

Modern Vegetarianism – Take a Look

Vegetarianism has a long tradition in China and elsewhere in Asia, a tradition dating back more than a thousand years. In the past, vegetarianism was largely associated with religion. As a result, many people today still link vegetarianism and religion. However, nowadays, a whole new vegetarianism is growing in Asia and globally, a secular vegetarianism, based on science, a vegetarianism that appeals to people of all religions as well as to those with no religion.

What is this modern vegetarianism and what are its roots? Modern vegetarianism is a blossoming tree with four strong roots and a rainbow of beautiful flowers. These four roots each developed due to scientific advances in our understanding in a number of fields: including the physical sciences, such as biology, chemistry, and physics, and the social sciences and humanities, such as psychology and economics. The four science based roots developed separately but have been brought together to form a modern rationale for why changing our diets provides a powerful, life-saving path towards progress for people and the planet.

These four scientific roots of modern vegetarianism are a better understanding of human health, our fellow animals, the environment, and the plight of people without enough to eat. Let's now look at each root separately.

Root 1 – Human Health.

The science that explains why moving away from animal based foods promotes human health developed in laboratories and in field research centers around the world, where scientists took a close look at the old-fashioned view that we need to eat meat and other animal based foods, such as dairy and eggs. What modern research has increasingly been finding is that not only to we not need to eat animal based foods, but we can actually be healthier without them.

One of the best known scientists investigating the impact of diet on human health is Professor T. Colin Campbell of Cornell University's Department of Nutritional Biochemistry. Professor Campbell is author of the best-selling book, *The China Study*, a compendium of nutrition research spanning his 40+ years in the field. *The China Study* was named for a large-scale study done jointly by China's Academy of Preventive Medicine, Oxford University, and Cornell University. Based on this research and an extensive and ongoing review of other research on cancer and other diseases, Professor Campbell advocates a plant based, vegan diet.

Root 2 – Concern for Our Fellow Animals

The 17th century French philosophy famously compared nonhuman animals to machines because, he claimed, they lacked the ability to think. Humans' view of other animals began to change in the 19th century with the work of Charles Darwin, whose theory of evolution showed that we humans are but another species of animal. Initially, Darwin's

views were controversial, but modern science leaves no doubt that we share many characteristics with the other members of the animal kingdom.

For instance, of late, scientists have conducted a range of ingenious studies delving into the minds and emotions of nonhuman animals. These studies provide increasing evidence that other animals can feel a range of emotions, such as fear and empathy, and do think. For instance, in one study of the minds of crows, researchers discovered that crows are able to think not only in the here and now but also in the there and then, as demonstrated by their ability to hide food and later return for it.

Despite this growing evidence that other animals are thinking, feeling fellow beings, food production practices continue to treat cows, chickens, pigs and others as though they were mere objects. For example, from birth, chickens are deprived of a natural environment and forced to live crowded tightly together, thousands in one windowless building. They are fed growth hormones so that they can be sent to slaughter after a miserable life of about six weeks. Animals raised for dairy and eggs suffer a similar fate, but they suffer for longer before their untimely deaths. When humans commit a terrible crime, we are either executed or sentenced to life imprisonment. Yet these animals, who have harmed no one, suffer life in prison and execution. As more people become aware of the injustice we inflict on animals just for food that we do not even need, more people are turning to vegan diets.

Root 3 – Environmental Protection

For centuries, humans took the environment for granted, cutting down huge areas of forests and dumping pollutants into the air, water, and land. Now, scientists have told us we must change our relation to the environment or face global calamity. The production of animal based foods plays a major role in environmental destruction. For instance, geographers and economists have taught us the inefficiency of meat eating. Eating meat wastes huge amounts of food, because we have to feed many kilograms of plant food to the cows, the chickens, and the pigs to yield just one kilo of meat. To produce all this unnecessary plant food, we need to cut down more forests, input more water, and use more fossil fuels.

Scientists have been telling us about the wastefulness of meat for at least 30 years. What they have only more recently discovered is the large role played by meat and other animal based foods in the greenhouse gas emissions that lead to global warming. Scientists warn that we have but a few years to reverse this or we face an unpredictable onslaught of natural disasters. A vegan diet can be a major part of the solution to the global warming precipice on which we find ourselves. Scientists working for the UN produced a report stating that livestock production accounts for 18% of human-produced greenhouse gas emissions, while transportation accounts for only 13%.

Root 4 – Help for the Hungry

Throughout history, humans have suffered famines in which millions have perished. Fortunately, modern agricultural science provides us with the knowledge and tools we need to grow enough food to feed every human on the planet, despite the fact that demographers predict continually rapid human population growth. This tremendous science driven agricultural growth makes it shocking that although we have enough to feed everyone, hundred of millions do not have enough to eat, and, as a result, thousands, including many young children, die every week.

How, educated people want to know, can we allow our fellow humans to die? In olden days, we could do little about famines; now we can, but will we? Production of animal based foods constitutes a major reason why food does not reach the starving. As explained in Root 3, about the environment, meat production wastes food. Wealthier people have the money to buy the animal based foods which require the plant food the poor cannot afford. By switching to a vegan diet, we may be able to shift more food to those without enough to eat.

In conclusion, fact not faith explains why many people are now moving toward plant based diets. Science continues forward, continues to enhance our understanding of the four roots of modern vegetarianism: human health, concern for our fellow animals, environment, and world hunger. At the same time, the new flowers of the blooming vegetarian tree continue to delight our senses. Some of these flowers are the many new vegetarian eateries opening up in many countries, including in China, and the colorful, delicious plant-based dishes they have on offer. Other flowers are provided by the manufacturers who create easy to prepare plant based food for us to eat at home. Happily, the roots of the switch to a plant based diet are becoming stronger at the same time that it is becoming easier to walk the flower-strewn path of vegetarianism.