

# *How Is What We Eat a Moral or Religious Act?*

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In some religious traditions, the act of eating and how it ties back to the eater's religion is obvious. For instance, in Catholicism, the tradition of eating fish on Fridays was about a fasting from the luxury of meat, and tied back to the sacred story and the desire to show Jesus gratitude for his death on the cross on another Friday long ago. In Orthodox Judaism, laws around eating are prescribed in Leviticus and the oral Torah. Whether these laws were introduced for health reasons or ethical reasons or simply as a means to practice obedience, together they prescribe such things as the limit against eating fruit from a tree in the first three years of its life and the means by which meat must be ethically slaughtered. In Jainism, a 2,000-year-old religion predominantly centered in India, a belief in the fundamental equality of all life dictates a vow not to cause any unnecessary injury to any life form. Therefore, Jains neither kill nor eat animals, but also refrain from such things as eating root vegetables like potatoes, since those root vegetables feed a plant's life and to eat them would do disproportionate harm to the plant. The most observant Jains can be seen sweeping the road in front of them, wearing a cloth mask across their nose and mouth, to avoid stepping on or breathing in insects and thereby causing them harm.

So it is hardly new to the human religious venture to ask how what we believe informs not just the work we do, the relationships we have with each other, but also the food we eat or don't eat and the practices around eating and producing that food.

I can imagine how much more immediate the ethical questions about what we eat would be if we still worked a family farm and tended to the garden and fed and nursed the livestock ourselves. Those I know who were raised on a family farm knew many of their animals by name or personality -- the mischievous cow, the runaway goat. They knew what farming techniques enriched the earth and which would deplete it over time.

Even if we didn't live on a farm, but still picked up our food from its roadside stand, or bought our fish from the fisherman by the river who caught it, as my father-in-law does in Goa, there would be an intimate connection to our food. We'd ask or be told in the course of casual conversation how the catch was these days. We'd wonder aloud together why one species was hard to find or why it seemed to be dying off. We'd quickly tie a die-off to overharvesting or the factory that just started operating upstream.

For me, and I imagine for most of you, by the time I get my food, there are only a few labels to tell me where it touched down on its journey to market, and only sometimes

something that tells me a little about how it was treated along the way. My food tells no story with ease, and the man who rings me up at the checkout counter knows no more than I do about it. I'd have to do some real digging to find out the story of my food's journey to the table.

What a number of people who are either environmentalists or animal activists or concerned advocates for our health are asking us all to do is to do that digging -- to make it part of our ethical, moral, environmental or health agenda.

My first reaction to such a challenge is, "Of course. ... Of course we should know what we eat. Of course I want my vote in the grocery store to be for kindness, fair treatment of the Earth, good health." Quite honestly, my second reaction is, "Oh God! How can I find the time for this too?" My reaction after being forced to do more reading on this subject by gentle Jane Buscemi and her invitation to just raise the questions of how our eating is a religious or moral act was: "We are in trouble." We are almost doing more harm in ignorance than is bearable.

Let me digress for one moment before we go on. One of the things I embraced about ministry was that I'd be surrounded by people striving to be good, wanting to ask the important questions about life and our place in this world. Another was that I would be asked, required even, to look over the walls, like that exhibit in the Holocaust Museum that makes you literally look over a wall to see films of life in the ghettos and in the Nazi experimental laboratories. Reading what little I read of the piles of material available (some of which Jane copied and handed off to me) felt like one of those moments of being forced to look over the wall. That kind of looking is both a part of what I dread in the religious life and part of why I chose to enter into a religious life, and I expect you all share those two feelings also. We all both *want and know we need* the guarantee that someone will demand we look at hard things *and* we dread being forced to face our up-'til-then complicit ignorance and almost sinful, passive naiveté. Here we go again.

There are lots of ways to ask and answer the question of how what we eat is a religious or moral act. One is to see the body, your own, as a temple and the need to care for it well as a commandment. If that is a starting point, then all the literature about health and eating habits is one way to focus our energies. And it has lots of things to say about the hormones in our food, the antibiotics, the levels of certain kinds of fats and how that predisposes us to heart disease, the processing that makes food taste good but strips it of nutrients. Choosing food that takes good care of our bodies is how we also equip ourselves for a life that continues long after we finally gather up some wisdom.

Another way to see eating as a religious act is to see care of the earth as a religious commandment, and then see how various forms of farming, or eating higher or lower on the food chain, and even things like the ramifications of farm subsidies work in creating more or less sustainable and eco-friendly patterns of living.

A third way to see this as part of our religious inquiry is to take up the question that the Jains and Jews take seriously: how the production of what we eat causes or does not

cause unnecessary suffering. This area is particularly focused on those of us who are meat eaters or who eat products that require animals -- things like milk and eggs ... or Gummi Bears.

I'm not sure how much it serves us for me to regale us with stories and facts and figures on various food industries from factory farming to slaughterhouses. We need enough to be woken up, not enough to feel beaten down. And probably we already suspect much of what we would be asked to see if we were forced or forced ourselves to look over the wall. Maybe one simple personal story will suffice.

Years ago, while spending my summer with my aunt and uncle at their inn on Lake Cayuga, I was asked to run an errand for the kitchen. They'd run out of eggs, and just up the road was a vendor. I'd never noticed the facility before. But there on the rural road was a big tin warehouse, not at all like the henhouse my grandmother and grandfather had. The one my grandparents had had hens running free, and the challenge was to reach in and take the egg before the hen came back for it, or reach under her as she sat on it before she took to pecking your hand and arm. I guess I expected the same. But what I found was very different. When I walked into this building, what struck me most was the loud, almost deafening noise, like a huge engine running.

What I heard, of course, wasn't a machine. It was the sound of thousands of chickens clucking and squawking. As I recall, three or four were pressed tightly into a cage about the size of a microwave oven, and suspended over a trough that caught their droppings. It was hot. And in each cage was one chicken that looked pink and raw because, I was told by the farmer, chickens always have a low man on the pecking order, and even in a group of four, one is victimized.

These chickens never saw the light of day. They were living, breathing egg-producing machines, or that's how they were treated.

What I didn't notice then -- but from what I read at least now know -- is that in such places today, the chickens have their beaks clipped, a procedure that is painful and done without anesthesia, possibly to prevent them from pecking one of their kind mercilessly. If egg production drops, the chickens are denied food and water for a few days to force a molting, something that sends them into another egg cycle. In addition, the places that breed for such chickens aren't much interested in male chicks that cannot lay eggs, so those chicks are often merely smothered at birth.

The smell and pollution from the warehouses is foul (excuse the pun). One book said the U.S. cattle, poultry and pork industries produce 5 tons of waste for every man, woman and child in America. Moreover, the heat mixed with the excrement and close quarters makes the chickens in these places prone to disease, so they are pumped full of medicines to keep them functioning. And what's almost worse: For years I've been buying cage-free eggs as my one tribute to my now decades-old chicken-house epiphany, but I read that "cage-free" farms often pack the chickens just as tightly into indoor pens and with hardly more humane treatment than what I saw.

For me this story is emblematic of one of the trends in our production of food that, if it doesn't meet your definition of cruel, is at least remarkably close. Cruel, of course, are the slaughterhouses that have production quotas so high that live cattle are sometimes skinned while still kicking or blinking. But it doesn't end at this kind of cruelty.

Read *Fast Food Nation*, if you haven't already, and its chapters on the slaughterhouse industry to get a sense of what kind of community degradation our demand for beef alone leaves in its wake. Read the human story in those same chapters: the story of one long-time employee, Kenny Dobbins, and what he suffered for lack of good regulations of this industry that lobbies so well and so hard for just such loose regulations. From lost limbs and seared lungs to some of the most disgusting work assignments known to man, Dobbins was left a battered and discarded carcass, like those he'd processed for his 18 years at the slaughterhouse.

To me, it feels as if agribusiness and so much of modern agriculture and animal husbandry makes land and its products objects in a way my grandfather and his father never did. My grandfather was once beaten for galloping the horses into the barn one morning, so concerned was my great-grandfather that those animals and their bodies be cared for and respected for the long days they had to work. My great-grandfather's parenting left a lot to be desired, but he did see animals as more than objects, as beings whose quality of life was something to be respected.

What different pictures are painted now, in which everything, from workers to animals to land and plants, leans dangerously close to being seen simply as a commodity -- something to be made more efficient, used up and then, when convenient, discarded.

And as bad as that is, what makes it worse is that we put these "commodities" with all their pollutants, antibiotics, pesticides and more in our bodies *and* we subsidize the negative byproducts of all that goes on in this production with our dollars spent innocently, or so it seemed to us, at the corner Shop-Rite or Kings. Even our purchase of a turkey at Thanksgiving, if not done with intention, can subsidize an industry that breeds some birds for breasts so large, to feed our penchant for white meat, that while they are alive the birds can neither walk nor have sex, they are so grotesquely misshapen. If all of this doesn't have religious or moral implications, I'm not sure what does.

So, what do we do about it? Of course, where we draw the line, our decisions around our own relationships with food, will depend on what we individually believe and value. Is genetic engineering just a benefit of science or a dangerous gamble? What does cruelty-free mean to us and what is acceptable as part of the natural order of things? Even among practitioners of yoga who take seriously the vow of *ahimsa* or causing no harm, as the Jains do, there are differences of interpretation about whether meat eating is forbidden as part of this vow.

There are a few things, however, on which I think we can agree. First, that we can and in fact should become more mindful about how what we eat is part of a religious act, a choice informed by our morals and ethics. In his recent article in the New York Times

Magazine and an interview in *The Sun* magazine, Michael Pollan discusses his experience eating a meal he foraged and hunted and prepared himself. He says it is an impossibility to live the way he did for that meal, “Yet as a sometimes thing, as a kind of ritual, a meal that is eaten in full consciousness of what it took to make is worth preparing every now and again, if only as a way to remind us of the true cost of our food, and that, no matter what we eat, we eat by the grace not of industry but of nature” (*New York Times Magazine*, March 26, 2006, p.71).

Second, there are some clear choices that, although not without gray areas and complications themselves, seem better for living our values through our food choices (suggestions drawn from many sources, but especially from Greefaith’s brochure on “Food and Faith”):

- \* We can eat meat at one meal less per week. Americans eat more meat than any other nationality and more than we have in our entire history. Yet one scientist estimated that if Americans reduced their meat consumption by 10 percent, we could feed the world with the savings in grain, not to mention the savings in harm to our environment.

- \* We can support local farms, particularly small farms that usually tend to mean more responsible farmers, more responsive to neighbors, and by buying locally can save the environmental cost of food. The average piece of food travels 1,200 miles to market. Summit’s farmers’ market is coming back to town soon!

- \* We can commit to buying organic food, which uses no toxic pesticides and, though it costs more, tends also to taste better. We still need to get expert at reading labels so that we know what is tolerated under the label organic, particularly around the living conditions of animal products labeled organic, if that is important to us. There are Web sites that can help us to do that.

- \* We can cultivate a habit of tracking our food. The more you know about where your food came from, the more likely you are to know how it was produced. Knowing, for instance, that our lettuce in winter comes from New Zealand may encourage us to eat local winter squash instead.

- \* And we can begin to advocate for, pressure for more humane, environmentally friendly standards for our food and its production. “I’d love to give up hormones,” said one cattleman in an article Pollan wrote for the *New York Times Magazine* in 2002. “If the consumer said, ‘We don’t want hormones,’ we’d stop in a second. The cattle could get along better without them. But the market signal’s not there” (Michael Pollan, “This Steer’s Life,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 31, 2002, p.51). We can put the market and regulatory signal there.

All this may seem all burden, no joy, but as Swarthmore professor Barry Schwartz urged in his book *The Paradox of Choice*, if you want to simplify life of all its myriad of complicating choices, “Learn to love constraints.” Make decisions with limits attached to them and live life according to them. These choices can simplify and enrich our lives.

The free and responsible search for truth and meaning and the commitment to care for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are (but) a part ask us to ask ourselves what our beliefs dictate about what we put in our mouths and how those choices too can change the world for the better. This is one more instance in which our faith is revealed to

be not the easiest faith around -- “You can believe whatever you want to” -- but one of the toughest. Like so many things we do, we face *this* age-old religious question informed and shaped in its answers by the complicated realities and circumstances of our times. This day we ask how we live our faith by what we put in our mouths. May every bite count and may the world be saved, healed, honored by what we offer ourselves as sustenance for the living of the religious life.

Amen.