

## **Sharing Tables: The challenge of dietary pluralism for Christian communities**

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By agreement with the conference organisers, I have decided not to focus this paper on arguments for and against Christian vegetarianism. I am going to take a step back, by asking questions about where all these arguments are going and what they are trying to achieve – and, I hope, at the same time a step forward, by exploring some aspects of the day-to-day situation of vegetarians and vegans in a meat-eating culture.

The paper isn't meant to be simply a reflection on personal experience, but I introduce an experience that I take to be illustrative of the problem I'm exploring here. The congregation of which I'm a member holds regular bring-and-share meals. About a year ago, the decision was taken by the committee that organises them that all food provided should be vegetarian. Now, my congregation and denomination, being frankly a weird kind of Christianity (if even that), has a fairly high proportion of vegetarians, so this move was not publicly controversial. I have, however, had several brief conversations since then with people who had stopped coming to the lunches, or who felt uncomfortable doing so, because they disliked (as at least one person put it to me) 'compulsory vegetarianism'. One said 'I don't mind vegetarian food, but I object to being forced to eat it'. This struck me as interesting on many levels.

For one thing, a move that had been intended to be maximally inclusive (by ensuring that most of the food provided at the shared meal was acceptable to most of the people there) had ended up being *de facto* exclusive. One could make various claims and counter-claims here about choice, who's excluding himself or herself, who's being excluded. But focus for the moment on the outcome.

For, as a vegetarian, albeit a fairly lax one, I initially found these responses frankly puzzling. Nobody, I thought, could believe that they *needed* to eat meat at every meal, so what was the problem with forgoing it on these occasions for the sake of easier table-fellowship? All of the people who objected to 'compulsory vegetarianism', I assume (for the purpose of argument) would happily accept hospitality from vegetarian friends. None of them (I again assume for the sake of argument) would object strongly to attending, let us say, an interfaith event at which the food was all vegetarian. What's the problem? It's not, as it were, strictly physiological (a physical need to eat meat), nor, I think, aesthetic (comparable to the problem of the fussy eater).

One factor at play here is clearly the general and often surprisingly strong resistance to *any* public advocacy of vegetarianism – as an attempt to interfere with what people eat and hence in itself an infringement of liberty. (There's a discussion, for another day, about the curious and growing propensity to interpret any positive public advocacy of a stance, however reasoned or moderate that advocacy may be, as some kind of attempt to control what other people do, and hence some kind of sin against freedom. Perhaps it's a particularly pernicious combination of liberal individualism and postmodern relativism).

But alongside that there seems to be a specific problem about the act of constructing this religious community around the shared table. Compulsory vegetarianism on these public occasions performs, even if nothing is said to that effect, a judgement on those who would normally be happy to eat meat. It performs their ethical and practical marginalisation. It proclaims a way of being community of which they are not ready to be part.

Now, many Christian vegetarians would argue that this, in the nicest possible way, is precisely the point. We perform many actions in liturgy (like exchanging signs of fellowship indiscriminately with all our neighbours) that proclaim, not who we habitually and by default are, but who we are called to be. And the performance of those actions is one of the ways in which we are formed better to fulfil our calling. (In most Christian contexts, a vegetarian meal, albeit not proclaiming its vegetarian credentials, is fairly central to this whole process). Now the bring and share meal may not be formally liturgical, but it is a core identity-forming practice of my congregation, and many would argue that it is right and proper for such a practice to be not only 'affirming of diversity' but challenging and enabling into a life more fully conformed with the peaceable kingdom of God.

If it just is *better* for Christians to be vegetarian, many would argue, this ought to be reflected in the public and collective practices of the church.

So, does my community have to listen at all to the voices of the disgruntled meat-eaters? And if it does or if it doesn't, what does that say about Christian ethics?

There isn't very much written about the issue of sharing tables, and how to cope with the lived reality of diverse diet. I'm going to say something about the one discussion I have found, although it's something of an oddity – and then the second half of the paper is a reading of a relevant biblical text.

Joel James Shuman introduces the 'sharing tables' at the end of a discussion of Christian attitudes to homosexuality (Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics). He draws an analogy between the issue of meat-eating and the divisions within the contemporary Church over human sexuality. Himself very reluctant to endorse same-sex relationships as equivalents of heterosexual marriage, he argues tentatively for their acceptance within the Christian community by comparing same-sex relationships to meat-eating. 'Many Christians' he writes 'continue to eat meat... even in the presence of compelling theological arguments that we were created to be herbivorous and will be so again in the Kingdom of God... why can the Church not see gay and lesbian unions analogously to the way we see our consumption of animal flesh in the time between the times?'

Now, I can imagine several possible responses to this tentative suggestion (although I have not been able to trace any of them in print – nobody else seems to have noticed what Shuman just did. It's sobering when you realise how much academic work goes entirely undiscussed). I can imagine Christian vegetarians saying 'we wish! [there was anything like the level of church advocacy and promotion of vegetarianism that there is for heterosexual marriage, or that it were possible to discuss food practices at such length in public]'; or saying 'God forbid! [that debates over eating should ever become half as vicious, unconstructive and paralysing as debates over sexuality]'. I can imagine certain groups of conservative Christians being deeply offended by the idea that meat-eating and homosexuality might end up on the same, negative, side of the Kingdom line; and I know the very liberal groups to which I'm generally affiliated would be deeply offended by the idea that vegetarianism and normative heterosexuality might end up on the same, positive, side of the Kingdom line. In fact, I think I might start dropping this into conversation more, to see what responses I get.

But then it seems highly unlikely that, in the early twenty-first century, Shuman's analogy between diet and sexuality would ever be taken seriously. In the contemporary Church, in general, sex matters and food doesn't; what you do in the bedroom, at least if you are *not* with your spouse of the opposite sex, is a matter of intense public interest and might divide your community, but what you buy in the supermarket and prepare in the kitchen is your own business. It is *assumed* (and this is, I suppose, what gives Shuman's suggestion its force) that a wide range of dietary choices can and will coexist, even when diet is recognised as theologically and ethically inflected. I suppose the relationships between the Body of Christ and the bodies of individual members are, roughly and in some contexts, seen as metonymic when it comes to sexuality and metaphorical when it comes to food. (That is, in the case of sexuality, the real bodies of members of the community can affect the real body of the whole. In the case of food, they can't).

Shuman does not, in his article, discuss Romans 14 or the related texts in 1 Corinthians. And indeed most commentators seem to think that the situation described in Romans 14 is not really germane to contemporary questions around meat-eating and vegetarianism, however relevant it might be to more general claims about the maintenance of fellowship.

To some extent I share that view. Let me say at this point, if it's not clear already, that I have no interest in trying to 'read across' some rules about meat-eating and vegetarianism from Romans 14 into the contemporary context, as if the particular social and religious meanings of dietary choice and community cohesion made no difference. (I am quite interested in what happens, and in what assumptions crop up, when scholars *do* try to carry this text across, but that's a side issue). I am, more importantly, interested in how this text 'reads' in and for a group of twenty-first-century Christian vegetarians. And as a theological ethicist, I am extremely

interested in whether we can develop that further and allow the experience of twenty-first-century Christian vegetarians to teach us something about theology, ethics and the churches.

So I'll ask you to turn to the text of Romans 14, which I have distributed. I'm going to present a reading, but I'm going to try to do so in a way that makes space for alternative readings to arise, because the last thing I want to claim is that you can read a simple answer to any contemporary question off a text like this. [??I'm going to begin by reading it through, so that we know where we're going].

A word first about identity. Much scholarly ink has been spilt over the question of the identities of the strong and the weak in Romans. There's a general consensus that 'the weak' are Christians who observe the Jewish food laws (and then plenty of supplementary ink on the evidence for vegetarianism as a Jewish strategy in mainly Gentile contexts where you wouldn't know whether the meat was kosher). I note that Mark Reasoner cites a far wider range of reasons why people might have been vegetarian, including a philosophical commitment to the well-being of nonhuman animals; and he argues that we shouldn't assume this problem reduces to one solved elsewhere.

Still, a significant number of commentators, while being happy to label the weak, anachronistically, as 'vegetarians' [actually it's not entirely clear what they do and don't eat], are at pains both to differentiate them from contemporary vegetarians and to make the point that their dietary choice is a matter of religious conviction (not merely 'preference'). In the more 'applied' or church-focused contemporary commentaries, this is partly because there's a tacit assumption (much like Shuman's article suggests) that Christian convictions won't lead anyone to vegetarianism, and that nobody's going to start an argument over it if they do, & the argument is that the reasonings of the weak are religious reasonings – so they look for alternatives where there are more obvious 'Christian' arguments each way, eg consumption of alcohol, rather than matters that are simply *adiaphora*. They understand that we're talking about a situation that threatens to be community-dividing, rather than those that will simply be left as people's 'own business'. I think they're basically right; the difference is that I and many others would want to argue that what we eat, even now, is *not* simply and straightforwardly 'our own business'.

As a further note: some commentaries suggest that there is a deliberate overemphasis in the contrast in verse 2, parodying the eating habits of the two groups (a contemporary version might be "some believe they should wolf down a big steak at every meal; the weak live on boiled cabbage"). Knowing the rhetorical sting operations Paul pulls off elsewhere in Romans, it's not impossible that he's deliberately pushing the parody to the limits here, just to make both sides recognise, and be faintly embarrassed by, the stereotypes they hold of each other and the problems that could cause.

But what's going on in the passage as a whole? I want to pick up on two features to start with.

One very striking feature of the passage is its emphasis on the language of *judgement* (in Greek the word family around *krineo*). And judgement generally receives a negative inflection here; it's a dangerous passage if you think liberal tolerance is a major risk to Christianity. On first reading, nice liberal tolerance is right there. Not just tolerance, refusal to judge, horror of causing offence, but even some kind of relativism – [14] "it is unclean for anyone who thinks that it is unclean". And just to complete the collection of [supposed] liberal horrors, we've got body-soul dualism ("the kingdom of God is not food and drink" [17]). You'll have guessed already that I'm going to say it's not that simple, but let's notice the first reading to start with.

We've also got a secondary emphasis, which is less obvious in the English, on the language of *reasoning* – the word-family around *logos* and *logismo*. It appears far less often, but the few points at which it appears are of interest to the argument.

My hypothesis is that we can read this as a text about judgement and reasoning in relation to basic everyday practices like food (among other things), and how to locate that judgement and reasoning within a Christian community. Vegetarians, as my example from personal experience suggests, get used to being perceived as passers of judgement. And often that's negatively inflected – killjoys, refusers of hospitality and fellowship, purity freaks, making judgements that upset people and divide communities. On first reading, they appear like

that in Romans 14 as well; or at least the risk that people will *see each other* that way is going to divide communities. It's a wider challenge within Christian ethics. How can we know we are 'right' without knowing that others are wrong (and hence getting sucked into the condemning/judging game)? Well, that's what I'm looking for in this text.

I'm hypothesising that this text lets us notice & take seriously the *reasonedness* of our own and others' actions, without having to *pass judgement* on it. And to do so in a context in which mutual obligation and responsibility are central. Decisions about food, I want to suggest, are reason-able and shareable even if, in a given situation, differences are not easily resolvable.

I also want to hypothesise that Christian vegetarians reading this text have to put themselves temporarily in the position of the 'strong in faith', so we have to invert the terms. (I'm not the first person to try this). Why? Because I think following the scholarly consensus we have to assume that the 'strong in faith' are the people who are going *against* the group norm, doing something shocking.

First look at [1] – “welcome those who are weak in faith, not in order to *diakriseis dialogismwn*”. That's both of our key terms together, and the translation's difficult. *Diakriseis* – NRSV has 'quarrelling', but that rather misses out the dimension of judgement and discernment. It's some sort of process of conveying or trading judgement, and it's being done in relation to *dialogismwn*. That's a term that generally has negative connotations in the New Testament and elsewhere in Paul – you could translate it as 'notions' or 'speculations', reasoning that doesn't go anywhere. Don't welcome people just in order to defeat their silly ideas. We start on the basis that some people are manifestly using silly arguments. Christian vegetarians might think the arguments for eating meat, such as they are, are quite silly and need to be challenged. Why not do so?

Staying with the plain sense, it seems to me that the 'case against judging' in this text proceeds on three bases; there's an argument about the past (or the accomplished reality of the work of God in Christ), an argument about the eschatological future, and finally an argument about the lived present. Very roughly: do not judge because God has welcomed you all; do not judge because it is not the time for judgement; and do not judge because it's bad for the community.

In my reading, the turning-point in the text comes around verses 10-11, where human acts of judging (and despising) are placed in juxtaposition to the appearance of all before the 'judgement seat' of God – and to the eschatological promise of the universal worship of God. Every tongue will 'confess' or 'give praise to' God – *exomologestetai* – and this is glossed (if you like) in verse 12 as 'each of us will be accountable [give a *logos* about himself or herself]'. (That's technical terminology, but I think it bears some of the weight I'm putting on it).

So in this central passage words, reasonings, and giving account of what one does, are all linked directly to the eschatological praise of God. That's their point. Perhaps because *logos* is *assumed* to be, primarily, praise. And 'giving thanks to God' comes before, and as the conditioning context of, ethical argument. Perhaps in fact giving an account of what one does and why one does it is itself closely linked to praising God – much closer to praising God than to judging another person. And this in turn calls into question the idea that you should only put forward ethical arguments about things on which you want and expect everyone to reach agreement, things that need to be *decided*, things on which one of us has to be proved right now.

Because *logos* is also incarnate here; particular people have *logoi*. The *logoi* do not circulate apart from the particular 'brethren' who use and interpret them; we give words 'about ourselves', particular 'tongues' confess God. And then, a couple of verses later, we get the passage I have cited as dangerous for opponents of moral relativism – a thing is unclean for 'the one who has reasoned (*logisomenw*) it to be unclean'.

So my reasonings about what may and may not be eaten are important; they *are* reasonings, not just silly ideas; they are valued as *mine*; but they are valued not because I have some kind of sovereign right to make up my own mind about everything, but because this is how I praise God. And the 'making public' of *all* the reasoning is eschatological – it happens in the context of every tongue confessing/giving praise to God. Right now there

might be something more important than the need to make all the arguments public – like the possibility of real injury or harm to another person.

Does this mean ‘respecting’ every nutty claim – or every ethical failure? It’s difficult – at least some commentators try to keep it limited by saying this relates only to things we *know* don’t matter very much – otherwise the implications are way too permissive. That’s probably a reason Shuman doesn’t cite it! But I’m not sure diet comes into that category – and at least some of the Romans aren’t either. Diet’s fairly close to the core of their identity and their faith. And I’m not even sure the text necessarily denigrates its importance.

What about ‘the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking’? Try this: the Kingdom of God isn’t the act of individual consumption, isn’t *something* you take for yourself and leave everyone else to take for themselves; it’s a set of relationships. And Christian vegetarians are habitually very attentive to the range of relationships their food performs, particularly with nonhuman animals and with the environment. Perhaps one suggestion that comes out of this reading is that attention to diet in Christian communities – even if it doesn’t bring about agreement – could come to challenge the whole idea that happiness and self-fulfilment lies in choosing and consuming for yourself. And if that in turn leads more people to ask critical questions about how animals get treated as objects for exploitation and consumption, so much the better.

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