

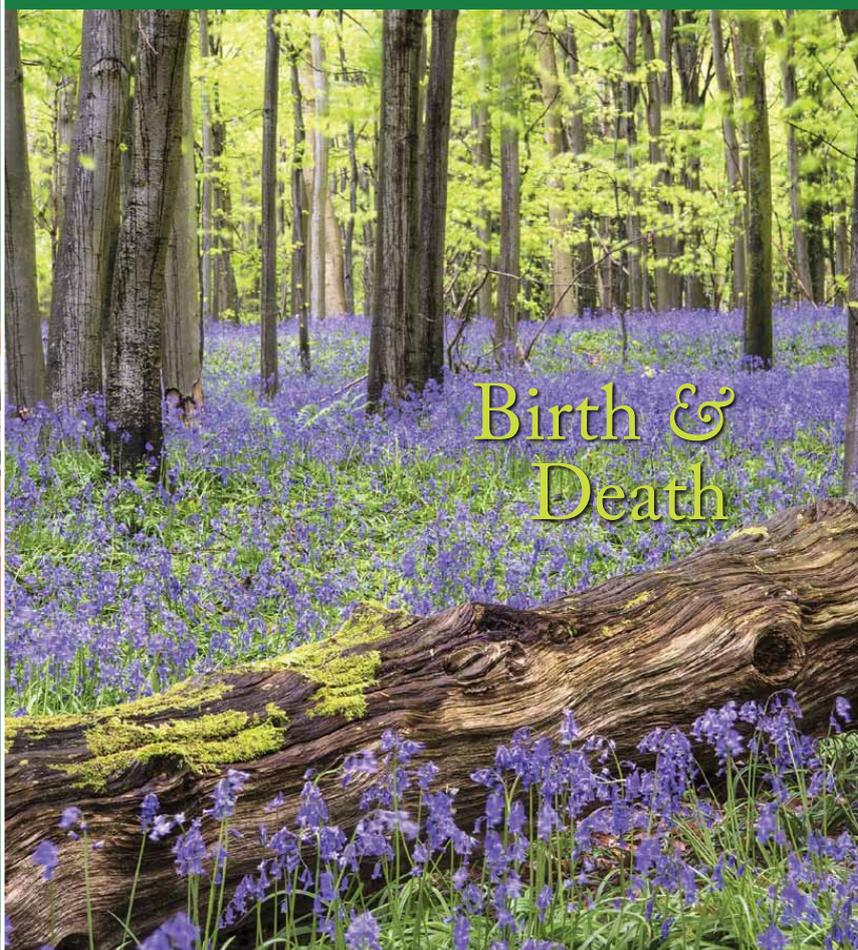
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Spirituality and Veganism

PIERS WARREN

Veganism (as defined by The Vegan Society) is a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose.

But is there any connection between veganism and spirituality? At the start of this magazine, amongst the aims of GreenSpirit, you will see that GreenSpirit challenges us to 'replace the anthropocentric worldview with an ecocentric one' and to 'walk ever more lightly on the Earth'. These challenges in particular tie in very clearly with vegan ideals.

To explore the advantages of veganism let me give you a run through of my own journey. As a young child I was drawn to animals and being outside in Nature. My earliest memories include the joy of finding slow worms under logs and building little ponds for tadpoles. From around the age of seven, I began growing my own veg (just radishes and lettuce to start with), which has grown into a passion that will stay with me my whole life.

Early on I also realised there was a lot of cruelty and exploitation in the world – elephants being massacred for their ivory, for example – and this realisation led to my later work in conservation. However, like most people in the UK, I was brought up eating meat and drinking milk and didn't really make the connection between this and cruelty; it was just the way things were. Plus of course we were victims of marketing hype telling us how healthy milk was, for example, despite the incongruity that no other animal drinks another species' milk, and none beyond weaning.

As my interest in animal welfare grew I became vegetarian as a young adult, and this decision was reinforced by a period living just down the lane from a large modern abattoir (the day-long screaming from the pigs stays with me to this day). I was also interested in self-sufficiency, yet my attempts at running a smallholding met the dilemmas of what to do with surplus male chicks, and the distress of removing young goat kids from their mother so that she could be milked for our own consumption.

The idea that veganism was the way to go to relieve my troubled conscience came to me, but it was years until I made the effort to embrace it fully. Like many vegetarians



Photo © Piers Warren

I struggled with doing without milk, cheese and eggs and managed to keep putting it to the back of my mind despite knowing that I would take the plunge one day.

Four things pushed me closer to the inevitable. Firstly, through organisations like VIVA! (see resources below), I learnt more about the cruelty involved in the dairy and egg industries: young calves torn away from their mothers at birth to be shot or sent to veal crates overseas; millions of day-old male chicks (useless for egg production) tossed live into a grinder, not to mention the awful conditions most laying birds are kept in, free-range or not, and so on. It is said that there is more cruelty in a glass of milk than a pound of steak. The animals we eat, from cattle to chickens to fish, are sentient beings with complex relationships with each other. Above all they want to avoid pain and not die. Research shows that even lobsters and crabs feel pain – being out of water for many hours before being boiled alive is not a good way to go.

Secondly, I learnt more about the personal health benefits of a cruelty-free diet. Vegans are less likely to suffer from all the major diseases: cancer, heart problems, diabetes, obesity etc. Increasingly the major health and dietetic organisations worldwide are encouraging people to eat less meat and more fruit and veg. This was driven home by the tragedy of losing my sister (who ate a lot of meat and dairy) who, despite being fit and having never smoked, died quickly of liver cancer in her fifties.



Photo © Piers Warren

Thirdly, it became clear that the meat and dairy industries were major contributors to climate change (more than all the world's transport systems put together). With my work in conservation, my horror at the dire projections as CO₂ emissions continue to increase and my own desire to reduce my carbon footprint, it seemed hypocritical to put off turning vegan myself. It may feel easier to switch to a green energy supplier or use public transport more, but the greatest thing you can personally do to reduce climate change is to become vegan. The effects of the meat and dairy industries on the climate, and why they are covered up, are explored in the excellent film *Cowspiracy* (see resources). There are many other ecological disasters associated with the drive for animal protein: for example, current projections are that by 2050 there will be no viable stocks of fish left in the oceans – worldwide.

And finally, as my own explorations into spirituality developed I kept coming back to the three words 'respect for life'. I've never been anthropocentric, have never considered man above all other animals – we've just evolved differently. I've always loved all animals, been fascinated by them and the wonder of evolution, found great peace in Nature, and

been awe-inspired by the beauty of wild places and creatures. I could not be a part of the wheel of destruction and cruelty purely through a liking for the taste of meat or cheese or milk. We are all connected. How can we feel spiritually at peace when we are causing so much death and cruelty every day (more than a billion animals are slaughtered for food every year in the UK alone)? There is nothing humane or ethical about slaughterhouses, no matter how modern they are. If you're not sure what goes on then I urge you to watch the documentary *Earthlings* (see resources). It's a harrowing experience, but then if just watching a film is traumatising, imagine what the reality is like. Not caring about the lives of sentient beings does not fit in with my idea of spirituality at all. There is nothing less valuable about the lives of pigs (which are more intelligent than dogs) than the pets we love and care for. I want to continue to explore and embrace compassion, empathy and reverence for all living beings.

It's been interesting to meet other vegans who had never previously thought of spiritual aspects of their life, but since becoming vegan have explored and embraced spirituality, taken up other activities such as meditation and yoga and gained deeper personal peace.



Respect for life extends to other humans too, of course. A billion people worldwide do not have enough to eat, yet the amount of grain fed to cattle to provide the rich west with burgers could alleviate all hunger in the world. The plant food needed to produce just one pound of meat could feed ten people for an entire day. It is unjust in the extreme.

Here are some resources I've found really useful and supportive:

Organisations: The Vegan Society (www.vegansociety.com).

VIVA! (www.viva.org.uk) very active in campaigning against cruelty, plus excellent nutritional advice.

Magazine: *Vegan Life* (veganlifemag.com) lots of interesting articles and news items about vegan topics plus yummy recipes.

Books: *World Peace Diet* by Dr Will Tuttle (www.worldpeacediet.com) a best-selling, in-depth study of our food and culture with a spiritual thread throughout.

The China Study by Dr T. Colin Campbell which details the connection between nutrition and heart disease, diabetes and cancer. The report also examines the source of nutritional confusion produced by powerful lobbies, government entities and opportunistic scientists.

Films: *Earthlings* (www.nationearth.com/earthlings) a documentary about humankind's total dependence on animals for economic purposes.

Cowspiracy (www.cowspiracy.com) a groundbreaking feature-length environmental documentary following filmmaker Kip Andersen as he uncovers the most destructive industry facing the planet today – and investigates why the world's leading environmental organisations are too afraid to talk about it.

There are already millions of vegans in the world, living healthy, cruelty-free lives, and more people are joining them all the time as the horrors of the meat and dairy industries are more exposed. It's easier than ever to eat out as a vegan, and more alternatives (such as plant-based milks and cheeses) make it easy to cook at home without feeling like you're missing out on anything. Veganism has boosted my enjoyment of food and cooking, and with the right variety of plant-based wholefoods it's easy to get enough of the right nutrition, protein, vitamins and minerals in a more healthy form than you would get from animal products. Increasingly top athletes are turning to a vegan diet as its benefits for health and fitness are discovered.

Our digestive systems and metabolism have evolved to thrive on plant-based diets as increasing amounts of scientific research prove – such as *The China Study* (see resources). The reason people eat so much meat and dairy worldwide is simply because they like the taste – a shallow reason to fund cruelty and climate change at the expense of your own health.

The more I've learnt about veganism, and the longer I've practised it, the happier I've been with the decision to exclude cruelty to animals, as far as possible, from my life, reduce my carbon footprint and improve my health. Like many other vegans I have spoken to I only wish I'd started many years ago, and I know I will never turn back.

If you'd like to discuss veganism further then please do so at the GreenSpirit members' Facebook page at: www.facebook.com/groups/greenspiritmembers

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