

Dietary Pacifism? Stanley Hauerwas and Christian Vegetarianism

By Matthew Barton

Introduction

Hi; my name is Matthew Barton, I'm a postgraduate researcher here in the Theology and Religious Studies department at the University of Leeds, I'm going to talk today about a line of thinking I've been focusing on over the past year, or thereabouts. I've got handouts for this, but to be warned they don't correspond perfectly with the order I'm going to talk about things in!

For my thesis, I intend ultimately to propose a new theological model of Christian Vegetarianism, which I hope to reach through discussion with lay Christian Vegetarians, but also through a double critical engagement with the work of the radical ethicist and theologian Stanley Hauerwas, focusing on his pacifism on one hand and on the other his model of the Church as a "counter-cultural community of character." Despite rarely engaging with animal ethics himself, I consider these dual strands of Hauerwas' work rich for approaching such a topic and it is this engagement with Hauerwas that I want to talk about today.

Opening by looking (through vegetarian eyes) at Hauerwas' grounding of Christian nonviolence in his call for the church to be a counter-cultural community, I will move to reflect on ways in which the individualism of modern society – and the church's capitulation to this – hamper the growth and acceptance of vegetarian ethics and theology within Christian communities. I will then make an argument for the vital importance of the church as counter-cultural by looking, alongside feminist Carol Adams, at the language of invisibility present through the animal flesh industry today. Finally I will move onto a focused consideration of the conclusions of "The Chief End of All Flesh", a co-authored article in which Hauerwas for the first and only time dealt directly with the issue of Christian diet, and in the process consider criticisms of this article and also of Hauerwas' body of work taken as a whole. I hope to end by outlining simply my model of Christian Vegetarianism, which I call dietary pacifism.

Church as counter-cultural community of character

Stanley Hauerwas is well-known for dealing with a range of pressing religious and social issues in the process of working out his arguments about Christianity, the church, and society. Interestingly, however, engagement with dietary issues – specifically with the question of whether or not Christians should be vegetarian – has formed at best a minor footnote to his body of work. This is perhaps surprising given what I would identify as the central theme of his writing, stated succinctly by one of his critics Jeffrey Stout: "Being the church, according to *Hauerwas+, is a matter of maintaining a pacifist community of virtue in the midst of a violent world, thus providing a foretaste of the peaceable kingdom in which God reigns absolutely and eternally."

So for Hauerwas, the church is called to be a counter-cultural community of character, which follows the example of Jesus' life in practicing nonviolence and being an example to those inside and outside of the church in the process. And this nonviolence "is not one among other behavioural implications that can be drawn from the gospel but is integral to the shape of Christian convictions." Put differently: "The church is a people on a journey who insist on living consistent with the conviction that God is the lord of history. They thus refuse to resort to violence in order to secure their survival." If we perceive the animal creation as part of our community of creation, a clear maxim could be derived from this alone: if you don't need to kill to eat, don't.

Much can be said about the implications of Hauerwas' writing on nonviolence, which he conceives as being communicated through Christ's example to us. Matthew 5:43-48 calls us to be perfect as God is perfect:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even

the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

A tall order. As Hauerwas says, “Serving the weak in the name of man is not enough; God calls us to love and care for the weak just as He has loved and cared for us.” It follows that the life of Jesus must be the central core of any deserving Christian ethic. This does not, of course, mean that we should simply *copy* the actions of Jesus, but that we should look to understand and thus emulate the manner and attitude towards both God and the world exhibited in those actions. And it is here, in Jesus’ incarnate life and actions, that we see how suffering holds more power than power itself; we see the sacrifice of the higher being (God) for the lower being (man); and we see that dominion entails service, responsibility and stewardship rather than cruel domination. So if we are to truly incorporate Christ’s sacrifice into our lives, I would argue that we cannot do so if we conveniently ignore that his sacrifice was one of the higher for the lower. If we cannot make this sacrifice (*of ourselves, for the rest of creation*), even if all that we sacrifice is support for the modern animal flesh industry, it is hard to argue that we are living as faithfully as we could.

Jesus’ openness to the unclean, denial of the right of violence even when under attack, association with those on the outside, resistance of temptation, peaceful challenge of the authorities, acceptance of his fate and trust in God’s power to bring peace all serve as an example for our lives that we must understand to enter into the kingdom. In Hauerwas’ words, “His life is the life of the end – this is the way the world is meant to be – and thus those who follow him become... the people of the new age.” God’s peaceable kingdom is eschatological; that is it looks with anticipation towards God’s ultimate will for creation expressed in Isaiah 11:6-9:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

This is the end of violence, exploitation and death, even to the extent of subverting the natural order. In our time and place we don’t need to kill to eat and so this can be removed from our lives in looking forward to the *eschaton*. As Hauerwas’ teacher and mentor, John Howard Yoder, asserts: “A social style characterised by the creation of a new community and the rejection of violence *of any kind* is the theme of New Testament proclamation from beginning to end.”

Modern society, modern church

Stanley Hauerwas’ depiction of church as “a community of character” is well summarised in his other key work, *The Peaceable Kingdom*:

As Christians, we must maintain day in and day out that peace is not something to be achieved *by our power*. Rather peace is a gift of God that comes only by our being a community formed around a crucified saviour – a saviour who teaches us how to be peaceful in a world in rebellion against its true Lord. God’s peaceful kingdom, we learn, comes not by positing a common human morality, but by our faithfulness as a peaceful community that fears not our differences.

An excellent summary of what the Church should be: a community united in Christ, peaceful yet not afraid or ashamed to be counter-cultural. This message is now more important than ever; because unfortunately, the modern society that has given us the modern animal flesh industry has created an environment where the church struggles to keep in mind the beneficent purpose of human dominion. Misguided efforts to retain relevance within today’s individualistic culture see Christianity’s ethical elements abstracted from their religious contexts as truth claims are swept aside: religion is reduced to a matter of opinion and no more, immune from criticism but difficult to commend to others. This effort for acceptance by modernity thus *undermines* witness; and this is why Hauerwas is so insistent that the Church shouldn’t be afraid to be

counter-cultural. The relevance of this for Christian Vegetarianism is that, like the nonviolent community of character Hauerwas envisions, in the context of this violent world it is explicitly counter-cultural. Flesh-eating, particularly in Britain the eating of cow and sheep and pig, is a cultural norm, and in its modern fear of the counter-cultural the church might be unwilling to oppose this.

Hauerwas has written that “Our practices with regard to other animals shape our beliefs about them.” The continuing practice of Christians consuming animals continues to shape the Christian anthropocentrism wherein animals are a degraded *other*. A lack of critical reflection on the relationship between Christian belief (what we believe, what we talk about in church) and Christian practice (what we actually *do* in our everyday lives) leads to the sanctification of practices *society* deems acceptable. Christians are said to do what they do because ‘that’s what Christians do’ – only in this case, ‘what Christians do’ is uncritically endorse the modern animal flesh industry and its ‘out of sight out of mind’ attitude by continuing to unquestioningly consume animal flesh. And because this is quite simply ‘what Christians do,’ to suggest or practice otherwise is sacrilege.

Perhaps this might go some way to explaining why many Christian vegetarians face degrees of disapproval or antagonism within their church communities on account of their ‘sacrilegious’ diets: it is a depressing symptom of this sanctification of social practice that the very ‘community of character’ that might inspire an individual Christian to adopt a vegetarian diet – by imbuing them with a sense of the primacy of nonviolence – would then turn on that same individual as in some way deviant, as their new lifestyle comes to pose a challenge to the social norm the church has sanctified in its misguided effort to retain so-called relevance. As Richard Young observes, “Anyone who has ever attended a church dinner is well aware that the typical fare is anything but vegetarian.” Quite so: at the last church dinner I attended in my hometown, I received in lieu of the animal flesh on everyone else’s plate a hunk of cheese.

In standing against flesh-eating, Christian vegetarians are not counter-cultural simply because the wider church community exhibits indifference to their diet: their refusal to consume animal flesh can become a challenge to the Christian community by dint of crossing a boundary created when flesh-eating became a sanctified practice. I would suggest that if today’s Church spent less time wondering how to retain relevance within the constraints of modern society, and more time trying to restore its internal relevance by returning to critical reflection on its belief and practice, not only would the results be more encouraging for contemporary Christians, but vegetarianism as a Christian practice might receive a fair (or at least a *fairer*) trial.

The language of invisibility

With regards to the relevance of Hauerwas’ counter-culturalism for Christian Vegetarianism, it is worth asking a question: why do people eat *bacon*, and not *pig back*? This is a question that might initially seem trite, but it is worth considering. Why has a whole lexicon developed which at all times avoids referring to animal flesh in a way that recognises the (dead) animal it was cut from? Why do people eat bacon, and not pig back? Why veal, and not baby steer? Indeed, why meat, and not animal flesh? This is what Carol Adams refers to when she speaks of the absent referent: “When we turn an animal into ‘meat’, someone who has a very particular, situated life, a unique being, is converted into something that has no distinctiveness, no uniqueness, no individuality.” The mass term ‘meat’ robs the life and death of individual animals of any spiritual significance, reducing them to no more than a product for human consumption. More than this, it removes all agency from the animal’s killer and the consumer of its flesh: if a cow is not a cow but ‘beef’, its very nature is to be killed and eaten and therefore those involved in its abuse and demise are doing no more than acting out the way things have to be. By rejecting ‘meat’ as a mass term one recognises that all life has value because God gives it value, refusing the comfort of the Cartesian anthropocentric world view and the prevalent attitude of ‘out of sight, out of mind’ encouraged by the selfish individualism of the modern particularistic society.

Visibility is the key for dietary pacifism: without it, the ‘out of sight, out of mind’ precept can continue to underwrite the selfish exploitation of animals institutionalised in the modern particularistic society. Combating *invisibility*, present in the mass term ‘meat’ and the Cartesian connection of ‘rights’ to ‘rationality’ as well as the Christian notion of human dominion, is a pivotal task of Christian Vegetarianism: if Christian

Vegetarians continue to use the same language of invisibility as the flesh-eating society that surrounds them, they are contributing to the problem of institutionalised non-Christian abuse of the animal creation, no matter what efforts of flesh-avoidance they make in their private lives.

If we therefore refuse the clear line the dominant culture draws between human animals and non-human animals, there is the danger of exposing Christian Vegetarianism to criticism on the grounds that it is unsustainably abstract. That is, if we refuse to distinguish between human and non-human animals, by what right do we then proceed to distinguish between animal and non-animal when it comes to deciding what will go on our plate? Carol Adams' response to such criticism is a simple but powerful appeal to intuition: we intuitively recognise animals as beings who feel pain and pleasure as do we, and thus refrain from harming them.

A potential pitfall of arguing in this way is, of course, that some people will not intuit this of animals (especially if it has been conditioned out of them from a young age by the surrounding culture). Indeed, if everyone was intuitively aware that animals feel pain and pleasure as do we, Rene Descartes would never have written that animals are mere automata: or, if he had, he would have been laughed out of town. If we are to argue from intuition it must be supported with empirical observation. We intuit that animals feel pain, and we see this when they respond to things we call painful – physical and mental distress – by acting in a way that shows they wish to avoid it. We intuit that animals feel pleasure, and we see this when they respond to things we call pleasurable (and that we know they have the mental faculty to recognise) – food, warmth, shelter, sex – by acting in a way that shows they wish to experience it. The animal creation has interests, and feels pain and pleasure, as do we: as Christians concerned with all creation, then, we move to act in a way that respects their interests as best as we can intuit and observe them.

The Chief End of All Flesh

There is much in Hauerwas' counter-cultural and pacifist work, as I hope I have shown so far, to support an argument for Christian Vegetarianism as dietary pacifism; a counter-cultural, theologically-consistent Christian stance. "The Chief End of All Flesh", however, is the only of Hauerwas' works to explicitly deal with issues relating to animals and vegetarianism, and while taken as a whole it is positive with regards to vegetarianism as a Christian practice, its conclusion leaves something to be desired. The article, co-authored with John Berkman – a student of Hauerwas' – is illuminating, especially so given that it was first published nearly two decades ago, and it fits well with the body of Hauerwas' work as seen in this exploration. Why then is Christian Vegetarianism a theme Hauerwas has not returned to? At first thought, it seems unlikely that Hauerwas would allow either upbringing or audience to overtly affect his choice of topics and how to handle them: his controversial writings on democracy and medicine can be easily cited as examples of this. The abrupt turnaround at the end of "The Chief End of All Flesh", unfortunately, suggests otherwise.

Hauerwas and Berkman initially go so far as to argue that as just war theory is a theory of *exceptions* to the rule of Christian nonviolence (and does not therefore justify war in general), so is the burden of proof on Christians who wish to eat animal flesh: a characteristically bold Hauerwasian statement, to be sure, and one that I would support as fundamental to dietary pacifism practiced in a Western context. But this argument is followed with the suggestion that Christians might yet be able to eat animal flesh, if it is understood as an animal sacrifice made for human survival. Found in another of Hauerwas' works this might be easier to overlook, but at the end of "The Chief End of All Flesh" it is hard to see such an assertion as anything more than a get-out. Only pages previously Hauerwas and Berkman state that "our practices with regard to other animals shape our beliefs about them"; that humans and animals are co-members of creation, given that both serve God's good pleasure; and that, as Christians, we have no stake in our individual survival but in serving one another and in this way serving as signs of the peaceable kingdom. To then move within the space of a paragraph to arguing that we can eat animals so long as we understand their deaths as a sacrifice goes directly against these assertions; for if we have no stake in our own survival, and if we live in a part of the world where there is minimal difficulty in pursuing a vegetarian or vegan diet, the semantic justification of calling slaughter 'sacrifice' seems little more than the manipulation of Hebrew Bible traditions for the primary purpose of justifying the status quo.

I think, therefore, that Hauerwas' radical reputation must be reconsidered. The radicalism that Hauerwas is famed for, after all, is almost always of a type that will appeal, on some level at least, to the American Christian right. Distrust of modern particularistic society; a call for the church to be a community apart; a negative stance on liberal politics; a stress on sin and virtue; opposition to abortion – all of these are points would be unsurprising in a Southern Baptist context. The importance of a vegetarian diet for faithful Christian living, however, would be shocking and more than likely ill-received in such a context. Perhaps there are, after all, limits to how radical Hauerwas is prepared to be; it certainly bears consideration that the issue he ultimately shrinks from is one that would potentially put him into direct conflict with those churches his radicalism most consistently appeals to.

Further criticism of Hauerwas

This is, essentially, the most common criticism of Hauerwas' agenda. Nigel Biggar has asked why Hauerwas' resistance to liberalism extends *beyond* opposition to selfish individualism, moving into to complete dismissal of the entire liberal 'project', given that liberalism can often be humane, polyglot and accommodating. He asks, "Does it issue, ironically, from an all too worldly anxiety about identity, self-definition, and boundaries?" We must remember, after all, that our imperfect natures mean non-Christians will at times be able to teach us things. Certainly dialogue is in itself no danger, so long as the church can remain faithful in its belief, practice, and the relationship between the two: Christian vegetarians and non-Christian vegetarians will, for example, have much more to talk about on certain topics than will Christian vegetarians and Christian non-vegetarians. This is not a sign of the dissolution of the church or the pervasiveness of liberal culture; it is a reminder that the world outside the church holds much for Christians to learn from, and that if we are to oppose modern society for its glorification of sin, we must also remember that we within the church are as flawed and fallible as any without.

C. Melissa Snarr argues similarly, focusing particularly on Hauerwas' argument that those within the church should abstain from working for social justice outside it. Snarr asserts that Christians

are called to be concerned about public policies because they are called to love their neighbour. Their religious lives do not float about their existence in the world, and their existence in the world is always affected by political decisions. To think otherwise is the privilege of the privileged few.

This is, besides my problem of Hauerwas' about-face at the end of *The Chief End of All Flesh*, my biggest criticism of Hauerwas too: his focus on complete removal of the church from liberal society, sectarian or not, undermines the force of his argument for pacifism and relating to the entirety of creation as God's creation and under God's grace. If we are to remove ourselves, as Christians, from the mainstream of liberal society, what then can we do for the poorest, weakest, and neediest members of creation? Among them are animals, of course, but even those uninterested in the animal creation might find more to be concerned about in the fates of unborn babies, those with learning difficulties, suffering elderly citizens, and so on.

As Stout reminds us, sounding much like Hauerwas in his less divisive work: No aspect of the created world... has ever been outside the reach of God's grace or ever will be. That includes the secularized practices of a modern democratic society... Mere refusal of those practices, from a genuinely orthodox point of view, must be deemed an offence to the sovereignty of God.

To argue for complete separation from liberal society is sinful, arrogant, and sinful in its arrogance.

To dismiss social justice as unachievable for Christians is uncharitable to the world, and places the church infinitely above the rest of creation in virtue. Furthermore, such a stance denies the value of social justice: Stout likens it to "the combatant who, in the conflict, is only concerned with keeping his sword bright." As someone who considers himself both a vegan and a pacifist I do not think we can assume the matter to be so clear cut that practicality must always outweigh principle, and Stout goes perhaps too far when portraying Hauerwas' argument as extending *from* his pacifist convictions *to* his argument for the church's separation from society. He takes Hauerwas' claim that "What God does in response to the evils of the age is to suffer nonviolently on the cross in perfect virtue," and sees this as leading to the conclusion that Christians who

instead focus on achieving social justice through social measures are, in *Stout's* words, "busy basting the rotten carcass of governmental violence with holy water."

"Busy basting the rotten carcass of governmental violence with holy water." Quite apart from the unnecessarily graphic imagery of this quote, which seems only to serve the purpose of making Hauerwas' argument appear more shrill, I cannot agree with the causal nature of Stout's reading of Hauerwas. I see Hauerwas' work as occupying two main strands, the pacifist and the anti-liberal, and they do often come together when condemning, for example, governmental violence; indeed, I connect the two strands myself in criticising the selfish individualism and lack of concern for non-human life that characterises the modern animal flesh industry. This does not in any way, however, necessitate the conclusion that one strand (pacifism) directly fathers the other (anti-liberalism). Hauerwas' argument for separation from liberal society is not, after all, rooted in the idea that modern society is violent *per se* but that it glorifies sin and indeed elevates many vices to virtues.

All that being said, I must agree with Stout that professed pacifism without action to obtain justice for those suffering is hollow. Because pacifism without social justice (or dietary pacifism without animal justice) is hollow, Hauerwas should move from criticising liberal society to arguing for Christians to *reform* it. Transformation, not isolationism or conformism, is what Christian counter-culturalism is about. The example of Christ is meaningless if we do not live it to the world: as James exhorts us in 2:17, "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

What Christian Vegetarianism draws primarily from Stout's criticism of Hauerwas, then, is the awareness that abstaining from flesh itself is not enough: unless we challenge, in whatever way, the wilful ignorance engendered by the 'out of sight, out of mind' moral precept at the heart of the modern animal flesh industry, we might consider ourselves to be complicit in the regime we consider ourselves to be outside of. Criticisms of Hauerwas' argument for the church's removal from liberal society do not extend or apply to Christian Vegetarianism and dietary pacifism, because the anti-liberal and pacifist strands of the Hauerwasian canon are not causally linked. By exploring Stout's criticism of Hauerwas' anti-'liberalism' but breaking the causal link he draws, we are able to prepare the way for a deeper, more streamlined usage of Hauerwas' theological ethics in relation to the animal creation.

Conclusion

To conclude, whenever we talk about creation we in the church must remember that *God*, not humankind, is the end of all creation. Animals are a part of creation; if they are less than us, our dominion does not allow exploitation for we are not God and are part of creation too. If we are able to be a counter-cultural community of character, trusting in God's power and Jesus' example to sustain us in a life of nonviolence, we are free to assume disinterested care for creation and thus adopt vegetarianism because flesh-eating is *not* 'what Christians do.' As Stephen Webb says: "The basic point of Christian theology is that the cross does not take away but instead reveals our sin, so that repentance, not celebration, is the only possible response. The cross says no to our amazing and infinite capacity to make violence meaningful. The implication for animals is enormous."

This is dietary pacifism: the extension of the commonality of all creation to genuinely include all creation and not use species as an arbitrary cut-off point for morality. In this way the Christian duty of nonviolence too is extended to the animal creation, and Christian Vegetarians are able, through their diet, to recognise their responsibility to the whole creation and thus to live in anticipation of God's peaceable, eschatological kingdom, and the end to violence between human and non-human we hope it will bring. As Hauerwas himself writes:

Just as we believe that Christians are not called to be nonviolent because nonviolence is a strategy to free the world from war, but because as Christians we cannot conceive of living other than nonviolently in a world of war, so it may also be true that Christians are called to live nonviolently towards animals in a world of meat-eaters... Christian vegetarianism might be understood as a witness to the

world that God's creation is not meant to be at war with itself. Such a witness does not entail romantic conceptions of nature or of our fallen creation but rather is an eschatological act.

If we are to truly follow Christ's example as the suffering servant *and* realise our place as *imago Dei*, the extension of Christian nonviolence and the duty of compassionate charity to the animal creation is the natural conclusion, now and in the peaceable kingdom we look towards. And like nonviolence, the question of not killing to eat is not one dependent on context or standpoint but one which holds true across time and space, a (qualified) transhistorical maxim that we in the affluent West today are fortunate enough to find easily attainable. And it is in this way that a double critical engagement with Hauerwas – criticisms of his agenda, which in any case have proved in some senses useful to our theoretical construction, notwithstanding – empowers Christian Vegetarianism, for we see not just the centrality of nonviolence to Christian living, but the role of the church as a counter-cultural community of character – if the world outside the church differs from ours it is not the church's place to pander to modern culture in a misguided attempt to keep the numbers up, or to endorse without question commonly-accepted cultural tropes such as a language of invisibility applied to the animal flesh industry; it is rather the church's place to be a sign of God's peaceable kingdom in word, life and deed. Taken together, this pacifism and counter-culturalism shows us the position and importance of dietary pacifism today. As fallen creatures with a responsibility of dutiful care to those living alongside us in the hierarchy of creation, we can all improve our attitudes with regard to the world and all animals in it; as Christians, I would suggest, it is our responsibility and duty to strive to do so.

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