, it is necessary to investigate the various categories of vegetarianism (i.e. lacto-vegetarian, vegan, etc.) and, from there, choose which option would be best based on one's age, sex, work, and environment. For example, for those who live at moderate latitudes, lacto-ovo-vegetarianism or semi-vegetarianism offers a varied enough diet that one could limit one's intake of fish and meat.<sup>26</sup>

A vegetarian diet does provide many health benefits. For example, the high fiber found in vegetables prevents atherosclerosis and obesity. Vegetables also contain a large amount of essential vitamins and minerals known to reduce the risk of cancer and hypertension, such

<sup>24</sup> See A. Zwoliński, *Wegetarianizm*, 24-28.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> See Ś. Ziemiański, and J. Budzyńska-Topolowska, *Wegetarianizm w świetle nauki o żywności i żywieniu* (Warsaw: Instytut Danone, 1997), 160.



as vitamin C, coumarin, selenium, potassium, and magnesium. And, a diet high in vegetable protein can lower cholesterol<sup>27</sup> and provide a significant amount of unsaturated fatty acids as well as a small amount of saturated fatty acids, both of which are necessary to prevent and even treat coronary heart disease. Additionally, recent studies have shown that vegetarian diets significantly reduce the risk of developing diabetes.<sup>28</sup>

While it is clear that a vegetarian diet presents a variety of health benefits to adults, particular caution should be taken with regard to children, adolescents, and pregnant women, to whom essential vitamins and nutrients are indispensable for proper growth and development. For example, failing to consume sufficient vitamins such as B12, D, iron, and exogenous amino acids, which are often found in meats and animal products, can result in stunted growth as well as physical and mental impairment, anemia, and malabsorption of other key minerals and nutrients.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, children, adolescents, and pregnant women should supplement their diets with vitamins B12, D, iron, and exogenous amino acids, which can be found in nuts and legumes. Additionally, pregnant women should take folic acid supplements, since a lack of this B vitamin can cause severe defects in the developing fetus' nervous system. Studies have shown that the incidence of low birth weight or perinatal complications does not increase when proper nutritional supplementation takes place during pregnancy.<sup>30</sup>

Publications on food science and nutrition warn against extreme forms of vegetarianism such as veganism and fruitarianism and recommend that only adults follow them. Should an individual choose to follow a vegan or fruitarian diet, then intensive vitamins and calcium supplementation is necessary to reduce carcinogenic nitrosamines in the gastrointestinal tract that would have otherwise been reduced by dairy products. Moreover, these supplements should be taken periodically and under a doctor's supervision.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 161-162.

<sup>28</sup> See Y. Lee and K. Park, "Adherence to a Vegetarian Diet and Diabetes Risk: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Observational Studies," *Nutrients* 9, no. 7 (2017): 8.

<sup>29</sup> See Ś. Ziemiański and J. Budzyńska-Topolowska, *Vegetarianism*, 161.

<sup>30</sup> See A. Ochendzan, E. Kamiński, "Wpływ diety wegetariańskiej na stan zdrowia kobiety w ciąży i noworodka w okresie okołoporodowym," *Zeszyty Naukowe: Wyższa Szkoła Hotelarstwa i Gastronomii w Poznaniu* 3 (2008): 19.

<sup>31</sup> See Ś. Ziemiański and J. Budzyńska-Topolowska, *Wegetarianizm*, 164.

Scientists are still studying vegetarianism's influence on human health, and some other aspects of vegetarianism require further investigation. Among other things, scientists need to examine the effects of vegetarianism on pregnant mothers and the subsequent development of their pre-school, school, and adult age children, and these longitudinal studies require time.<sup>32</sup> Because of the current lack of knowledge about the effects of vegetarianism on human health, individuals should be prudent and cautious when deciding to follow a vegetarian diet. The health benefits of vegetarianism are particularly evident when taking into account recent changes that have occurred in the production of meat and animal products. For example, in order to ensure the source of their income, breeders inject their livestock with antibiotics to protect them against diseases and with hormones to speedily increase their muscle mass. Both the residual antibiotics and hormones are subsequently passed on to those who consume these meat and animal products, thereby insidiously affecting their health.<sup>33</sup>

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The practice of vegetarianism is becoming increasingly more common in Poland. The reasons for this choice, however, are varied. Given that Poland is a predominantly Catholic nation, the Church should appreciate people's motivation to cease eating meat for ascetic reasons or out of sensitivity to the suffering of livestock. Pastors should approach vegetarian Christians with less suspicion, particularly since their numbers are increasing.

Vegetarianism can also be a means to care for one's health. For example, studies have shown that eliminating meat from one's diet aids in maintaining better physical condition and reduces the risk of serious diseases. In some cases, however, it can be dangerous to eliminate all animal food products, since they contain essential nutrients. For this reason, an individual should exercise caution when deciding to practice any form of vegetarianism.

Doctrinal vegetarianism, which upholds that the world is permeated by evil, misunderstands animal rights, is influenced by other religious beliefs and systems, and is incompatible with the Christian vision of man and the world.

<sup>32</sup> See A. Ochendzan and E. Kamiński, "Wpływ diety," 19.

<sup>33</sup> See R. Ziemińska, "Moralne argumenty," 198.

## TEOLOGICZNE I MORALNE ASPEKTY WEGETARIANIZMU

Celem niniejszego artykułu było zaprezentowanie coraz popularniejszego zjawiska wegetarianizmu z perspektywy teologii moralnej. Po syntetycznym opisanu jego rodzajów dokonano charakterystyki motywacji, które leżą u podstaw rezygnacji ze spożywania produktów pochodzenia zwierzęcego. Zastrzeżeń moralnych nie budzą decyzje argumentowane pragnieniem ascezy i wrażliwością na los zwierząt gospodarskich. Mogą być one wręcz uznane za ideał moralny. Odpowiedzialne praktykowanie wegetarianizmu nie stanowi także poważnego zagrożenia dla zdrowia człowieka. Istotne obiekcje należy jednak skierować pod adresem wegetarianizmu motywowanego ideologicznie czy doktrynalnie. W swoich podstawach jest on bowiem sprzeczny z chrześcijańską wizją stworzenia.

Moral  
theology

**Słowa kluczowe:** prawa zwierząt, teologia moralna, weganizm, wegetarianizm, zwierzęta.

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