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## JACOB BOEHME AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF A VEGETARIAN FOOD IDEOLOGY

Ken Albala

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Among radical Christian sects in the early modern period there were several well-delineated doctrines which explain both the impetus to live communally and to eschew violence. The most familiar of these is the Michael Sattler's Schleithem Confession espoused by Anabaptists which demands that the faithful separate from the abomination (the rest of the world) and take literally the commandment 'thou shalt not kill'. Among their detractors and persecutors, radicals were sometimes accused of taking this last injunction too literally – assuming that the prohibition against killing extends to animals. As biblical literalists, however, there were ample citations to warrant flesh-eating. Paul's *Letter to the Corinthians* (I 10:25) explains, 'You may eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience; for the earth is the Lord's and everything in it.' Of course Christianity itself was first an attempt to abandon the dietary legalism of Judaism and thus adopted an entirely liberal attitude towards food. As Jesus himself says (Matthew 15:11) 'Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth...'

To start there were no dietary restrictions of any kind. Only later were fast days officially incorporated into the Christian calendar, and through the accretion of tradition some monastic orders practiced a vegetarian or semi-vegetarian diet. Fast days as a form of penance, practiced by all Christians up to the early modern period, did however allow fish, and ultimately the

experience of fasting valorized flesh-eating since meat was normally permitted, even indulged in during Carnival.

In any case, throughout the history of Christianity, there is no consistent, biblically rooted set of ideals that could be drawn upon to defend vegetarianism, particularly when combined with general pacifism and communal living. The instances encountered among Anabaptists and radical sects during the Interregnum in seventeenth-century England must be considered exceptions, a stray Adamite here, a Familist there, but no coherent group of vegetarians. There was no formal Christian confession incorporating these elements until the Seventh-day Adventists in the nineteenth century.

There were, however, tantalizing glimpses of practices anticipating these and, not surprisingly, they are found not among the bibliolators, but among mystics who claimed to have received revelation via the 'inner spirit' which they believed superceded biblical authority. The Quakers and Schwenkfelders are the best known of these groups. It is not uncommon, even today, to find pacifist vegetarian sentiments among these groups, but there has never been a formal written doctrine or what I would call a food ideology demanding abstinence from flesh.

I use the term food ideology, as distinguished from a foodway or cuisine for several reasons. First, a food ideology is a set of ideas that encompasses a larger world outlook, a political programme, a unique aesthetic and way of living by which adherents can distinguish themselves from others not within the group. Second, and most importantly, it promises the individual a decisive transformation of the self. That is, if the diet is rigorously maintained, one can anticipate self-fulfilment in ways made explicit by the ideology. For example, a Weight Watcher is promised explicitly that if the diet is followed you will become thin. Implicitly the message is that you will therefore be happy, have the approval of friends and family and perhaps even will find romantic love. Vegetarianism can also be a food ideology when motivated by ethical concerns. One hears the rationale that it is healthier, damages the environment less, and diminishes the

unnecessary suffering of fellow creatures. It offers the individual a clear conscience, transforming the self from one among the violent uncaring masses to a being of greater moral acuity.

Such motivations are not readily identifiable among vegetarians in the past. According to Keith Thomas the concern for animal welfare only emerged gradually in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, before which it is found only among certain exceptionally sensitive individuals – Leonardo da Vinci or Thomas Tryon, for example. But there are hints that vegetarians may have been motivated for other, equally consistent, ideas, though ones that would seem scarcely recognizable to vegetarians today. This paper is an attempt to trace the outlines of one of these food ideologies that informally included pacifism and at times communal living. Rather than chase down references to aberrant radical activities as described only by enemies, I have decided to look at the ideas of a mystic Paracelsian Hermetic theosopher writing in the early seventeenth century, a time when religion and science were not yet compartmentalized into separate spheres of thought. This is one Jacob Boehme, writing in and persecuted in Gornitz, now near the border of Germany and Poland.

My choice of Boehme was instigated by a paragraph in Colin Spencer's history of vegetarianism (*The Heretic's Feast*) in which he asserts, 'He is almost impossible to read today, being turgid, deeply obscure and often quite batty.' Just my sort of writer, and I took this as a challenge. I also think that Spencer was off the mark when he claimed that Boehme's non-violence and vegetarianism was prompted by a fundamental mystical kinship with the universe. 'To kill is to break and sunder the mystical union,' he claims. In fact, Boehme can scarcely be called a pantheist at all, and it seems that his motivations stem from what he saw as our fundamental and radical distinction from all animals. If anything, it is an attempt to escape the bestial part of our earthly existence, rather than a recognition of our affinity to animals, which is a very recent phenomenon. I think the key to understanding Boehme's vegetarian ideas lies in his understanding of the meaning of the Fall.

I should point out, incidentally, that there is absolutely no evidence that Boehme himself was a practising vegetarian. None of his biographers mentions this. Though the topic is mentioned, scattered randomly throughout his writings, there is also no one work, or even section of a work, that explicitly demands a vegetarian diet. Apparently, his close followers were able to tease this out of his works, and how they did that is one thing I would like to explore in this paper.

On the topic of the Fall, its general importance is that the Garden of Eden offers the only example in the Judeo-Christian tradition of a purely vegetarian, or rather fruitarian, and non-violent state of being. It was conceived as an actual place and obviously as a life-style that accorded with God's original intentions for his creation. As is explained in Jan Soler's classic article on the meaning of Jewish dietary laws, this condition was altered by the Fall, but even more importantly after the Flood when God makes a concession to human frailty and allows Noah and his descendants to eat everything. 'Every creature that lives and moves shall be food for you; I give you them all, as once I gave you all green plants' (Genesis 9:3). The only restriction at this point is to abstain from blood.

As we enter the Christian tradition, obviously the complex Levitical prohibitions have been superseded, but there is also an expectation that after the Final Judgement and Apocalypse, when Christ returns to rule in the New Jerusalem, the lion will once again lay down with the lamb. That is, humans, or at least the elect, will once again enjoy a totally non-violent and vegetarian existence, in accordance with God's original plan. Thus purely orthodox Christians would have to concede that at the beginning of time and possibly at the end of times, humans will not need to kill in order to eat. What, however, could arouse suspicions of heresy, was the suggestion that in preparation for the Second Coming, or in a conscious effort to create a new Eden on earth now, humans should abstain from meat. This was only one of the suggestions that got Boehme in trouble with the Lutheran authorities in Gornitz.

In Boehme's earliest writings there is scant mention anywhere of eating, except for one tantalizing paragraph in the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Aurora* in which he defends his intellectual and spiritual endeavours. He says, 'I know very well that the children of the flesh will scorn and mock at me.' This immediately implies that he places himself in a different category, possibly among children of the spirit, but that he is also speaking of food is made apparent by the lines that follow. '[They] say I should look to my own calling, and not trouble my head about these things, but rather be diligent to bring in food for my family and myself...' But, he continues in the next paragraph, 'when I took care for the belly, and to get my living, and resolved to give over (i.e. up) this business at hand, then the gate of heaven in my knowledge was bolted up' (p. 659). Thus Boehme speaks not only metaphorically about choosing not to be among the children of the flesh, but in order to receive his illumination, he has to give up care over his daily sustenance. This is not yet explicitly about meat-eating, but is some indication of the formation of a distinct attitude toward food.

Boehme's ideas had matured by the time he wrote *On the Election of Grace*, and here he refers specifically to the Garden of Eden in a chapter 'Of the Original State of Man.' Note that as in all Boehme's writings the text can be taken both literally and figuratively and seems to be intentionally obscure. 'The mind therefore should learn to discover what is comprised in the earth, before it says: Man is earth; and it should not look upon the earth as a cow does, who supposes the earth to be the mother of grass, nor does she require any more than grass and herbs....But man desires to eat the best that springs from the earth, and therefore he should learn to know that he is the best that springs from the earth. For every being desires to eat of its mother from which it came. Man requires not for his vitality to eat of the coarseness of the earthly being, but of the fineness, viz. the Quintessence which he had as food in Paradise' (p. 66).

There is further discussion of exactly what constituted the Edenic diet throughout his writings and Boehme abandons a

literal interpretation of Genesis and concocts his own mystical and alchemical version of the story. Adam, he explains, was able to eat the fruit of paradise because it had not yet been divided into constituent and antagonistic elements – fire, air, water, earth. Food was, like Adam himself, at first a hermaphrodite, unified and whole and offered everything his body would need. This is a concept probably derived from Paracelsus, that Edenic fruit came in a concentrated essential form. Paracelsus claimed that it was the Flood that ruined the original potency of fruits and vegetables (and medicines too) and only after the Flood were Noah and his progeny given permission to eat animal flesh. 'Everything shall be food for you,' is actually a concession to human weakness and frailty, but also a recognition that humans would now need a variety of foods including meat to sustain their bodies.

Boehme offers an alternative version of this story. It was Adam in this unified state – which Boehme refers to as being 'in temperament' – for a forty-day period before the creation of Eve, who abandoned the original diet of quintessential fruit. It was Adam's desire 'to try how heat and cold and all the other properties would taste in wrestling combat.' In other words, it was a longing for cooking as it was understood in the early seventeenth century as a mixture of spicy, sweet and sour and salty flavours. This, claims Boehme, was the knowledge that Adam craved. 'Adam introduced himself by desire into multiplicity of properties, viz. into the phantasy of inequality, and would know everything and acquire wisdom.' The wisdom he refers to is the way that elements combine and contrast in the material world, just as good and evil contend in battle on earth.

Further clarifying this contrast, Boehme explains, 'When he was in Paradise, that is in the temperament, he was placed in a certain region where the holy world budded forth through the earth and bore paradisaic fruit, which in essence was also in temperament. The fruit was pleasant to the sight, and good for food in a heavenly way, not to be taken into a worm-bag or miserable carcase as in done now in the awakened animal

property, but to be eaten in the mouth in a magical way' (p. 77). Only later in the narrative is the dietary break decisive. This is after the creation of Eve, and after God had set the tree of knowledge in the garden to test the now-divided couple to see if they could return to the unified heavenly state. Then it is Eve, quickly followed by Adam, who ate the forbidden fruit and 'in eating that morsel he died as to the kingdom of God, and awoke to the kingdom of nature' (p. 98). Only then was there also strife, enmity, property and, of course, war.

Now why this episode is so important is that Boehme understood that at the end of time – after the Final Judgement and the separation of good and evil once again, humans, or at least the elect, will return to their unified tempered state. They will also once again enjoy food proper to their singular constitutions – the quintessence. The Second Coming will be a return to elemental unity and balance, and a return to our original diet as God has planned it. The implication of this conception of history is that though we still live in the corrupt and compound world, and still exist in bestial form and require a 'worm-bag to hold earthly food' we can anticipate and prepare for the millennium. This is not even implied in *On the Election of Grace* but does become apparent in later works.

In *The Three Principles* Boehme speculates about the characteristics of what he calls 'the new man' and it is here that his ideas begin to take the shape of a food ideology, even though the text itself is fairly abstruse. The new man is the thoroughly converted, spiritually enlightened believer. 'Now if the soul eateth of the clear Deity, what food hath the body then?...the soul is a spirit and must have spiritual food, and the body must have bodily food. Or wilt thou give the new man earthly food? If thou meanest so, thou art yet far from the Kingdom of God' (p. 635). He then explains that Christ ate heavenly food during his forty days in the wilderness, and we should do the same. This passage can either be interpreted in a metaphorical sense, which I think is the way Boehme intended it – that eating heavenly food, nourishing the body is an inward and mystical process whereby

the body does God's will. It is not actually eating one type of food rather than another. But if interpreted literally, as it seems would be very easy to do, it might lead one to conclude that there is a particular way to nourish the body in order to become the new man, and as anyone would know to 'eateth of paradisaical food' is to eat only vegetables.

Elsewhere Boehme elaborates on the contrast between Edenic food and earthly food and how we should eat today. 'The primitive man (in Eden) ate of the fruit, and drank of the water of the earth; yet he did not take them into his body. When he put them to his mouth, the earthy part (the quintessence) of the fruit was transmuted into heavenly food.... Thus no filth accumulated in him, as it accumulates in the Fallen man.' This also explains why Adam could be immortal, his body was not taxed with digestion, nutrients were already broken down into quintessential form. After the Fall digestion was necessary and filth is generated. It seems specifically his idea is Paracelsian here, and refers to the accumulation of tartrates which hastens aging and causes sickness. But there is hope for man in the fallen state. Boehme continues, 'Even now [as in contrast to Eden] (if he is not in too low a state) he desires to eat the best that the earth produces – the quintessence of its fruit' (Vetterling, 1290). This certainly does suggest that some foods cause a greater accumulation of filth, and others, fruits and their quintessence, nourish in an earthy but cleaner way. Furthermore, some people are in a low state, others more spiritual, because they feed on foods closer to the original mode of feeding.

We are told precisely what is this low mode of eating only once, in what I construe to be the only explicit passage in Boehme's writing condemning meat-eating. 'Concerning food and drink, we notice two damnific facts; the first is, that man defiles his Soul with the flesh and blood of beasts; which darkens him and thus hides the ground of the Pearl (or Wisdom) from him; and the second is, that he clouds his Mind with strong drink' (Vetterling 1290). This is not meant merely to be a spiritual corruption, because Boehme then proceeds to offer a

physiological explanation of what occurs in the body processing meat and hard liquor. 'In the blood of the heart the Soul-creature moves; hence the [uncontaminated] blood is so sweet that nothing can be compared to it.' The concept he refers to with the term Soul-creature is not obscure or mystical, it merely means the spirits, the refined essences of food thought to nourish the soul just as the cruder elements are assimilated into and nourish the body. Therefore eating purer foods more thoroughly nourishes the soul while the heavier crasser foods like meat weigh the body down. As he says, 'The life of a beast stands primarily in the blood, and secondarily in the flesh; and this beastly life should not be introduced into man because it infects his spirit and defiles his soul.' A diet of vegetables, because it leaves behind less filth, thus makes the body more apt as a dwelling place for God. 'How can God abide in a Soul that dwells in defiled surroundings?'

Boehme next falls back on a classical defence of vegetarianism by claiming that 'the slaughtering of beasts makes man wolfish.' But at the core the ideology is one firmly rooted in a unique understanding of Edenic and post-lapsarian nutrition. Ultimately the adoption of a fruitarian diet makes our body and soul cleaner and fitter to receive illumination. It was precisely this feature that was seized by later Behmenists, Philadelphians and other mystical groups who worked an explicit vegetarian program into their religious agendas. Boehme's ideology probably also informed George Cheyne's recommendations to adopt an Adamic diet, which was as much religiously motivated as concerned with weight-loss and health. Revealingly, the original impetus in all these cases had practically nothing to do with animal welfare.

Rather than pragmatic, worldly concerns, this vegetarian ideology was motivated by an ecstatic vision of universal peace, the eradication of property, and the end of animal slaughter in a kingdom to come. By adopting a vegetarian diet, the true believer hastens the Second Coming and also assures that he or she will be among the elect, ready to receive the inner spirit because unpoluted by gross nutrition. A vegetable diet is therefore a conscious weaning from meat and violence in preparation for the Adamic

diet of quintessence that will be enjoyed by saints in New Jerusalem. For Boehme's followers, vegetarianism was also a distinct social marker that set them apart from the common rabble and an integral part of their illuminate ideology. What it promised was eternal life.

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