

Tekst 8

Vegetarianism

A History

by Colin Spencer

Reviewed by Ellen Ruppel Shell

1 The British radiologist and irrepressible wit Sir Robert Hutchison once famously remarked that “vegetarianism is harmless enough, although it is apt to fill a man with wind and self-righteousness”. In *Vegetarianism: A History*, British novelist and cookbook author Colin Spencer seems hellbent on making Hutchison’s case.

2 Spencer begins auspiciously in a chapter entitled “In the Beginning,” reminding us that Adam and Eve were herbivores, and then posing a big question: “What is food?” He addresses this puzzle in a lengthy discourse on evolution, stretching back millions of years to the early Miocene, during which hominoids subsisted on roots, berries and grubs, through the birth of omnivorous humans roughly 100,000 years ago, whose penchant for raw meat he disputes, to the domestication of plants and animals 10,000 years ago. Along the way, he delivers insights on the mating habits of whales, the nutrient content of sea water, the relative penis size of primates, and assorted other arcana of such mind-boggling specificity that one marvels at the dexterity of the author’s web search engine.

3 Spencer traces many of our contemporary qualms over meat-eating – environmental, medical, ethical – back some 25 centuries, to Pythagoras, the Greek theoretician and philosopher best remembered for his theorem on right triangles. Pythagoras regarded the soul, as he did numbers, as an

abstract concept that was not tied to any particular material entity. He naturally advised against meat-eating, for, as Spencer writes, “To kill and eat any living creatures, whether they be bird, reptile or fish, was to murder one’s cousins and eat their flesh.” The followers of Pythagoras, the Pythagoreans, abstained from eating not only meat, but also most other foods: One Pythagorean equated eating beans with “eating the heads of one’s parents.” Spencer applauds this asceticism, as he does that of a long list of other vegetarian heretical sects, the Stoics, the Essenes and what appears to be his personal favorite, the Manicheans.

4 The Manicheans surfaced in the second century in Persian Babylonia (modern-day Iraq) and over the next several centuries spread widely through northern Africa, India and China. They believed that the world was sharply divided between good and evil, light and darkness; all matter was at its heart dark, but plants contained illuminating “light particles” and were therefore okay to eat, while flesh 36 and was therefore taboo. Manicheans were discouraged from having sex, so as not to create more flesh, and were forbidden to drink wine or to plant or pluck vegetation.

5 This did not prevent the Manichean elite from enslaving less “enlightened” souls to till their soil and harvest their produce, a practice that could hardly have endeared them to the local peasantry. They were also rumored to gorge on sweets and mead, and to take a rather damning view of human life other than their own. All this, rather than their refusal to eat meat, may have caused the Manicheans to be reviled in some quarters. But Spencer

does not belabor this possibility, for his book is essentially an extended argument that portrays vegetarians through the ages as a persecuted minority driven to the fringe or, in some cases, extinction, chiefly by their saintly refusal to eat animals.

6 Spencer reminds us that the Cartesian view of animals as soulless machines led to some horrifying practices. Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, did experiments with his wife's dog that we would find disgusting. Butchers of the period whipped calves and pigs to death to tenderize the flesh, and bled turkeys and other birds to death by hanging them upside down with a small incision in the vein of their mouth. What we think of as modern factory farming flourished in Elizabethan times, with pigs confined to cells so tiny they could not move, and poultry piled in great heaps in their cages.

7 That Elizabethans not infrequently treated humans with similar unkindness is perhaps beside the

point, for this is a book about the struggle to come to grips with our palates, not our humanity. Still, one can't help but question Spencer's priorities – and to wonder by the end of this long and weighty book whether he might not be nearly as obsessive as some of the vegetarian sects he so sympathetically portrays. The final section is a no-holds-barred rant, riddled with errors and misconceptions. He makes the ominous and entirely false charge that “no research has ever been conducted on the effect of BST milk on humans”. He cites as if it were made yesterday a 14-year-old prediction that “a large segment of the UK population may be at considerable risk” of Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease from eating infected meat.

8 Spencer is a lively writer. But in this idiosyncratic history his senses of humor, proportion and ultimately, reality, appear to have been betrayed by a furious sense of purpose.

The Washington Post

Tekst 8 Vegetarianism

- 1p 33 Which of the following can be concluded from paragraph 1?
Colin Spencer's book
A contains enough arguments to convert opponents of vegetarianism.
B derives its ideas from Sir Robert Hutchison.
C is a good illustration of Sir Robert Hutchison's point.
- 1p 34 Which pair of statements about Colin Spencer's book agrees with Ellen Ruppel Shell's view in paragraph 2?
1 The book draws conclusions based on unreliable sources.
2 The book contains numerous sidetracks.
3 The book treats its subject matter in chronological order.
4 The book overestimates the importance of herbs and plants in man's diet.
A 1 and 2
B 1 and 3
C 2 and 3
D 2 and 4
E 3 and 4
- 1p 35 Which of the following agrees with what is said in paragraph 3?
A Pythagoras considered killing animals as wrongful as killing humans.
B Pythagoras' ideas on food were watered down by his followers.
C Pythagoras started from the assumption that numbers and the soul were interdependent.
- 1p 36 Which of the following fits the gap in paragraph 4?
A derived from darkness
B led to sinfulness
C necessitated slaughter
- 1p 37 Which of the following is suggested in paragraph 5?
A The Manicheans' beliefs were too difficult to put into practice.
B The Manicheans were brutally oppressed because of their vegetarianism.
C The Manicheans were despised for reasons other than their vegetarianism.
D The Manicheans were vegetarian only when it suited them.
- 1p 38 Which of the following series, consisting of words quoted from paragraph 5, suggests that the writer is being sarcastic?
A damning, quarters, driven to the fringe
B enslaving, gorge, belabor
C hardly, endeared, saintly
- 1p 39 Welke opvatting leidde volgens Spencer tot de in alinea 6 beschreven wreedheden?

- “one can’t help but question Spencer’s priorities” (paragraph 7)
- 1p **40** What is meant by this?
- A** For Spencer human welfare seems to come second place to animal welfare.
 - B** For Spencer vegetarianism appears to be more important than brutal treatment of animals.
 - C** For Spencer what we eat might be more important than why we eat.
- The following quotes have been taken from other reviews of Spencer’s book.
- 1p **41** With which of the following could Ellen Ruppel Shell be expected to **disagree absolutely**?
- 1 “A fascinating study ... This unusual social and cultural history is meticulous in its research and refreshing in its insights into a little-studied subject.” *NAPRA Review*
 - 2 “Spencer makes you think . . . a very readable volume.” *Toronto Globe & Mail*
 - 3 “Spencer’s history is both fair-minded and balanced. There’s a lot to chew over in these -- dare one say it? -- meaty pages.” *Parade*
- A** Only 1 and 2.
 - B** Only 1 and 3.
 - C** Only 2 and 3.
 - D** 1, 2 and 3.
 - E** None.