

## Is Vegetarianism Un-Islamic?

*Richard C. Foltz\**

All your life you have been drinking the blood and eating the flesh of animals without realizing what you have been doing. You love flesh and enjoy murder. If you had any conscience or any sense of justice, if you were born as a true human being, you would think about this. God is looking at me and you. Tomorrow his truth and his justice will inquire into this. You must realize this.

M. R. Bawa Muhaiyadeen, *Come to the Secret Garden: Sufi Tales of Wisdom* (Philadelphia: Fellowship Press, 1985), 26.

An estimated 20 percent of the world's population—over one billion people—claims Muslim identity. Though Muslims now inhabit every corner of the globe and live in societies as diverse as those of West Africa, Central Asia, the Philippines, and the United States, one social factor that they all seem to share is the eating of meat. Ethical questions surrounding the use of animals for food are not raised in the legal literature of classical Islam, and, even today, any serious discourse on the viability of an “Islamic” vegetarianism is difficult to find.

The Islamic scholar Mawil Izzi Dien, in his recent book *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam*, goes so far as to assert the following:

According to Islamic Law there are no grounds upon which one can argue that animals should not be killed for food. The Islamic legal opinion on this issue is based on clear Qur'anic verses. Muslims are not only prohibited from eating certain food, but also may not choose to prohibit themselves food that is allowed by Islam. Accordingly

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vegetarianism is not permitted unless on grounds such as unavailability or medical necessity. Vegetarianism is not allowed under the pretext of giving priority to the interest of animals because such decisions are God's prerogative.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, according to Izzi Dien, not only is there no such thing as Islamic vegetarianism, to be a vegetarian is un-Islamic! Such a blanket dismissal of the very possibility of an Islamic vegetarianism, however, is not warranted. Throughout history, numerous Muslims have practiced vegetarianism, in many cases for reasons of piety. Since early times, many South Asian Sufis, for example, have been vegetarian, including many members of the Chishti order, the Suhrawardi saint Hamid al-din Nagori, and others.<sup>2</sup> Though some have attributed this to Hindu or Buddhist influence, among the Sufis of North Africa and the Ottoman world, saints were often believed to take animal form, and vegetarian anecdotes were widely told.<sup>3</sup> An early female Sufi, Zaynab, is said to have been persecuted for her refusal to eat meat.<sup>4</sup>

Today, a growing number of Muslims throughout the world are practicing vegetarian lifestyles, not only in the West but in traditional Islamic environments as well. The animal rights organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has launched, at the suggestion of its Muslim members, a website on Islam and vegetarianism.<sup>5</sup> In Turkey, which has several national vegetarian organizations, an old Istanbul neighborhood known as "Non-meat-eater" (*Etyemeç*) derives its name from the vegetarian practices of a

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<sup>1</sup>Mawil Izzi Dien, *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam* (Cambridge, England: Lutterworth, 2000), 146.

<sup>2</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 348, 358.

<sup>3</sup>Emile Dermenghem, *La culte des saints dans l'Islam Maghrebien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 97-101.

<sup>4</sup>Margaret Smith, *The Way of the Mystics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 154-162.

<sup>5</sup>[www.islamveg.com](http://www.islamveg.com).

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Sufi sect.<sup>6</sup> Iran has at least one registered vegetarian society, the Sana and Shafa Vegetarians' Association, based in Tehran.<sup>7</sup>

### **An Anthropocentric Tradition**

Throughout the Qur'an's fourteen-hundred-year history, Muslim commentators on the Islamic Scripture have been both forthright and unapologetic in asserting an anthropocentric worldview. "Verily," the Qur'an states, "we create man in the best conformation" (95:4).<sup>8</sup> Humanity is described in the Qur'an as the "vicegerent" (*khalifah*) of God on earth (2:30; 6:165; 35:39), entrusted with the stewardship of maintaining the balance and order of Creation.

The Qur'an has usually been read as allowing the eating of meat, as in verse 5:1 which reads:

O you who have attained to faith! Be true to your covenants! Lawful to you is [the flesh of] every beast that feeds on plants, save what is mentioned to you [hereinafter]: but you are not allowed to hunt while you are in a state of pilgrimage. Behold, God ordains in accordance with his will.

A similar permission has been perceived in 6:145:

Say: "In all that has been revealed unto me, I do not find anything forbidden to eat, if one wants to eat thereof, unless it be carrion, or blood poured forth, or the flesh of swine—for that, behold, is loathsome—or a sinful offering over which any name other than God's has been invoked. But if one is driven by necessity—neither coveting it nor exceeding his immediate need—then [know that], behold, thy Sustainer is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace."

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<sup>6</sup>Ibrahim Tütüncüoğlu, "The Past and Current Situation of Vegetarianism in Turkey," *European Vegetarian Union News*, (1998), 4 and (1999), 1: online version: [www.ivu.org/evu/English/news/index.html](http://www.ivu.org/evu/English/news/index.html).

<sup>7</sup>Baquer Namazi, "Environmental NGOs," *Situational Analysis of NGOs in Iran* (Tehran: United Nations Development Programme, 2000), appendix.

<sup>8</sup>Qur'anic citations are given from Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980).

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According to the Qur'an, then, meat eating might seem to be, except under specified conditions, pleasing to God. Since it is incumbent upon Muslims to live in a way that is pleasing to God in every detail, not to eat meat if God wishes us to would constitute an act of infidelity.

Islam's historical tensions with Buddhism (and, in India, with Hinduism), seen as an idol-worshipping religion, provide a further "guilt by association" argument against vegetarianism. The seventh/thirteenth century legal scholar 'Izz ad-Din b. 'Abd as-Salam, in his *Qawa'id al-Abkam fi Masalih al-Anam*, observes:

The unbeliever who prohibits the slaughtering of an animal [for no reason but] to achieve the interest of the animal is incorrect because in so doing he gives preference to a lower, *kehasis*, animal over a higher, *nafis*, animal.<sup>9</sup>

An earlier traditional jurist, Ibn Hazm (d. 456/1062), provides an argument against moral consideration being extended to animals that is later echoed by those heard in nineteenth-century England when he writes that "the laws of Allah are only applicable to those who possess the ability to speak and can understand them."<sup>10</sup> The faculty of speech has long been proposed as a major criterion of human uniqueness, and some would make this argument even today. But such reasoning can, in light of our improved understanding of animal communication, be turned on its head; it could actually be used in *support* of making animals morally considerable. Even in the Qur'an, one finds a verse that seems to run counter to Ibn Hazm's claim: "And [in this insight] Solomon was [truly] David's heir; and he would say: 'O you people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given [in abundance] of all [good] things: this, behold, is indeed a manifest favour [from God]!" (27:16). Of course, it remains unclear to most humans what laws Allah may have established for

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<sup>9</sup>'Izz ad-Din b. 'Abd as-Salam, *Qawa'id al-Abkam fi Masalih al-Anam*, cited in Izzidien, 146.

<sup>10</sup>Ibn Hazm, *Al-Fisal fi l-Milal wa l-Ahwa' wa n-Nihal*, 5 vols. (Cairo: [Available from] Muhammad 'Ali Subayh, 1964), 1:69.

other species and how they may or may not differ from those laid down for humans.

### **Compassion for Animals**

Within the admitted hierarchy of Creation in which human beings occupy the highest rank, the Qur'an and the Sunnah nevertheless strongly enjoin Muslims to treat animals with compassion and not to abuse them. The Qur'an states that all creation praises God, even if this praise is not expressed in human language (17:44). The Qur'an further states: "There is not an animal in the earth, nor a flying creature on two wings, but they are communities like unto you" (6:38). Thus, when in the nature of things (*fitrah*), the Muslim must kill in order to survive, Muhammad called for compassion: "If you kill, kill well, and if you slaughter, slaughter well. Let each of you sharpen his blade and let him spare suffering to the animal he slaughters."<sup>11</sup> He is reported to have said on another occasion, "For [charity shown to] each creature which has a wet heart [i.e., is alive], there is a reward." He opposed recreational hunting, saying that "whoever shoots at a living creature for sport is cursed." In another *hadith*, the Prophet is said to have reprimanded some men who were sitting idly on their camels in the marketplace, saying, "Either ride them or leave them alone." He is also reported to have said, "There is no man who kills [even] a sparrow or anything smaller, without its deserving it, but Allah will question him about it [on the Day of Judgement]," and, "Whoever is kind to the creatures of God, is kind to himself."<sup>12</sup>

Classical Islamic law prescribes that domestic animals should not be overburdened or otherwise mistreated or put at risk, that their young should not be killed in their sight, that they should be given adequate shelter and rest, and that males and females should be allowed to be together during mating season. The legal category of water rights extends to animals through the law of "the right of

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<sup>11</sup>*Sahih Muslim*, 2/11, "Slaying," 10:739.

<sup>12</sup>Cited in B. A. Masri, *Islamic Concern for Animals* (Petersfield, United Kingdom: The Athene Trust), 1987, 4.

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thirst” (*haqq ash-shurb*).<sup>13</sup> The *Sahih Bukhari* mentions two contrasting stories with particular relevance to the treatment of animals. In one, a woman is condemned to hell because she has mistreated a cat; in another, a sinner is saved by the grace of Allah after he gives water to a dog dying of thirst. In the observation of G. H. Bousquet, Islam thus “condemns to hell those who mistreat animals, and . . . more importantly, accords extraordinary grace to those who do them good.”<sup>14</sup>

Possibly the richest material that Muslim civilization has produced in regard to animal rights is a tenth-century treatise entitled *The Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn* by an anonymous group of philosophers who called themselves the *Ikhwan as-Safa*, or “Pure Brethren.” In this unusual work, representatives from the animal kingdom bring a court case against the human race whom they accuse of abusing their position. The animals point out that before the creation of man, they roamed the earth in peace and harmony, what might be called in contemporary language “natural balance”:

We were fully occupied in caring for our broods and rearing our young with all the good food and water God had allotted us, secure and unmolested in our own lands. Night and day we praised and sanctified God, and God alone.

Ages passed and God created Adam, father of mankind, and made him his viceregent on earth. His offspring reproduced, and his seed multiplied. They spread over the earth—land and sea, mountain and plain. Men encroached on our ancestral lands. They captured sheep, cows, horses, mules, and asses from among us and enslaved them, subjecting them to the exhausting toil and drudgery of hauling, being ridden, plowing, drawing water, and turning mills. They forced us to these things under duress, with beatings, bludgeonings, and every kind of torture and chastisement our whole lives long. Some of us fled to

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<sup>13</sup>James L. Wescoat, Jr., “The ‘Right of Thirst’ for Animals in Islamic Law: A Comparative Approach,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13 (1995), 6:637-654.

<sup>14</sup>G. H. Bousquet, “Des animaux et de leur traitement selon le Judaïsme, le Christianisme et l’Islam,” *Studia Islamica* 9 (1958), 1:41. These *hadiths* are retold in a recent book for Muslim children, *Love All Creatures* by M. S. Kayani (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1997 [1981]).

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deserts, wastelands, or mountaintops, but the Adamites pressed after us, hunting us with every kind of wile and device. Whoever fell into their hands was yoked, haltered, and fettered. They slaughtered and flayed him, ripped open his belly, cut off his limbs and broke his bones, tore out his eyes; plucked his feathers or sheared off his hair or fleece, and put him onto the fire to be cooked, or on the spit to be roasted, or subjected him to even more dire tortures, whose full extent is beyond description. Despite these cruelties, these sons of Adam are not through with us but must claim that this is their inviolable right, that they are our masters and we are their slaves, deeming any of us who escapes a fugitive, rebel, shirker of duty—all with no proof or explanation beyond main force.<sup>15</sup>

The Brethren's view of the natural world is all the more striking for its exceptionality in the context of fourth/tenth-century Muslim society. They were a radical group, as indicated by their choice to remain anonymous, and, in subsequent centuries, only the heterodox Sevener-Shi'i or Isma'ili sect, identified today with the Aga Khan, adopted their writings as authoritative. Yet it may be that, in regard to animal rights, the Pure Brethren were (like St. Francis in Catholicism) simply ahead of their time and, as such, may have more to teach us in the twenty-first century than they did to Muslims of their own era.

At least one contemporary Islamic legal scholar has taken issue with the dominant anthropocentric view of animal rights. In the Preface to his book *Islamic Concern for Animals*, the late B. A. Masri (formerly imam of the Shah Jehan mosque in Woking, England) states his opinion that "life on this earth is so intertwined as an homogeneous unit that it cannot be disentangled for the melioration of one species at the expense of the other."<sup>16</sup> Masri understands the superiority of the human species to consist only in its spiritual volition (*taqwa*), that is, its capacity to make moral choices. Without this distinction, Masri believes, the differences between humans and other animal species are superficial.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Lenn Evan Goodman, trans., *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn* (Boston: Twayne, 1978), 5-6.

<sup>16</sup>Masri, *Islamic Concern for Animals*, vii.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

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In fact, animals, Masri notes, can even be humanity's teachers. 'Ali, the Prophet's nephew and son-in-law, is reported to have said, "Be like a bee; anything he eats is clean, anything he drops is sweet and any branch he sits upon does not break." Despite all this, however, Masri stops short of discussing the option of vegetarianism. His concern is with eliminating the kinds of unnecessary cruelty and exploitation of animals that he sees as prevalent in modern society, such as laboratory testing.<sup>18</sup> He writes:

To kill animals to satisfy the human thirst for inessentials is a contradiction in terms within the Islamic tradition. Think of the millions of animals killed, in the name of commercial enterprises, in order to supply a complacent public with trinkets and products they do not really need. And why? Because we are too lazy or too self-indulgent to find substitutes.<sup>19</sup>

The received dogma that entire species of animals exist primarily for us to eat, meanwhile, escapes Masri's critique more or less intact. It is curious that, in condemning the killing of animals for "inessentials," Masri fails to include meat-eating as the one inessential use for which more animals are killed than any other. He mentions all manner of alternatives to the abuse of animals for so-called scientific purposes, without ever acknowledging, much less exploring, the many healthful alternatives to a meat-based diet. Only in the last sentence of a lengthy discussion on the cruelties of factory-farming does Masri (himself a vegetarian) suggest, "Some may decide that the products of intensive factory farms are not suitable, both from the religious and the health point of view, and seek more naturally produced eggs and meat; or give up eating meat altogether."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>B. A. Masri, "Animal Experimentation: The Muslim Viewpoint," in Tom Regan, ed., *Animal Sacrifices: Religious Perspectives on the Use of Animals in Science*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 171-197.

<sup>19</sup>Masri, *Islamic Concern for Animals*, 17.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 28. Near the end of his treatise, Masri finally raises the question of "why Islam, with all its concern for animals, has allowed its followers to consume their meat and did not ask them to become vegetarian, like some other religions" (31). He does not follow up with an answer, however, putting it off to a proposed but

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The late Sri Lankan Sufi teacher, M. R. Bawa Muhaiyadeen, puts the matter somewhat more strongly. “My children,” he writes, “we must be aware of everything we do. All young animals have love and compassion. And if we remember that every creation was young once, we will never kill another life. We will not harm or attack any living creature.”<sup>21</sup>

Of course, ethical concern for the rights of animals does not necessarily lead to vegetarianism, nor is it the only possible justification for it. Another major motivation is human health. Especially among Sufis, austerities aimed at purifying the body have sometimes entailed abstention from animal flesh. The Indian saint Shaykh Nasir ad-Din Mahmud (d. 757/1356), known as “The Lamp of Delhi,” ate plain rice, or rice with lentils (a mixture we now know to be protein-complementary!), or else bread and sometimes melons and sweets.<sup>22</sup> Such practices were not limited to the Indian environment. Even Hellenistically influenced Sufis have sometimes shunned meat-eating as nourishing the “animal soul” or *nafs* (also called “the lower self”). Muhyi ad-Din ibn ‘Arabi, in his *Risalat al-Anwar*, admonishes the reader to “[b]e careful of your diet. It is better if your food be nourishing but devoid of animal fat.”<sup>23</sup> In his commentary on this passage, ‘Abd al-Karim ibn Ibrahim al-Jili notes that this is “because animal fat strengthens animality, and its principles will dominate spiritual principles.”<sup>24</sup>

Of course, mainstream Islam has never encouraged asceticism in the way many Sufi traditions have. But in light of present-day scientific perspectives on nutritional health, it is clear that Muslims can enjoy physical as well as spiritual benefits from a vegetarian diet.

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apparently never completed second volume of his work. (Masri passed away in 1993.)

<sup>21</sup>M. R. Bawa Muhaiyadeen, 28.

<sup>22</sup>Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Nasir-u'd-din Chiragh-i-Delhi* (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat, 1991), 57, citing Sayyid Muhammad Gisu Daraz, *Jawami' al-Kalim*, 162. I am grateful to Emil Ansarov for alerting me to this and the following two references.

<sup>23</sup>Muhyi ad-Din ibn ‘Arabi, *Risalat al-Anwar*, trans. Rabia Terri Harris, *Journey to the Lord of Power* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions International, 1989 [1981]), 31.

<sup>24</sup>‘Abd al-Karim ibn Ibrahim al-Jili, *Isfar ‘an Risalat al-Anwar*, in Harris, 81.

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Both aspects would seem to be fully compatible with established Islamic principles of animal rights.

### **Social Justice in Islam**

The Prophet Muhammad was one of history's great social reformers. He lived at a time of social change and upheaval in western Arabia, a time when some families were enjoying untold wealth while others suffered in deprivation. Consequently, social justice is one of the major themes of the Qur'an.<sup>25</sup> Muhammad's insistent preaching against the hypocrisy and selfishness of Mecca's wealthy elite is certainly a major factor accounting for the persecution suffered by the early Muslim community.

In most societies today, meat-eating remains by and large a privilege of the wealthy. This is a privilege that comes at a cost not only to the animals who are slaughtered for the tables of the rich, but also in the form of chronic hunger for 20 percent of the world's human population, a disproportionate number of whom are Muslims. Even while so many human beings go permanently malnourished, more than half of all land under cultivation is given over to crops destined for livestock consumption. As contemporary philosopher Peter Singer, guru of the Animal Liberation movement, puts it, "The raising of animals for food by the methods used in the industrial nations does not contribute to the solution of the hunger problem. On the contrary, it aggravates it enormously."<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting that Middle Eastern countries now import much of their meat from places such as New Zealand and that factory-farming (in which animal remains are typically fed to other animals) presents considerable difficulties in verifying whether meat is *halal*.

A growing body of contemporary literature asserts that Islam contains strong directives about environmental stewardship, centering on the notion that Allah has appointed humans as

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<sup>25</sup>See, for example, Sayyid Qutb, *Social Justice in Islam*, trans. William E. Shepard, *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

<sup>26</sup>Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Random House, 1975), 180.

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vicegerents (*khulafa'*) over Creation.<sup>27</sup> This discussion has so far failed, however, to emphasize connections between issues of environmental degradation and meat-eating. Among the many other harmful effects of industrial-scale meat production are the clearing of tropical forests for grazing land, the pollution of water supplies by factory farms, and the feeding of hormones and antibiotics to livestock, which then adversely affect human consumers.

While the fact remains that a few small human societies (mainly pastoral groups in arid climates) are still ecologically constrained to diets based on animal products,<sup>28</sup> for the vast majority of Muslims, the eating of meat is not only unnecessary but is also directly responsible for causing grave ecological and social harm, as well as being less healthful than a balanced vegetarian regime. Given these considerations, the absence of a serious contemporary Islamic discourse on the benefits of vegetarianism is nothing less than astonishing.

### **To Kill or Not to Kill?**

One issue that many Muslims connect with meat-eating is the customary sacrifice performed once a year on the occasion of 'Eid al-Adha, commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. On this day, Muslims traditionally slaughter an animal they can afford, from a sheep to a camel, and distribute the meat to the poor as an act of charity. However, twice during the 1990s, King Hassan

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<sup>27</sup>See, besides Izzi Dien, Akhtaruddin Ahmad, *Islam and the Environmental Crisis* (London: Ta-ha Publishers, 1997); Abou Bakr Ahmed Ba Kader et al., eds., *Islamic Principles for the Conservation of the Natural Environment* (Gland, Switzerland: International Union for the Conservation of the Natural Environment, 1983); S. Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (Chicago: Kazi, 2000 [1967]); Iqtidar H. Zaidi, "On the Ethics of Man's Interaction with the Environment: An Islamic Approach" *Environmental Ethics* 3 (1981), 1:35-47; the essays in Harfiya Abdel Haleem, ed., *Islam and the Environment* (London: Ta-ha Publishers, 1998); Fazlun Khalid and Joanne O'Brien, eds., *Islam and Ecology* (New York: Cassell, 1992); and my "Is There an Islamic Environmentalism?" *Environmental Ethics* 22 (2000), 1:63-72.

<sup>28</sup>S. Hossein Nasr, plenary address, Islam and Ecology conference, Harvard University, 8 May 1998.

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of Morocco banned this slaughter for economic reasons, citing the well-being of his Muslim subjects.

In any event, ritual slaughter in Islam is merely customary, and not prescribed by law.<sup>29</sup> In a recent essay, Muslim publisher Shahid ‘Ali Muttaqi argues against the necessity of performing the traditional sacrifice on the occasion of Eid al-Adha. Contrasting Islam with Judaism and Christianity, he points out that “the notion of ‘vicarious atonement for sin’ is nowhere to be found in the Qur’an. Neither is the idea of gaining favor by offering the life of another to God. All that is demanded as a sacrifice is one’s personal willingness to submit one’s ego and individual will to Allah.”<sup>30</sup> Muttaqi concludes that the existence of animal sacrifice in Islamic custom derives from the norms and conditions of pre-Islamic Arab society, and not from Islam itself:

Animals are mentioned in the Qur’an in relation to sacrifice only because in that time, place, and circumstance, animals were the means of survival. In those desert lands, humans were intricately tied up in the natural cycle, and as a part of that, they killed and were killed like every other species of that area. Islam offered conditions to regulate life in that time and place, ensuring the best possible treatment for all under those circumstances, while at the same time broadening people’s understanding of life to include a spiritual dimension and a respect for all life as a part of a unified whole. But let us not assume for a minute that we are forever stuck in those circumstances, or that the act of eating meat, or killing an animal is what makes one a Muslim.<sup>31</sup>

Even if one is to accord a cultural (as opposed to strictly religious) value to practices such as the Eid al-Adha sacrifice, it may be noted that a number of religious traditions, including Judaism, Vedism, and others, historically evolved metaphorical substitutions for blood sacrifice; it is therefore not inconceivable that such a development could occur in the future within Islam.

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<sup>29</sup>Philip J. Stewart, “Islamic Law as a Factor in Grazing Management: the Pilgrimage Sacrifice,” in *Proceedings of the First International Rangeland Congress* (Denver, Colorado: Society for Range Management, 1978), 119-20.

<sup>30</sup>Shahid ‘Ali Muttaqi, “The Sacrifice of ‘Eid al-Adha’: An Islamic Perspective Against Animal Sacrifice” ([www.islamveg.com/sacri.html](http://www.islamveg.com/sacri.html)), 2.

<sup>31</sup>Muttaqi, 5.

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The Qur'an and Sunnah have been shown to enjoin Muslims to treat animals with compassion. This is clearly reflected in the established procedure for *halal* slaughter. It should be obvious, however, that not slaughtering the animal at all would be even more compassionate. As strong as the theme of compassion in Islam is demonstrated to be, the line allowing for "humane" killing seems arbitrarily drawn. As Oliver Goldsmith remarked in regard to certain members of eighteenth-century English society, "They pity, and they eat the objects of their compassion."<sup>32</sup> Peter Singer suggests that "practically and psychologically it is impossible to be consistent in one's concern for nonhuman animals while continuing to dine on them."<sup>33</sup> Since, unlike in early times, most Muslims today are not constrained to eat meat for their survival, 'Ali Muttaqi enjoins Muslims to "cease to do so merely for the satisfaction of ravenous cravings which are produced by nothing more than our *nafs* ("lower self")."<sup>34</sup>

It is often remarked, especially by hunters, that since the natural predators of so many animals have been suffering dramatically declining numbers, prey species are in many places proliferating beyond control and should, therefore, be hunted by humans. One recent case in India concerned the *nilgai*, or "blue cow." With the disappearance of tigers, the *nilgai* population has exploded, but Hindus will not allow the species to be hunted because of its name. In desperation, some Indian Muslims have resorted to the cry, "For God's sake, let's not call it a blue cow. Let's call it a blue bull, and kill it!"<sup>35</sup>

What this sort of argument overlooks, of course, is that population imbalances such as that of the *nilgai* have been brought on by gross human alterations of habitats, such as those of predators like the tiger. The reasoning, then, is one of punishing the victim. Is this, we may ask, the approach of a conscientious *kehalifah*?

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<sup>32</sup>Oliver Goldsmith, "The Citizen of the World," in *Collected Works*, 5 vols., ed. A. Friedman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 2:60.

<sup>33</sup>Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 172.

<sup>34</sup>Muttaqi, 6.

<sup>35</sup>Related by Muhammad Aslam Parvaiz at the Islam and Ecology conference, Harvard University, 8 May 1998.

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A more sympathetic example can be found in a story about the eighth-century female Muslim mystic Rabi'ah of Basrah. According to the medieval hagiography of Farid ad-Din 'Attar:

It is related that one day Rabi'a had gone up on a mountain. Wild goats and gazelles gathered around, gazing upon her. Suddenly, Hasan Basri [another well-known early Muslim mystic] appeared. All the animals shied away. When Hasan saw that, he was perplexed and said, "Rabi'a, why do they shy away from me when they were so intimate with you?" Rabi'a said, "What did you eat today?"  
"Soup."  
"You ate their lard. How would they not shy away from you?"<sup>36</sup>

'Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri (d. 465/1074) tells a similar story about Ibrahim ibn Adham, who, it is said, liked to go hunting. One day, as he was pursuing an antelope, he heard a voice asking him, "O Ibrahim, is it for this that We have created you?" Immediately, he got down from his horse, gave his fine clothes to a shepherd in exchange for a wool tunic, and assumed the life of a wandering dervish.<sup>37</sup>

### Food for Thought

Islam has a long tradition of interpreting (*ijtihad*) divine revelation to meet the needs and conditions of the present age. Factory farms did not exist in seventh-century Arabia, nor were large percentages of arable land being used for fodder crops in preference to food for humans while 20 percent of the world's population went chronically malnourished. Traditional Arab pastoralists needed animal products in order to survive, yet their practices did not result in the destruction of entire ecosystems. For the most part, the early community lacked the vast dietary alternatives available to most Muslims today, and, unlike us, they were unaware of the connections between meat-eating and heart disease, colon cancer, obesity, and other maladies.

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<sup>36</sup>Farid ad-Din 'Attar, *Tazkirat al-Awliya*, trans. Paul Losensky and Michael Sells, in Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1996), 160.

<sup>37</sup>Qushayri, cited in Dermenghem, 100.

Times have changed. But, for a contemporary Islamic legal scholar to make a case for vegetarianism, the Qur'an-based objections raised by Izzi Dien at the beginning of this article would have to be addressed. I am not a qualified legal scholar, so the following brief attempt to suggest how this task might be approached is offered only for purposes of initiating discussion. The verse cited above—"The beast of cattle is made lawful unto you [for food]" (5:1)—might be compared with other verses (16:5, 66; 40:79), where the wording is equally general. The theme common to these verses is that of deriving sustenance; in 16:66, milk is explicitly mentioned, whereas 40:79 begins, "It is Allah who provided for you all manner of livestock, that you may ride on some of them and from some of them you may derive your food."

The gloss "flesh of" in verse 5:1 is merely inserted into English translations, being absent in the original Arabic. Moreover, the prohibition of hunting while on pilgrimage would seem to indicate that it is an impure act, which might best be refrained from altogether. Likewise, in interpreting the permission in 6:145, which extends even to forbidden meat "if one is driven by necessity," one might choose to generalize the condition of dire need to meat-eating in general.

A vegetarian interpretation of these and other Qur'anic verses will not be without problems. In several verses, the eating of meat is mentioned as one of the pleasures of paradise (52:22; 56:21).<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, it would appear that, in arguments such as Izzi Dien's, we have the perspective of meat-eating Muslims seeking the kind of interpretation that will support a carnivorous status quo. Muslims committed to ethical vegetarianism, therefore, might interpret the Qur'an to the opposite end with equal success.

Given all these considerations, it is not inconceivable that at some point in the future, Muslim legal scholars will find a basis in the Qur'an and Sunnah for encouraging vegetarianism. Indeed, in cases where abstention from meat does not endanger the welfare of

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<sup>38</sup>I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out these verses to me. Of course, likening meat to other heavenly pleasures forbidden on earth could be compatible with some, though not all, arguments for vegetarianism.

## Studies in Contemporary Islam

Muslims, perhaps some will even issue *fatwas* (“legal opinions”) classifying meat-eating as *makruh* (the category of discouraged acts whose commission brings no punishment but abstention from which brings reward). This is an admittedly extreme speculation, yet, in light of the extreme injustices connected with meat-eating in the contemporary world, both toward animals and toward human beings, it is perhaps not an entirely outlandish one. That is for the jurists to discuss. In any event, at the very least, one can hope to hear more in the way of Islamic critique of factory-farming as being incompatible with the clearly established Islamic principles of compassion toward animals.<sup>39</sup>

It cannot be denied that, since the inception of Islamic civilization fourteen centuries ago, a dietary norm of meat-eating has gone largely unquestioned by Muslims, who have interpreted the traditional sources in ways that have affirmed a carnivorous diet. But from the standpoints of human health, social justice, ecological stewardship, and compassion toward nonhuman creation, it can be seen that a vegetarian lifestyle may in fact be preferable for Muslims. Such a lifestyle is not incompatible with the teachings of the Islamic tradition, which can actually be read in ways that fully support vegetarianism.

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<sup>39</sup>My anonymous reviewer, citing the Malikite jurist Shatibi’s concept of *maslahah* (that is, a ruling for the common good that is compatible with the *Shari’ah*, even though it is not found in it explicitly), suggests the possibility of an approach whereby “compassion, as one of the overarching principles of Islamic religion, takes precedence over specific legal prescriptions.”