
A SCOTTISH VEGETARIAN'S VIEW OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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A paper presented at the CESNUR 2015 International Conference

at Tallinn University, Estonia

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Particularly in a postmodern age, the role of positionality in scholarly research has assumed considerable importance. The old-fashioned phenomenological method, in which the subject matter of one's research was supposedly viewed objectively by a neutral researcher who had bracketed his or her assumptions, is now seen to be an impossibility. Instead, this model of research has given way to the notion that there is no independent objective object of study, but only a variety of perspectives on it, depending on the characteristics of the researcher.

In the past I have sometimes used the example of myself as a Scottish vegetarian as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the necessity of self-disclosure. Some of a researcher's characteristics are relevant to his or her perspective on a topic, while others are not, and any disclosure should relate to the former and not the latter. In what follows I shall have little to say that refers to Scotland, however, but somewhat more on the Society's stance on vegetarianism. It was my identity as a vegetarian that caused me to look up the topic on Jehovah's Witnesses' searchable electronic resources, and this piece of idle curiosity led me to observe that the Watch Tower Society had undergone a change of position on the theme, and that its critics, who invariably pounce on discrepancies between different Watch Tower publications, appear largely to have overlooked the Society's change of stance on the issue. The countercult critics typically refer to such changes as 'flip-flops', which is somewhat

pejorative term for what Jehovah's Witnesses themselves refer to as 'adjustments in view' or 'clarified understanding' (Reed 1998; Gruss 2007; Penton 1985). In this regard Jehovah's Witnesses often cite Proverbs 4:18: ¹

But the path of the righteous is like the bright morning light
That grows brighter and brighter until full daylight

thus implying that Jehovah does not disclose complete and perfect understanding of the Bible all at once, but progressively enables his followers by their continued study to arrive at a true interpretation of its teachings.

The Bible is somewhat problematic in its instructions regarding diet. As Jewish vegetarians will point out, God's instruction to Adam and Eve was that they could eat from any of the trees in the Garden of Eden, with the exception of the tree of knowledge (Genesis 2:16-17). God says to Adam, "Here I have given to you every seed-bearing plant that is on the entire earth and every tree with seed-bearing fruit. Let them serve as food for you." (Genesis 1:29). This suggests a vegetarian diet; while they are granted dominion over the animals, they are not explicitly permitted to eat them. God's instruction to Adam appears also to apply to the animals: "And to every wild animal of the earth and to every flying creature of the heavens and to everything moving on the earth in which there is life, I have given all green vegetation for food." (Genesis 1:30). However, Cain and Abel's fatal quarrel appears to have resulted from their respective offerings to God, Cain's vegetable offering having been judged to be inferior to Abel's offering of meat (Genesis 4:2-5).

Before the flood, animals as well as humans are believed to have been vegetarian. A 1961 *Watchtower* response to a reader's question argues that the animals that went into Noah's Ark must have been vegetarian. Since there was limited space in the Ark, it would

have been impossible to store meat to last for 40 days, and we can be sure that there were no facilities for freezing food, and no slaughterhouse on board. Exactly the same number of animals exited the Ark as were allowed in.

The permission to eat animal flesh is only subsequently given to Noah, arguably as a concession to human weakness, with the restriction that they may not consume animal blood – a point of key importance to Jehovah’s Witnesses (Genesis 9:3-5). When Moses receives the Law on Mount Sinai, it is clear that a carnivorous diet is acceptable, but with restrictions such as the avoidance of pork and shellfish (Leviticus 11). Moving on several centuries, it seems plain that Jesus and his disciples at least ate fish (Luke 24-43). While there are no explicit references to Jesus eating meat, he instructs his disciples to make preparations for eating a Passover meal, which would include the Passover lamb (Luke 22:8), and his teachings occasionally refer to meat-eating: when the Prodigal Son returns, the fattened calf is on the celebratory menu (Luke 15:30). Peter later has a dream in which a net descends from heaven bearing all kinds of animals, which he is commanded to kill and eat (Acts 10:9-16), and since then it has been characteristic of most of the Christian tradition that its followers may eat any form of meat rather than conform to Jewish dietary restrictions or follow a vegetarian diet.²

One other biblical passage seems to run counter to the notion that one should have a carnivorous diet: this is the story of Daniel, who is brought to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar’s court with his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. When they are offered royal food and wine they refuse, requesting to live only on vegetables and clean water. Nebuchadnezzar’s official agrees to a ten-day experiment: the health of Daniel and his faithful friends would be compared with that of other young men who eat the royal fare. At the end of this period they are found to be unsurpassed in wisdom and ten times more proficient than all Babylon’s magicians (Daniel 1:3-20).

The coming paradise on earth is envisaged as a return to the sinless world that Adam and Eve forfeited, hence it might seem a reasonable expectation that men and women should revert to Adam and Eve's vegetarian ideal. The Bible teaches that in this paradise, the great crowd will experience the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy of peace and harmony among the human and animal creation: the lion will lie down with the lamb, the child will play among poisonous snakes, and they will not harm or destroy in God's holy mountain (Isaiah 11:6-9). The child can hardly play peacefully with the wild animals if he or she knows that they are later going to be slaughtered and served at the dining table! If one examines the Watch Tower Society's pictorial illustrations of the new world, they are invariably of men and women are tilling the ground, and carting wheelbarrows full of vegetables such as outsize marrows. The great crowd is never portrayed operating slaughter houses, or even as sitting down to enjoy roast beef or pork chops.

In its first 75 years or so the Watch Tower Society had little to say on the topic of vegetarianism, even in the 1920s and 1930s, when its journal *The Golden Age* promoted a number of unorthodox health practices. In 1952 a *Watchtower* article entitled 'Tolerance' stated that such topics were "inconsequential matters" and should not be the subject of argument, but recommended tolerance on the part of followers of each type of diet. In 1954, however, a fairly substantial article appeared in *The Watchtower*, entitled 'May Christians Eat Meat?' The author argued that God looks favourably on animal sacrifices, citing the story of Cain and Abel, where God prefers Abel's animal sacrifice, and noting that in the history of Israel burnt offerings of animals were pleasing to God. Daniel, who with his friends stands up to king Nebuchadnezzar by insisting on vegetarian food, is not to be regarded as a champion of vegetarianism: his refusal of meat was rather a rejection of a foreign king's rich food, which may have involved violating Jewish food laws.

All these examples come from the Hebrew-Aramaic scriptures (the Watch Tower Society's preferred term for the Old Testament), and hence are not decisive for the Jehovah's Witnesses, for whom any commandment in these scriptures must be reinforced in the Christian Greek scriptures (the New Testament) in order to have binding force. When we examine Christian scripture, we find that Jesus nowhere commends vegetarianism; as noted, he celebrated the Passover; he ate fish with his disciples; he multiplied loaves and fishes for large crowds on two occasions; and he directed the fishermen disciples to a large haul of 153 fishes. Writing to the Romans, Paul makes a comparison between vegetarians and meat eaters:

One man has faith to eat everything, but the man who is weak eats vegetables.

Let the one eating not look down on the one not eating, and let the one not eating not judge the one eating, for God has welcomed that one. (Romans 14:2-3).

The author of the 1954 article points out that it is the vegetarian who is described as being weak, not the meat eater. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul appears to urge them positively to patronise the meat market:

Everything that is sold in a meat market keep eating, making no inquiry on account of your conscience, for 'the earth belongs to Jehovah, and so does its fullness'. If anyone of the unbelievers invites you and you wish to go, proceed to eat everything that is set before you, making no inquiry on account of your conscience. (1 Corinthians 10:25-33).

Other Watch Tower articles are less emphatic about the virtues of meat eating over vegetarianism. A later (1976) article contends that vegetarianism is an individual matter. The author itemises the arguments in favour of a vegetarian diet – economic, health, compassion – but points out that these are not arguments to be found in the Bible, and that God’s word does not prescribe vegetarianism. God authorises the taking of animal life, but not human life, and the author points out the irony of Cain offering a vegetable sacrifice, but proceeding to murder his brother. Similarly the author mentions Field Marshal Montgomery and Air Chief Marshal Lord Dowding, who led military operations in the Second World War, but ironically were vegetarian. Their priorities, clearly, were wrong. The 1976 article interprets Paul’s instruction to the Romans to mean, not that carnivores are superior to vegetarians, but rather that we should exercise conscience and tolerance in such matters.

The fact that meat-eating is regarded as legitimate does not entail that Jehovah’s Witnesses eat any kind of food. The prohibition on blood is well known, and reflects the commandment given to Noah, and subsequently reinforced at the First Council of Jerusalem. Jehovah’s Witnesses regard the prohibition as a food law, and not merely an instruction prohibiting blood transfusion. The blood is the life, and must not be consumed; thus foods like blood sausage are to be avoided. The Bible also states that animals should be treated with kindness, and one Watch Tower article is critical of modern methods of factory farming (Watch Tower 1997). Hunting and fishing are acceptable as occupations or as pastimes: it is noted that the Israelites hunted. Jacob is willing to kill two goats for his father Isaac, and Esau goes out to bring back meat so that his mother Rebecca can prepare venison. However, hunting is not acceptable if it involves guns, and one should not hunt or fish simply for the joy of killing: to do so would be to hunt in the spirit of Nimrod, whom the Bible describes as a hunter, stating that he was “in opposition to Jehovah” (Genesis 10:9). The same article makes one further stipulation about hunting and fishing: since such practices are time-

consuming, one must be sure that they do not prevent those who take up such hobbies from attending congregational meetings.

Watch Tower publications acknowledge that a vegetarian diet can be conducive to health, but the authors contend that there are other ways of promoting health, such as eating less, and taking exercise. One article argues that it was not the vegetarian diet that improved the complexion of Daniel and his friends. The 10 day contest between Daniel and the Babylonian courtiers was not long enough to prove the point. Rather, it was Jehovah who effected the difference (Watch Tower 2007:17-20).

If vegetarianism was God's original ideal, then can we expect a vegetarian new world? Watch Tower publications say relatively little about this, although the consensus appears to be that harmony between humans and animals will be achieved by humans eating vegetables only (Watch Tower 1952a; 1975: 184, 187). The reasoning is that the coming world should reflect the original paradise, in obedience to Jehovah's antediluvian instructions. There are hints in the Bible on the matter, which are frequently quoted in connection with the paradise on earth. In God's holy mountain, which is taken as a picture of this coming state, the participant can expect

A banquet of rich dishes,
A banquet of fine wine,
Of rich dishes filled with marrow,
Of fine, filtered wine. (Isaiah 25: 6)

The psalmist writes:

There will be an abundance of grain on the earth;

On the top of the mountains it will overflow.

His fruit will flourish as in Lebanon,

And in the cities people will blossom like the vegetation of the earth. (Psalm 72:16)

These verses do not state explicitly that the paradisiacal diet will be exclusively vegetarian, but certainly meat-eating is not mentioned in connection with the new world.

Can we therefore expect a return to vegetarianism? The March 1952 *Watchtower* gives an affirmative answer, stating that “Even the lion will turn vegetarian then,” while in 1961 the author states that this is merely a possibility, commenting that it is a “time wasting topic”. The later 1952 article dismisses the whole debate about food, claiming that those who think food is important are like Esau, who traded a bowl of lentil stew for his entire inheritance (Genesis 25:29-34).

The issue of vegetarianism raises a number of questions regarding Watch Tower teachings. First, why does it get so little discussion when many people today consider vegetarian diet and animal welfare important topics? Second, are there discernible reasons for changes in the Society’s position? Third, how can the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim to be the custodians of ‘the truth’ when their position on this and other topics changes through time?

Regarding the first of these questions, it might be suggested that conditions in the coming eternal paradise are in Jehovah’s hands and not subject to any human control, hence one ought merely to await the coming kingdom and ensure that one has one’s place in it. However, substantially more discussion is given to other issues regarding the coming kingdom, over which humans have no control. For example, much attention has been given in Watch Tower publications to the question of who will be resurrected to stand judgement, and particularly the fate of the inhabitants of the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah – a topic which has given rise to considerable vacillation. Why should this matter? The story of their

destruction is firmly in the past, and since we belong to neither of the two cities, we only need to ensure that we do not follow their example, and duly repent.

The answer, I believe, is not to be found in the practical relevance of the issues involved. The difference between the issue of Sodom and Gomorrah's fate and the dietary customs in the new world lies in the fact that substantially more mention is made of the former in scripture. Not only is the story of the cities' destruction to be found in the book of Genesis: Jesus says refers to it, as do several of the Old Testament prophets, as well as Paul, Peter and Jude.³ Because of its attention in scripture it is important to interpret the story. By contrast, there is no clear scriptural indication that the food laws of the Garden of Eden will be re-established in the new world, and hence any view on the subject would be speculative rather than interpretative. It is important for Jehovah's Witnesses to interpret scripture, rather than to speculate about what is not found in it.

What might be the reasons for the Watch Tower Society's adjustments in understanding of vegetarianism? It is possible that the Watch Tower authors may have failed to notice these changes in position. Some of the sources to which I have referred were written before the electronics revolution made it possible to search the Watch Tower literature and to determine with reasonable certainty what has previously been published. Watch Tower literature is written by a variety of authors, whose identity is undisclosed, and they may well have been unaware of the previous treatment of the topic. While the Governing Body is supposed to direct the ideas expressed in Watch Tower articles, its composition inevitably changed over the decades, and those who had continuous presence may simply not have recalled the history of the topic. Remarkably, there were two members of the Governing Body whose membership spanned all the publication dates under discussion,⁴ but it would have been a remarkable feat if they had recalled all the relevant literature. Unlike topics that have aroused

comment outside the society, such as allegedly failed prophecies, vegetarianism is not a topic that has elicited external comment.

Another factor may have influenced the Jehovah's Witnesses increasing sympathy for vegetarianism, namely the spread of the Society as a worldwide organisation. Originating in the United States, it grew up in a society of carnivores. As the society spread to the East, where vegetarianism is more prevalent, it would seem sensible for Jehovah's Witnesses to be more accommodating to vegetarians. A 1997 *Awake!* article refers to an 18-year-old young woman called Sujata, who was brought up as a vegetarian Hindu before becoming a Witness, and who believes that God's instruction to Adam was to follow a meat-free diet. Not all Indians are Hindus are by any means vegetarian, but statistics indicate that nearly a third of the Indian population do not eat meat.⁵ As the Watch Tower Society made inroads into India, it would seem sensible not needlessly to disparage the dietary habits of nearly a third of the population. If this was a contributory factor in the Society's growth, some success has resulted: in 1947 the average number of publishers was a mere 198, while by 1997 it had risen to 15,970.

I began by mentioned the notion of 'adjustments in understanding', of which vegetarianism is one example. Doctrinal vacillation raises a much wider question than how one should interpret the Bible on specific issues. How can the Watch Tower Society maintain its position as the custodian of 'the truth' in the light of doctrinal changes? Clearly most organisations and religious denominations change their views and methods of organisation from time to time, and it is unreasonable for the Society's critics to demand complete consistency between late 19th century publications and those of the present-day, as some of them appear to do. Perhaps contrary to popular belief, Jehovah's Witnesses have not sought to hide their changes in position over the years, and their annual CD which collates past editions of publications provides a lengthy list of topics on which Jehovah's Witnesses have

revised their stance. However, more problematic than any lack of consistency is the fact that the Watch Tower Society claims to be Jehovah's sole authoritative mouthpiece, and the exclusive vehicle of salvation, offering the one true interpretation of scripture. Can the Society legitimately be regarded as the custodian of truth if it delivers scriptural exegesis that it later acknowledges to be faulty? More problematically, since the Society's views are liable to 'adjustment', how can we be sure that the currently defined position can be guaranteed as true, if its views can be reconsidered and retracted? Andrew Holden writes:

It could well be that many Witnesses have not been in the organisation long enough to realise that "new lights" have a habit of growing dimmer, while old ones are sometimes switched back on! (Holden 2002:32).

The Society is not unaware of this problem, and a 1981 *Watchtower* article addressed this difficulty. Entitled "'Light Has Flashed Up for the Righteous'" (a quotation of Psalm 97:11), the article suggests that at times some zigzagging is necessary in order to arrive at a final definitive truth. The (anonymous) author compares the Society's policy with the nautical practice of 'tacking', whereby the navigator of a ship has to steer in one direction and then change to another in order to catch the wind and to arrive efficiently at the destined port. The author writes:

However, it may have seemed to some as though that path has not always gone straight forward. At times explanations given by Jehovah's visible organization have shown adjustments, seemingly to previous points of view. But this has not actually been the case. This might be compared to what is known in navigational circles as "tacking." By maneuvering the sails the sailors can

cause a ship to go from right to left, back and forth, but all the time making progress toward their destination in spite of contrary winds. And that goal in view for Jehovah's servants is the "new heavens and a new earth" of God's promise. (Watch Tower 1981: 27).

While this suggestion displays ingenuity, I doubt that it solves the problem. The manoeuvrings of the Watch Tower Society may offer the path to the new heaven and earth, but the follower still cannot be assured that at any point in time the Society is teaching definitive truth, and not at some stage on a 'tacking' manoeuvre. It is not obvious why such zigzagging should be necessary in order to determine the true interpretation of the Bible, and tacking manoeuvrings enable a ship to make progress, rather than to backtrack. As Raymond V. Franz points out, tacking may take a ship from side to side, but it should not take it back to where it was previously (Franz 2000: 358). Although the Society has typically avoided claiming infallibility, as long as the possibility of theological and exegetical change remains, it is difficult to see how the Watch Tower Society can plausibly claim to offer 'the truth'.

Summing up the Jehovah's Witnesses' position on vegetarianism, it has developed from disparagement to tolerance, acknowledging that that is no clearly defined biblical stance on the practice. It may be an ideal for the coming eternal paradise, but the Society stops short of affirming this explicitly. Having undergone some modifications in its position, the Watch Tower Society now regards vegetarianism as a matter of conscience although, as I have argued, the price it pays for its doctrinal adjustments is that they undermine the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the organisation's biblical interpretation.

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¹ All quotations are from the New World Translation, which is the Jehovah's Witnesses own version of the Bible. The 2013 translation is used, except where Watch Tower publications quote an earlier version.

² Adventists remain an exception, continuing to accept ancient Jewish dietary laws.

³ See, e.g. Isaiah 3:9; Jeremiah 49:18; Ezekiel 16:48; Amos 4:11; Zephaniah 2:9; Romans 9:29; 2 Peter 2:6; Jude 1:7.

⁴ Lyman Swingle served from 1945 to 2001, and Milton Henschel (who became the Society's sixth president) from 1947 to 2003.

⁵ According to Wikipedia 1% of Americans identified as vegetarian and prior to 1971, and more recently between 5% and 13% of the US population, and between 3% and 11% of the UK population regard themselves as vegetarian. This contrasts with UN statistics relating to India in 2007, where an estimated 31% of the population followed a vegetarian diet.