

We need to talk about food!

Maria Nita considers some guiding Christian principles



Food growing in Tra Que Village, Vietnam

Photo credit: Rod Long on Unsplash

In his letter to the church in Rome, St Paul wrote decisively on the subject of food. In regard to Jewish religious laws which forbade the eating of certain foods, he stressed the freedom that the Christian could now enjoy. For example:

“The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.... Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for ourselves alone...” (Romans 14:3, 6, 7a)

“If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.” (Romans 14:15)

“All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.” (Romans 14:20)

As John Barclay, Professor of Divinity at Durham University has concluded, we should not understand by this that

Christian teaching on food is lax or irrelevant to determining what a sustainable diet should be. He draws on Paul’s letters to identify two key Christian principles that govern food consumption: “that food can only be eaten in an orientation of thanksgiving to God, and that care must be taken concerning the effects of eating on others.” These principles are both strong and flexible and can be adapted to different contexts. If by consuming food we are hurting other fellow humans, Barclay claims – and I would add fellow non-humans here as well – we need to abstain from it. This leads to the logical conclusion that, given that global livestock production is damaging the planet, Christians have a responsibility to “reduce greatly, or even cease, their consumption of meat”.¹

Climate campaigners are also calling on everyone to stop or at least significantly reduce their consumption of meat and dairy. Certainly, there are abundant sources of inspiration for a sustainable meat and dairy free diet in the wider lived Christian religion: abstaining from animal products (with occasional fish) has been widespread Christian practice since

¹ Barclay, John M.G. *Food, Christian Identity and Global Warming: A Pauline Call for a Christian Food Taboo*, *Expository Times* 121, no. 12 (2010): 585–593

the time of the early Church. Having grown up in Eastern Europe, I have vivid memories of brightly coloured Orthodox calendars in my aunts' kitchens, marking the days when it was permissible to have fish during fasting periods.

Sustainable food is a community matter. It is also a highly sensitive subject, something which people see as a personal, lifestyle choice. I cannot pretend to write about sustainable food in a detached or dispassionate manner and I believe that a sustainable diet cannot be left to each individual consumer's conscience. I believe we should all ask our human communities to stop their consumption of meat and dairy derived from livestock. I say "derived from livestock" because I see a possible solution in eating lab-produced meat and dairy, as these become more widely available. In the meantime, I do think we have to listen to what scientists and activists have been telling us for decades – reducing meat and dairy obtained from livestock is a key step in the decarbonisation journey we all need to be on.



Reducing meat and dairy is key to decarbonisation Photo credit: Annie Spratt

It has only been a couple of years for me since I fully made this shift. Letting go of red meat was fairly easy but I struggled getting used to milk alternatives in my coffees and teas. I am certain I would now struggle to switch back, and there is a lot of evidence that tastebuds change quite quickly according to our diets. It can be hard to make dietary changes, even when these are needed for our own health – let alone what might first appear as other people's health. Of course, post pandemic, we can all see more clearly than ever that our own health, others' health, and the planetary health, are deeply interconnected. What we eat affects our human and non-human communities – which in turn affects us.

Food is part of our spiritual and religious lives, a key dimension for cultural expression and transmission. Having grown up in Romania in the 80s and 90s, at a time when meat and dairy were scarce in cities, I remember my parents making sure we had lots of meat for Christmas and Easter. I

recall on one cold December evening, watching incredulously as my father brought home with him a nervous looking man who immediately started unbuttoning his shirt in the middle of our small kitchen. Pulling up his vest, he revealed a long plastic bag, stuffed with raw meat. The meat, which had been divided in packs, like a thick sausage, was wrapped around his large belly, having clearly been smuggled from the nearby slaughterhouse. Our whole suburban neighbourhood was in fact known as "the slaughterhouse" – "Abator" in Romanian – and I can see why that was. Despite the inconspicuous slaughterhouse building being hidden behind giant rusty gates, it produced the most nauseating burnt, acid smell you could imagine, which often permeated all the streets and alleys, for days.

I remember even then, struggling to understand why getting meat was worth such a risk (going to prison probably) and how Christmas was going to be improved by this experience. My sense of dismay has since only grown. We now have an existential global climate crisis on our hands; continuing to eat meat and dairy is simply not worth the risks we face, and the severe, deadly effects of global heating – which others, humans, and non-humans, are already enduring.

We need to talk to our communities about meat and dairy as much as we need to talk to them about fossil fuels. There is a reluctance in mainstream publications, including IPCC reports, to recognise what constitutes unsustainable food – which clearly has deeply rooted cultural explanations. Carbon footprint analysis shows clearly that meat and dairy are the most unsustainable foods – with far higher carbon footprints than other foods. Meat and dairy derived from livestock damage the environment and are also unhealthy for us. Clear governmental guidelines in this area are controversial because they are seen as contravening our individual freedoms and neo-liberal values. There is, however, a growing awareness of both the environmental and the health concerns associated with consuming meat and dairy – see the 2014 documentary, *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* for a perfect example of how alternative viewpoints in the public sphere can drive forward our understanding of sustainable and healthy food. Both on public platforms, and in all our communities, Christians have a key role to play in abating the climate crisis by talking honestly about sustainable food. ■



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