

MUSLIMS AND MEAT-EATING

Vegetarianism, Gender, and Identity

Kecia Ali

ABSTRACT

Religious thinking, including among Muslims, connects food and sex, as well as women and animals; both food practices and gender norms are significant for communal identity and boundary construction. Female bodies (properly covered) and animal bodies (properly slaughtered) serve as potent signifiers of Muslim identity, as patriarchal thought sustains the hierarchical cosmologies that affirm male dominance in family and society and allow humans to view animals as legitimately subject to human violence. I argue that Muslims in the industrialized West—especially those concerned with gender justice—ought to be vegetarians and that feminist ethics provides underutilized resources for Muslim thinking about ethics generally and food ethics in particular. Much contemporary Muslim thought about meat is at least as concerned with demonstrating the primacy of “Islamic” identity as with general questions about the formation of virtuous subjects and the development of good societies. This defensive concern with religious authenticity poses a stumbling block to richer thinking. Engagement with non-Islamic (though not “un-Islamic”) ethics provides a model for productive dialogue and engagement among parties who disagree about basic presumptions but agree on desirable outcomes, including the development of individuals’ ethical sensibilities and the construction of societies conducive to human flourishing.

KEY WORDS: *food, Islam, vegetarianism, feminism, animals, Islamic law*

Religious thinking, including among Muslims, connects food and sex. Food practices, especially surrounding meat, and gender norms, especially surrounding sexuality, are significant for communal identity and boundary construction. Women and animals, often discursively connected, play vital roles in the symbolic language of religious identity. In a variety of Muslim contexts, female bodies (properly covered) and animal bodies (properly slaughtered) serve as potent signifiers. Not only are there parallels between women and animals, and between sex and food, but the

Kecia Ali is Associate Professor of Religion at Boston University. Her books include *Sexual Ethics and Islam* (Oneworld, 2006), *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Harvard University Press, 2010), and *The Lives of Muhammad* (Harvard University Press, 2014). Active in the American Academy of Religion, she serves as President of the Society for the Study of Muslim Ethics. Kecia Ali, ka@bu.edu.

conceptual utility of women and animals is linked: hierarchical cosmologies affirm male dominance in family and society and affirm human dominion over animals, legitimating their use, confinement, slaughter, and consumption. While patriarchal ideologies have come under fire by Muslim feminists, little attention has been paid to the related problem of animal subjection—indeed, there is typically no recognition that these issues are connected. In this essay, I argue that secular feminist vegetarian insights can help Muslims concerned with gender justice to understand the intertwined nature of meat-eating and female subjection.

In addition to making the case that Muslim advocates for gender justice should be vegetarians, I aim to show that engagements across narrowly drawn traditions can serve as a model for richer ethical conversations. In particular, I argue that feminist ethics provides underutilized resources for Muslim thinking about food ethics in particular and ethics more generally. Much contemporary Muslim thought about meat, like that about gender, is at least as concerned with demonstrating the primacy of “Islamic” identity as with general questions about the formation of virtuous subjects and the development of good societies. This defensive concern with religious authenticity poses an obstacle to productive ethical work. Engagement with non-Islamic (though not “un-Islamic”) ethics provides a model for productive dialogue among parties who disagree about basic presumptions but agree on desirable outcomes, including the development of individuals’ ethical sensibilities and the construction of societies conducive to human flourishing. Muslim ethical discourse already uses, but seldom acknowledges, non-religious thinking, particularly from scientific and social-scientific sources. However prevalent secular arguments are, religious language serves as an arbiter of acceptability. The stress on “Islamic” food rules, even when they diverge from conventional wisdom on the issue of meat, reinforces an identity politics in which eating only *ḥalāl* (ritually slaughtered; literally, “licit”) meat is increasingly central. Identity politics often value the label “Islamic” but reject labels such as “feminist” and “vegetarian” which seem to challenge the primacy of religious identity. I argue instead that Muslims can benefit from acknowledging influence and admixture and validating it as valuable.

1. Food and Sex

Dense webs of signification have long connected food and sex, as well as women and animals, in religious thinking. For most of human history, discussions about preparation and consumption of food, especially meat, have been the purview of religion. The Qur’an, like the Bible, discusses food on numerous occasions. Food is a sign of God’s bounty (Q. 55) and is to be enjoyed, except those items specifically prohibited (Q. 5:1), or during the obligatory daytime fast during the month of Ramadan (Q. 2:187). Sex

too is a blessing, vital for reproduction (Q. 4:1), but limited to legitimate partners (Q. 24:30; see Ali 2006) and prohibited during menstruation (Q. 2:222) and during daytime in Ramadan (Q. 2:187). Rules about intermarriage, which are differentiated by gender, are closely linked both conceptually and textually to rules about commensality (Q. 5:5), which apply to men and women equally (Ali 2006). Above and beyond scriptural references, meat eating “always has ritual value” because “it is tightly tied to the reproduction of social ties” (Benkheira 1999, 90).

In many traditions, food regulations, like marriage rules, separate insiders and outsiders, and indeed the two are often connected. Jewish and Muslim regulations broadly agree that one can only marry those whose food is lawful. Jewish law forbids sharing the food of non-Jews and marrying them, while Sunni Islamic law permits both (for men) in certain circumstances; Shi'i law restricts both food sharing and intermarriage, coming closer to Jewish than Sunni jurisprudence on these points. There has been variation over time in Muslim thinking about permissible food (and of course a great deal of variation in observance). Medieval Sunnis were generally permissive toward Jewish and Christian preparation of otherwise lawful foods, including meat other than pork; Shi'i thinkers were more restrictive (Freidenreich 2011). Modern Sunnis have been increasingly hesitant about meat slaughtered by Christians and Jews. Muslim concern with demarcating a distinctive identity when traveling or dwelling among non-Muslims probably accounts for this shift (Adams 1933; Khan 1998; Fischer 2011). Concern about sharing meals with and eating even non-meat food prepared by Christians or Hindus became a subject of contention from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century in India (Masud 1994). Refraining from consumption of problematic food could differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims but also, as for the medieval Shi'a, between good Muslims and bad Muslims; a “reformist” Muslim traveler in the United States insisted on the impropriety of eating widely available meat, and criticized Muslims who did (Masud 2000).

In minority contexts, religious food rules are contested even as, or perhaps because, they serve as evidence of Muslim distinctiveness. Stigma attached to Muslim food rules—particularly surrounding “inhumane” slaughter processes (Burt 2006)—parallels widespread ways of discussing Muslim oppression of women (Abu-Lughod 2014). The increasing availability of halal meat in Muslim-minority contexts reinforces its centrality, while at the same time making it an increasingly prominent avenue for the display of Muslim identity. Malays in London may eat kosher or vegetarian food when halal meat is unavailable but they perceive this as a stopgap measure rather than a permanent dietary choice (Fischer 2011; also Ward 2001). When halal meat is available, even if slightly more expensive or inconvenient than ordinary meat, eating only halal becomes

more common. In a self-reinforcing loop, the more people eat only halal meat, the greater its role becomes as a signifier of Muslim identity: good Muslims not only do not eat non-halal meat, good Muslims eat halal meat. Meat eating thus comes to play a central role in constructing minority Muslim identity, which often centers on the proper “Islamic” way of eating. This function is not new. In Mughal India, ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq Muḥaddith Dihlawī (d. 1642) “commented that the Prophet Muḥammad loved meat, preferring it to other types of food. This description was intended to remind Ṣufīs that their vegetarianism was contrary to what had been practiced by Muḥammad and therefore sinful. It may be recalled that in his later life [controversial emperor] Akbar and a number of his courtiers had become vegetarian” (Rizvi 1975, 109).

2. Food and Ethics

Choices about halal meat in North America and Western Europe occur in a climate of broader debates about food. In popular consciousness, scientific and social-scientific considerations loom large. Mostly focusing on the health and environmental costs of current modes of food production and consumption, popular books and documentaries address these issues with barely any reference to religion, at least in the traditional sense (and seldom with attention to gender).¹ At the same time, food and eating take on moral and even religious meanings. Apart from any connection between vegetarianism and specific creeds, religious language colors discussions of vegetarianism itself. Americans speak of “conversion” to vegetarianism or, especially, veganism (Malesh 2009; Adams 2010, 118–19; Godin 2011, 83; Cerulli 2012). As Mohammed Benkheira puts it: “Diverse alimentary ideologies like macrobiotics and vegetarianism . . . often appear as caricatures of the alimentary doctrines of the old religions” (Benkheira 2000, 22). In fact, according to the vice president of the Humane Society, “It’s probably harder to change your diet than it is to change your religion” (McWilliams 2009, 119).

At the same time that vegetarianism and “locavorism” have become “quasi-religions” (Zeller 2014; see also Grumett and Muers 2010, 70); religious people in North America and Europe continue to discuss food and meat in terms specific to their faith communities. Perhaps to a greater extent than mainstream secular discourses, religious discussions about

¹ One exception is Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Eating Animals* (2009), which reflects on Jewish identity. Another is Tovar Cerulli’s *The Mindful Carnivore: A Vegetarian’s Hunt for Sustenance*, which discusses religion sporadically throughout his memoir; he also touches repeatedly on the “spiritual” dimensions of hunting (see, for example, 2012, 90, 133, 137, 142, 179, 184–87, 191, 223, 234, 255). Cerulli also deals with gender issues and feminist critiques of meat-eating.

meat raise not only environmental but also social justice and animal welfare concerns (Young 1999; Linzey 2009). Progressive Jews ask whether kosher slaughter suffices or whether one must consider how animals are raised and human workers treated (Alpert 2008, 143–46). Similar discussions and initiatives among Muslims living in Western Europe and North America advocate scrutiny of food production generally and of animal products in particular, including but exceeding a focus on ritual slaughter (Robinson 2014; *Beyond Halal* 2014). Some Muslim commentators have argued for choosing “local and organic” over halal meat (Hijabman 2012). Others arrange things so as not to have to choose: in addition to online marketing of organic halal meat, a food cooperative along the lines of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) group has popped up in the Washington DC metropolitan area (Dahlan-Taylor 2012), and a Muslim family in England works to “raise animals . . . organically and sustainably” before they are ritually slaughtered (Power 2014).

In addition to these efforts to ensure ethical meat consumption, thinkers and activists often touch on reducing meat consumption, either because of the increased cost of ethical or organic meat, or because of meat production’s impact on ecology, health, or animal welfare. One strand of thinking contrasts the abstemious habits of pious ancestors with the overconsumption of luxury goods, including meat, by contemporary Muslims. American traditionalist Hamza Yusuf refers to the Prophet as a “semi-vegetarian” and lauds the early caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (d. 644) for admonishing a man to eat meat every other day at most. ‘Umar linked this prohibition to concern for those who went hungry while others feasted. In appealing to these precedents, Yusuf roots his advice about meat eating in a religiously authoritative history. If the Prophet and, as Yusuf puts it, the most Prophet-like of the post-prophetic Muslim figures, ate meat sparingly, then not only is there nothing wrong with at least partial abstention from meat, indeed it is recommended. Ironically, this endorsement of limited meat consumption appears on a website for a purveyor of “organic halal meat” (Abraham Natural Produce 2014)—perhaps suggesting the presence of commercial motivations: if one is going to eat less meat, then one can splurge on costlier organic meat.

There are foundational texts, too, that are susceptible to pro-vegetarian interpretations, just as Qur’anic verses on marriage and sexuality have been reinterpreted by Muslim women in egalitarian ways (Hidayatullah 2014). Muslim texts present a variety of considerations surrounding food. Various prophetic traditions counsel moderation in eating—moderation, not radical asceticism. At least one prophetic tradition advocates moderate indulgence in food, sleep, and sex—or rather, moderation in abstention from these things (Moosa 2009, 136). Other traditions suggest that one should not be persnickety about food—one should eat from whatever dish is closest, not turn down invitations even if one is (voluntarily) fasting,

and so forth. These anecdotes co-exist with stories of Sufis who are scrupulous about foodstuffs' origins, even for seemingly innocuous foods like grain. Stolen grain, or grain purchased with illicitly gained money, would cause illness in a sensitive person who consumed it. Food absorbed and transmitted to its eater the just or unjust relations of its production and consumption. Although such stories seldom tell of a commitment to total, principled abstention from meat, this basic observation can serve as one foundation for contemporary critical reflections about meat (Sanbonmatsu 2011; Grumett and Muers 2010).

Despite some advocacy of reduced meat consumption, Muslims infrequently discuss—and even less frequently, advocate—vegetarianism. The default Muslim stance toward vegetarianism, particularly if it is justified by animal welfare concerns, remains confusion, hostility, or outright rejection. Although, as Richard Foltz observes, “there exists no unified Islamic or Muslim view of nonhuman animals” (2006, 149), it is still the case that “preoccupation with the rights of nonhuman animals”—and vegetarianism more particularly—“remains firmly outside the mainstream in Muslim societies around the world today” (2006, 155, 156). The same is true in Muslim minority communities in the West, especially to the extent that purchasing, preparing, and consuming halal meat features in Muslim socializing and conversation. Muslim thinkers advocate minimizing animal suffering prior to and during slaughter, and some suggest avoiding the products of factory farming, but few suggest simply not eating animals.

Although the Prophet Muhammad reportedly speculated in two instances about forgoing meat consumption out of concern for animals (Canova 2009), such reports are seldom mentioned. Muslim thinkers, like the majority of Western thinkers, have largely accepted the notion that human interests trump those of animals: one thirteenth-century thinker, discussing non-Muslim practice, condemns those who forbid killing an animal “in order to achieve the interest of the animal” (quoted in Perlo 2009, 97). Though animal suffering remains a concern, most simply assume that one may kill animals for food but one should minimize their suffering during their lives and deaths. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2010, 83; see Adams 2010, 196) goes further in his discussion of ecological ethics and respect for plant and animal life, arguing that animal slaughter and consumption has a positive meaning: “The ritual killing of animals that can be eaten and whose flesh then becomes *halal* or permissible is of profound import in creating a spiritual bond with the natural world.”

One argument against vegetarianism presented by Muslim scholars and laypeople is that it usurps divine legislative power by forbidding what God made lawful (Perlo 2009, 96–97; Foltz 2006, 156; Orbala 2012).²

² Similar arguments are occasionally made against prohibiting polygamy and slavery (Ali 2006, 2010).

Sunni Muslim scholars may stress, triumphally, the relative liberality of Islamic food regulations in contrast to punitively restrictive regulations imposed upon Jews (Freidenreich 2011, 134–36; Cook 1996, 43). A Muslim argument for abstention from meat—even setting aside the meat from sacrifices associated with ritual celebrations—must circumvent “the Qur’an’s insistence that believers ought to consume all ‘permissible and good’ foodstuffs” since “behavior to the contrary constitutes either a denial of God’s authentic revelation or a rejection of the leniency God has mercifully extended to the believers” (Freidenreich 2011, 135; see also Moosa 2009, 135–36).

Still, despite the seemingly clear scriptural permission (or command) to eat meat, a few Muslim thinkers have declared the acceptability and even desirability of limiting meat consumption (Tappan 2011). Some have declared it permissible to be “vegetarian,” with one Egyptian scholar allowing vegetarians to abstain from the ritual animal sacrifice associated with the pilgrimage; still, vegetarians must not declare meat eating prohibited (Mayton 2010). These thinkers usually emphasize humanity’s obligations to alleviate animal suffering and steward natural resources, connecting them at times to specifically Muslim notions about human viceregency (*khilāfa*).

Muslim engagements with questions about meat eating, whether they appear in books, on blogs, as fatwas (often online), or essays in traditional or online periodicals, typically invoke exemplary early figures—as with Yusuf’s reference to ‘Umar—or use terms from the legal tradition.³ Legal categories, pervasive in modern Muslim writings, appear in the form of the “fivefold scale,” which divide acts into obligatory, recommended, permissible, blameworthy, and forbidden. Vegetarianism typically falls into the middle “permissible” or neutral category, though a few suggest that significantly reducing meat consumption is “recommended.” Others advocate for (at least partial) abstention using the same sorts of arguments that secular thinkers use, including that in industrialized nations, factory farming and slaughter cause meat-related suffering, both animal and human; further, raising animals for meat in these ways is inefficient and causes environmental damage.⁴

³ In addition to numerous fatwas that focus on proper slaughter (for a small sampling, see Islamicconcern.com 2014), other fatwas focus on purity of meat. See, for instance, a December 2010 Fiqh Council of North America fatwa “Conclusion of Meeting Regarding Livestock Feeding” (Fiqh Council of North America 2010).

⁴ Most secular works on the topic make similar points. For instance, Cerulli raises four intertwined concerns that originally led him to stop eating meat: worry about the purity of commercially available meat and its health implications, the inefficiency of meat production and its effects on the environment, cruelty to animals raised for meat, and the moral harm to humans involved in factory farming (Cerulli 2012, 14, see also 27).

Basheer Ahmad Masri (1914–1992), a Sunni thinker of Indian origin who spent his career in Britain, pioneered many of the ideas found in scattered online conversations about Muslims and meat-eating today. In his much-cited book *Animal Welfare in Islam*, Masri devotes a chapter to “Vegetarianism v/s Meatarianism” (2007, 56–95; cited in Perlo 2009, 95; Foltz 2006). He combines secular and religious arguments against meat eating: In addition to the Qur’an, *ḥadīth* tradition, and the occasional medieval Muslim scholar, Masri quotes a Roman philosopher (2007, 57), academic medical and nutritional journals (2007, 58–63), and statistics regarding land use (2007, 65–69). Just as his sources and topics are mixed, so are his ethical concerns: ecological responsibility, obedience to a divine plan (human dominion with regard to both use of animals and care for the planet), and human nature (virtue, frailty, purity, and perfectibility). He devotes the largest single portion of the essay to consideration of other religious traditions (2007, 71–82) prior to addressing Judaism and Islam jointly (2007, 82–92). Ultimately, Masri’s arguments about the desirability of moving toward vegetarianism serve to promote Islam, properly understood, as the religion best suited to humanity.

Masri’s essay intertwines secular and religious considerations to make religious claims. Islamic law, he insists, is meant to be practical rather than “merely” ritual but it is not about purely worldly things. This goes for its food rules as well. Meat-eating is not just about what it does to the environment or to animals but what it does also to the human beings who engage in it. As Ebrahim Moosa notes, “In many religious traditions, Islam included, dietary restrictions and food consumption are constitutive of religious observance as well as the formation of identity.” Food rules and practices manifest formative ethical ideals about meaningful human social activity—it is part of “*din*.” Though *din* is usually translated as “religion,” Moosa argues that it “denotes practices with salvific ends in mind, but that does not mean it excludes worldly or secular concerns” (2009, 139). Beyond considering “salvific ends,” Masri is drawing from a set of ideas about pious self-discipline and the construction of virtuous habits, including obedience. Where personal virtue and pious discipline appear in arguments for reducing meat-eating, two strands often intertwine. Opposition to thoughtless overconsumption critiques mainstream culture (that is, non-Muslim Western culture)—not dissimilarly to critiques levied of non-Muslim sexual immorality—and the invocation of early Muslim role models presents a specifically Islamic justification for semi-vegetarianism. Such critiques usefully bring religious precedent to bear on the ethical issues of daily living. Masri’s ideas about meat abstention have deep ethical and theological underpinnings, even as he appeals to contemporary science for rationales.

3. Food and Power

As Masri's writing makes clear, people seldom choose their diets in isolation. Both consuming and avoiding meat convey social identity and affiliation. Especially when with other Muslims, meat refusal can give offense, as can the refusal of hospitality more generally. As in contemporary Western societies, rejecting meat can be perceived as a criticism of others' eating habits (Adams 2010). Food consumption is thus intimately linked to other considerations of ethics, piety, and purity.

And it is connected to relationships of power. It is a truism that systems of domination are interconnected. A parallel between female and animal is implicit in a good deal of Muslim thinking, not only about food and sex (as discussed above). To take just one example, Indian/Pakistani thinker Abu'l-Ala Mawdudi, in his famous book *Purdah*, which roughly means seclusion or segregation of women, likens women and animals: "He believed that men were given divine rule over women who were like animals in men's farms" (De Soudy 2014, 191–92n117). Mawdudi is characteristically blunt about the biological and agricultural implications of his scriptural interpretations (Q. 2:223 and 42:11 particularly), referring to reproduction, intertwining husbandry and husband-dom. Just as dominant interpretations naturalize male superiority over females, particularly in presumptions about sexual use, these interpretations rely on the presumption of human sovereignty over animals.

Muslim feminist criticism has pointed out the ways that hierarchical cosmologies are used to naturalize and justify male dominance and female submission (Chaudhry 2014). Hierarchical cosmologies that place men in a God-like position over women commit the central theological error of joining partners with God (Wadud 2006). Women have their own direct relationship to God, one not mediated by husbands or fathers (Barlas 2002). So do animals (Tlili 2012). Systems of use and abuse of animals reflect a hierarchical dynamic that draws from and contributes to a broader sustaining of hierarchical thinking. Beyond its other harmful effects, then, meat eating supports patriarchy. The use(s) of female and animal bodies—and female animals' bodies in the case of milk and egg production (Adams 2010)—depend on and sustain relations of unjust dominance.

Secular feminist thought can lay bare these relations of dominance and help Muslim feminists to see the parallels between the "kindness to animals" model relied upon by Muslim advocates of ethical meat consumption and the soft patriarchy of the neo-traditionalist model of "gender equity" which feminists reject (Ali 2006). In that discourse, as long as the men in charge behave justly and temper their dominance with kindness, there is no cause for concern. Muslim feminists rightly note that this model fails to problematize male authority. Yet by refusing to question

the “naturalness” of human use, including killing, of animals, Muslim feminists forgo an opportunity to more thoroughly interrogate the hierarchical systems they critique.

For instance, Mawdudi’s claim is that men/human beings have been assigned viceregency over animals and that males have been assigned viceregency over females, making women like animals that men use for reproduction. By contrast, Muslim feminists insist that men and women are equally granted viceregency over the earth, and that their proper relationship to each other is of partners and collaborators, not boss and subordinate (or, vitally, God and worshipper) (Barlas 2002, Wadud 2006). In theologian Amina Wadud’s tawhidic paradigm—*tawhīd* refers to the oneness of God—males and females are equal under God. She describes “horizontal reciprocity” between human beings, and a vertical relationship between human beings and God (Wadud 2006). Yet one could argue for men and women’s identical relationship to God (under God) and to animals (over animals) and still claim a hierarchical relationship between men and women. Although a full consideration of human viceregency is beyond the scope of this essay—as is full consideration of the relationship between humans and non-human animals, or between non-human animals and God—it seems vital to insist on the complex ways in which all relationships of domination are mapped onto and interwoven with patriarchal social life and thought. The presumptions of the “Kindness to Animals” pamphlet distributed in some American mosques, which favor benevolent use of animals (including their slaughter for food), resonate with similar literature which advocates kindly authority of men over women within household and society (Darussalam 2002). As with much of the discourse aimed at pious believers, soft patriarchy promises to sustain relations of dominance while promoting “just” and “fair” treatment (defined, of course, in patriarchal terms).

Here, then, is where feminist ethics can prove useful. Carol Adams’s *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (2010), first published in 1990, argues for the parallels between, and intertwining of, male domination of women and human subordination and use of animals for food. Apart from (and building on) cultural resonances between the categories of “female” and “animal,” the operations necessary to justify subordination of these beings are similar. To eat meat requires one to forcibly forget the life that was taken to provide it; to uphold patriarchy requires the consistent dismissal of women’s legitimate complaints (treated as illegitimate). Adams coins the phrase “absent referent” to theorize the mental operations by which a living creature is rendered invisible and the processes that transform (animal) life into meat are dissociated from the food on the plate. Vitally, attempts by vegetarians to point out or critique the violence inherent in the process are consistently delegitimized. There is a deep parallel between the way “A feminist’s emphasis on sexual violence is judged as

hysterical; a vegetarian's emphasis on the death of animals as emotional" (Adams 2010, 125).

Adams thus offers a cogent means of thinking about connections between gender violence and violence toward animals as well as the structural and ideological conditions that make such violence on a large scale possible: in both cases, patriarchy. The "structure of the absent referent," she writes, "renders both women and animals as objects" (2010, 217). Her compelling demonstration of how mainstream U.S. advertising culture displays women as "meat" neatly illustrates female objectification—the same sexual objectification, for some thinkers, the *hijab* protects against. (For others, it enacts a singling out of female sexuality that reinforces objectification.) In either case, Adams goes one step further. She argues that "feminism is the theory and vegetarianism is part of the practice" (2010, 217). Analogous to Masri's intuitions about habituation and the development of virtue, Adams argues that "ethical vegetarianism is a theory that people enact with their bodies" (2010, 193).

4. Food and Virtue

Religious and non-religious ethicists alike must consider how to reduce large-scale industrial meat production's damage to animals and the environment and how to develop more virtuous human beings. Adams and Masri both consider human nature to be educable, though Masri stresses the futility of imposing unrealistic expectations on human beings. Some rules are too burdensome for most people to follow. To advocate complete abstention from meat misrecognizes basic human nature—at least of most human beings now living—and leads away from what one hopes to accomplish. "The writer's metabolism," he writes autobiographically, "got so used to meat that a complete change over to a vegetarian diet has now become very difficult" though "at heart, he has become a vegetarian by conviction" (2007, 56–57). I do not think that Masri means that human beings "naturally" desire or require meat but that both physical and mental habituation have, as Adams also argues, tangible effects. The attachment to meat is not merely cerebral: "There is the problem of life-long acquired taste for meat which works as a drag even on those who wish to give it up" (Masri 2007, 57). Masri does not, then, advocate reason as a sufficient motivation for complete abstention from meat but recognizes more realistic patterns of habit formation and psychologically ingrained behaviors. Although he understands human beings as essentially good, untainted by any original sin, we are forgetful, prone to lapses that taint the *fitra*, an "inborn, intuitive ability to discern between right and wrong" (Moosa 2009, 137). Repeatedly ignoring or deliberately disobeying divine commands—or the promptings of one's own better angels—twists one's natural inclination toward good and renders one

increasingly incapable of sound moral judgment. Or, as David Grumett and Rachel Muers note, “The food we eat is incorporated into our physical bodies, but our eating habits become part of us in deeper, longer-term and more complex ways” (2010, 145).

Masri’s account of Muslim vegetarianism, or abstention from meat, merges (in his mind) rationality and revelation. He combines secular and religious arguments, as already noted. Yet the use of rationality itself becomes a further proof of Muslim religious merit. Masri compares Islam with Hinduism and Judaism. In his view, although it is legitimate for a religion to require unquestioning obedience to certain divinely given rules, both Hinduism and Judaism impose overly stringent rules. Just as Hamza Yusuf insists on moderation as the proper path for the individual Muslim in dietary matters, Masri implicitly lauds moderation as the Islamic approach to religious law; Islam is the Goldilocksian mean. Though total abstention from meat might seem extreme, for Masri it escapes this fate since Muslim *motivation* for vegetarianism falls in between Western secular motivation (“practiced mostly out of compassion for animals”) and Hindu religio-doctrinal motivation, which advocates “abstinence from meat . . . based on the pantheistic philosophy or wisdom leading to non-violence or rebirth” (2007, 75). Masri marshals various tools in support of vegetarianism and uses his arguments for vegetarianism to illustrate the superiority of Islam. In this way, he echoes the triumphalist tone in which *Kindness to Animals* asks: “Are there any teachings better than Islam? It teaches us to be kind to animals before slaughtering. Our religion is great” (Darussalam 2002, 22).

5. Food and Feminism

The impulse to demonstrate the superiority of Islam hinders ethical reflection by too quickly dismissing ethical reflection emerging from other traditions of religious or humanist thought, including secular feminist philosophy, even as it tends to arrogate “scientific” evidence into the arsenal of acceptable proof. Yet it is not only concern with “Islamic” identity that is potentially troublesome. The labels “feminist” and “vegetarian” pose their own problems. Is it useful to draw a distinction between dramatic reduction in meat consumption and complete abstention? From an environmental and an animal welfare perspective, a drastic decline in meat consumption is very desirable. Other than achieving incremental reductions in direct harms to animals and the planet, what additional benefit if any does a vegetarian identity provide? Is being a vegetarian different than never eating meat? What does refusing meat mean?

Earlier, I noted that hostile Muslim responses toward vegetarianism are particularly virulent when meat abstention is advocated for reasons of animal welfare. Environmental and health arguments evoke less

defensiveness. Reducing or avoiding meat consumption without denying its permissibility has the praiseworthy result of harming fewer animals, yet it sustains ideological dominance over animals necessary to legitimate the possibility of killing them for food in contexts such as the contemporary United States where there is no legitimate nutritional need to do so. I want to suggest that this insistence on the potential for meat eating, even if one is choosing to abstain, reflects attachment to a hierarchical cosmology that subordinates women. It is similar to the model of marriage frequently advocated where husband and wife are expected to typically arrive at agreements on matters after consultation; however, the husband's authority to impose a unilateral decision remains and conditions all prior negotiations (Chaudhry 2014; Hidayatullah 2014).

Muslim patriarchy, of course, is neither timeless nor monolithic; it depends upon and differentiates itself from dominant Western patriarchal ideologies and structures. So too, Muslim food practices are inextricable—no matter how much Muslims insist on differentiation—from food norms and practices in the places where Muslims dwell. Food production and consumption are deeply interwoven with social structures; where these are unjust and power-laden, so too is eating, especially the eating of meat, “an expensive food with a complex production process that requires killing.” In such circumstances “the refusal of meat is a potent gesture” (Grumett and Muers 2010, 105).

It is not accidental but it is ironic that Muslim voices calling for reduction or elimination of meat consumption mostly come from those educated in or living in the West, where people consume far more than their fair share of the world's resources. The prominence of animal welfare concerns—though hardly dominant in North American or European cultures, which still rely on widespread, willful obliviousness toward gross abuses of animals in meat, egg, and dairy production—is greater than that in Muslim-majority nations, where factory farming and related abuses are less common.

Though one finds instances of attention to animal welfare, animal suffering, and abstention from meat among premodern Muslims, such precedent does not lead directly to contemporary rejections of meat. Rather, new ideas about animals and ecology change how contemporary believers construct religio-ethical norms. As Katherine Perlo argues in her study of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist texts and history, rather than religion determining people's ideas about animals, “the influence runs, to a considerable degree, the other way round” (Perlo 2009, 1). That is to say, twenty-first-century notions about animals, the environment, and food lead a handful of Muslim thinkers to consider vegetarianism from a substantially modern perspective and then to read it back into foundational religious sources.

Contemporary Muslims ought to acknowledge and embrace this reality. Just as secular thinkers miss religion's potential to contribute to genuine dialogue about crucial ethical issues (Singer 1990, 1993, 1995; Singer and Mason 2007; Camosy 2012), Muslim thinkers are often equally reluctant to engage constructively with non-religious philosophers and humanists. Tariq Ramadan (2009) has argued for the need for Muslim "text scholars" (that is, those trained in the religious sciences) to work with "context scholars" (scientists and social scientists who know the contemporary world). This is important. As Grumett and Muers note,

A good theological ethics, and an ethical theology, needs to draw on all available evidence about the effects of the practices it describes or advocates. It matters whether Christian food practices lead to starvation or bodily health, destruction of local and global habitats, or environmental sustainability; wealth concentration or redistribution; the suffering of non-human animals or their flourishing. (2010, 144–45)

Yet empirical information about the "effects" of food practices leaves aside what I am arguing is a useful engagement with humanistic and ethical discourses from outside Islam. Ramadan seems to be suggesting that scientific and social scientific discourses are neutral and therefore compatible with Muslim legal-theological thought, while presuming that other religious and ethical discourses would somehow taint Muslim reflection.

In a focus on the exclusively empirical, much is lost. Jonathan Burt observes the changing rationales presented by opponents and proponents of Jewish and Muslim slaughter methods:

In moving between scientific, secular humanitarian, and moral/religious arguments to ensure a sense of minimum suffering, the emphasis in these arguments becomes centered on time . . . the notion of the humane maps neatly onto a logic of efficiency, and, in its use of scientific data to justify its own humaneness, religious slaughter becomes likewise complicit with such a logic. (Burt 2006, 137)

He argues, suggestively, that willingness on the part of religious authorities to turn to scientific language "suggests . . . a flexibility and a willingness not to restrict the argument to one of faith" and notes that "there is no reason, therefore, why the issue of the mass slaughter of animals on an almost uncountable scale might not likewise be debated from within religious traditions themselves" (2006, 139). Burt's point that some thinkers are willing to adopt non-religious arguments for vegetarianism (as Masri does) does not address their tendency to render them in the key of Islam, rather than acknowledge borrowing from humanistic traditions.

Secular feminism offers much as a conversation partner. Muslim feminist thought can borrow from and amplify insights from other feminist

traditions about women's experiences as a source of knowledge. Wadud has written about women's embodied experiences: becoming a mother, in particular (Wadud 2006). Other Muslim women have written about female experiences of vulnerability and injustice. It is with these experiences that women approach texts (Barlas 2002), interpreting them differently than men have. Female and feminist ethicists have argued that moral intuitions and emotions, including compassion, are also relevant (Midgley 1983; Donovan 2006). One must be cautious not to degenerate into stereotypes of male rationality and female emotionality—which arise from and contribute to the linkage of female with animal and the devaluation of both in contrast to the male and human—but it is worth highlighting the feminist ethical discourse on sympathy and care, and its links with female experiences of birthing and caregiving (Wadud 2006). There are meaningful overlaps between the arguments of thinkers like Josephine Donovan (2006) and the sentiments of myriad religious figures through the centuries. Mercy, pity, sadness, and grief are meaningful emotions, as is anger. The importance of caring arises in Muslim religious texts. Affective responses are meaningful religiously; a comparison and dialogue with non-Muslim thinkers on these topics can deepen and clarify what religious resources are to be brought to bear (Cavell 2009; Donovan 2006; Coetzee and Gutmann 2001; Crowley 2005).

I am arguing not just that Muslims ought to bring data and ideas and approaches from outside the Muslim tradition into deliberations, something we have always done, but that we ought to acknowledge what we are doing. Rather than justify an approach, for instance to vegetarianism, as an obvious extension of religious thought, with this acknowledgment we can interrogate methodologies and presuppositions critically, assessing, accepting, and rejecting in keeping with core beliefs.

In my view, the search for purity is a dead end. Arguments that stress the "Islamic" nature of meat abstention or vegetarianism are pulling in the wrong direction, just like arguments that stress "Islamic" rights, roles, or rules for women (or men). It is better to acknowledge compatibility and overlap than to try to shoehorn considerations that emerge from contemporary circumstances into restrictively "Islamic" ways of talking and thinking about ethics. That does not mean appeal to religious precedent is always merely a veneer. Advocating reduced meat consumption as part of constructing a habitually virtuous self, and a more just society, makes sense. Muslims can draw on religious resources to encourage self-scrutiny and moderate consumption, to avoid extreme self-denial, to evince concerns about refusing hospitality, and to guard against setting oneself up as morally superior to others.

And yet identifying with and advocating vegetarianism rather than simple reduction of meat consumption also has a place, at least among Muslims living in the West. Vegetarianism does not automatically mean

one's consumption patterns will be ecologically sound or economically just. But because production and consumption of meat in industrialized Western nations is so pervasively unjust and harmful, calling oneself a vegetarian is worthwhile. It may not highlight the statement "I am a Muslim" but it can—and ought to—call attention to a different facet of one's identity: "I stand in opposition to dominant relations of injustice." The label, then, is strategic: compatible with but not intended to replace a religious identifier.

The term feminist can serve a similar function. Some Muslim women committed to female equality and gender justice have argued forcefully that the label feminist is inappropriate, counterproductive, or simply not meaningful to them. As Asma Barlas, like Christian womanist and *mujerista* scholars, points out, "feminism" carries racial and colonialist overtones (Barlas 2008). Barlas chooses to highlight her identity as a Muslim and the rootedness of her ideas about gender in her Muslim beliefs (Barlas 2002). It is legitimate to ask whether one separates oneself from a community by adopting the label feminist or the label vegetarian (or even feminist-vegetarian). One confronts the problem of competing identities, loyalties, or norms. Each believer will need to assess whether potential divisiveness is worth the benefits that come with adopting an identity term such as vegetarian.

Labels can serve as a starting point for dialogue between parties who share common goals but have different basic principles and assumptions about God, human beings (male and female), and animals, and the relations between them. Such dialogue ideally promotes critical reflection and refinement of presuppositions and arguments. Rather than solving large scale problems in the abstract, with models for dialogue that remain at a conceptual level, taking smaller steps and using concrete cases can move such conversations forward; meat-eating is an urgent case not only due to its impact on the environment, on animals, and on the human beings who participate in its infrastructure but also, as I have argued here, because of its role in shoring up patriarchy. Engaging with and drawing lessons from non-Muslim ethical traditions is not only acceptable but vital for flexible and effective Muslim ethical thinking about food and other topics. Although this boundary-blurring will be, like vegetarianism itself, suspect to some, it offers a necessary corrective to myopic claims that contemporary Muslim ethical reflection on meat-eating arises necessarily out of the Islamic tradition itself as an authentic and self-contained whole (Perlo 2009, 109). Such a view, to my mind, shortsightedly puts the stress on *Islamic* rather than on *ethics*.⁵

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