

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

July 8, 2008 at 5:50am

The only diet for a peacemaker is a vegetarian diet

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

In Fort Lauderdale, Fla., last week to speak at the National Convention of Unitarian Universalists, I met my old friend Bruce Friedrich. We spent eight memorable months together in a tiny jail cell, along with Philip Berrigan, for our 1993 Plowshares disarmament action. A former Catholic Worker, Bruce is now one of the leaders of PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. He gave a brilliant workshop on the importance of becoming a vegetarian, something I urge everyone to consider.

I became a vegetarian with a few other Jesuit novices shortly after I entered the Jesuits in 1982 and later wrote a pamphlet for PETA, "Christianity and Vegetarianism." I based my decision solely on Francis Moore Lappe's classic work, *Diet for a Small Planet*, a book that I think everyone should read.

In it, Lappe, the great advocate for the hungry, makes an unassailable case that vegetarianism is the best way to eliminate world hunger and to sustain the environment.

At first glance, we wonder how that could be. But it's undisputable. A hundred million tons of grain go yearly for biofuel -- a morally questionable use of foodstuffs. But more than seven times that much -- some 760 million tons according to the United Nations -- go into the bellies of farmed animals, this to fatten them up so that sirloin, hamburgers and pork roast grace the tables of First-World people. It boils down to this. Over 70 percent of U.S. grain and 80 percent of corn is fed to farm animals rather than people.

Conscience dictates that the grain should stay where it is grown, from South America to Africa. And it should be fed to the local malnourished poor, not to the chickens destined for our KFC buckets. The environmental think-tank, the World Watch Institute, sums it up: "Continued growth in meat output is dependent on feeding grain to animals, creating competition for grain between affluent meat eaters and the world's poor."

Meanwhile, eating meat causes almost 40 percent more greenhouse-gas emissions than all the cars, trucks, and planes in the world combined. (The world's 1.3 billion cattle release tons of methane into the atmosphere, and hundreds of millions tons of CO2 are released by burning forests due to dry conditions as in California or due to purposeful burns to create cow pastures in Latin America.)

And global warming isn't the only environmental issue. Almost 40 years ago, Lappe spelled out the environmental consequences of eating meat in stark relief. But more recently, her analysis received some high-power validation. The United Nations recently published "Livestock's Long Shadow." It concludes that eating meat is "one of the most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global." And it insists that the meat industry "should be a major policy focus when dealing with problems of land degradation, climate change and air pollution, water shortage and water pollution, and loss of biodiversity."

Much of our potable water and much of our fossil fuel supply is wasted on rearing chickens, pigs, and other animals for humans to eat. And over 50 percent of forests worldwide have been cleared to raise or feed livestock for meat-eating. (A recent protest in Brazil denounced Kentucky Fried Chicken for clearing thousands of acres of untouched Amazon rain forest for chicken feed.)

As a Christian, I became a vegetarian because of the Gospel mandate of Matthew 25, "Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me" -- because I do not want my appetites to contribute to the ongoing oppression of the world's starving masses. As a Catholic and Jesuit, I want somehow to side with the poor and hungry.

But another issue arises, too, over the decades, I've learned that our appetite for meat leads to cruelty to animals -- chickens pressed wing-to-wing into filthy sheds and de-beaked, for example. And since I've always espoused creative nonviolence as the fundamental Gospel value, my vegetarianism helps me not to participate in the vicious torture and destruction of billions of cows, chickens, and so many other creatures.

The chickens never raise families, root in the soil, build nests, or do anything natural. Often they are tormented or tortured before they are slowly killed, as PETA has repeatedly documented in its undercover investigations -- for your chicken dinner or hamburger. (All this is documented on a video narrated by Alec Baldwin, at www.Meat.org.)

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Animals have feelings, they suffer; they have needs and desires. They were created by God to raise their families and breath fresh air; and if chickens to peck in the grass, if pigs to root in the soil. Today's farms don't let them do anything God designed them to do. Animal scientists attest that farm animals have personalities and interests, that chickens and pigs are smarter than dogs and cats.

Animals figure in the Gospels. They brim with lovely, respectful images of animals. Clearly Jesus was familiar with animals, and cared for them, as he urged us to look at the birds of the air or be his sheep. He even identified himself as "a mother hen who longs to gather us under her wings."

And animals figure in the Hebrew Bible. Isaiah 11, a vision of reconciled creation, dreams of a day when "the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together with a little child to guide them. The cow and the beast shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest. The lion shall eat hay like the ox. The baby shall play by the cobra's den and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair. There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the God of peace, as water covers the sea." (Isaiah 11:1-9)

A vision of a nonviolent world, all creatures nonviolent, children safely at play with them, and no violence anywhere. That is the peaceful vision of creation that we are called to pursue -- in every aspect of our lives, from the jobs we hold, to our use of gasoline and alternative energies, to what we eat and wear, say and do.

I admire the Bible's greatest vegetarian, Daniel, the nonviolent resister who refused to defile himself by eating the king's meat. He and three friends became healthier than anyone else through their vegetarian diet. And they excelled in wisdom, for "God rewards them with knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom."

In his workshop at the Unitarian Universalists convention, Bruce added another beautiful image, the Garden of Eden. The Bible opens with a vision of paradise where God, animals, and humans recreate in peace together. Clearly, the Bible calls us to return to that paradise.

And Bruce reminded us that from the beginning we are directed to be vegetarians. Genesis 1:29 says, "See, I give you every seed-bearing plant all over the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food."

Biblical images and justice issues aside, there are medical reasons to stop eating meat. Vegetarian diets help keep our weight down, support a lifetime of good health and provide protection against numerous diseases, including the U.S.'s three biggest killers: heart disease, cancer and strokes.

Dr. Dean Ornish and Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn both have 100 percent success in preventing and reversing heart disease using a vegan diet. Meanwhile, Dr. T. Colin Campbell writes that one of the leading causes of human cancer is animal protein. More, vegetarians are also less prone to developing adult-onset diabetes. And then we have to contend with the spread of Mad Cow disease and Avian influenza. One could almost argue that the human body is not designed for meat-eating.

But for me being vegetarian boils down to peacemaking. If you want to be a peacemaker, Bruce said, reflecting the sentiments of Leo Tolstoy, you will want to eat as peaceful a diet as possible. "Vegetarianism," Tolstoy wrote, "is the taproot of humanitarianism." Other great humanitarians like Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer and Thich Nhat Hanh agree. The only diet for a peacemaker is a vegetarian diet.

"Not to hurt our humble brethren, the animals," St. Francis of Assisi said, "is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not enough. We have a higher mission: to be of service to them whenever they require it. If you have people who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity," he continued, "you will have people who will deal likewise with other people."

So it was good to visit with my friend Bruce, and hear once again the wisdom of vegetarianism. It's a key ingredient in the new life of peace, compassion and nonviolence.

John's autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, (with a foreword by Martin Sheen), available Aug. 1, can be ordered at www.amazon.com. See also: www.persistentpeace.com. John's pamphlet "Christianity and Vegetarianism" can be read online at www.peta.org or free copies of the pamphlet or a free CD of John reading the pamphlet can be ordered by sending an email to VegInfo@peta.org. You can listen to or download John reading the pamphlet at www.ChristianVeg.com. See also: www.johndear.org.

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