Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.
and why? Wheen drops a few hints at what he thinks the answer might be. For example, he says that the growing appeal of fundamentalism might be explained as a quest for "simple certainty" by people who find the pace of change in society "both bewildering and alarming". But the point is not developed. Weakest of all—so weak, it undermines his whole project, in my opinion—is his mockery of those who attempted rational explanations of the Sept 11 terrorist attacks. His blunderbuss approach leaves casualties on both the left and right of political opinion—and, for the most part, deservedly so. Fair enough. But what are we left with?

**Books Why be a vegetarian?**

In a masterful sweep through two decades of epidemiological discovery, Gary Fraser and friends probe the probable and possible lifestyle causes of chronic disease with a special emphasis on diet. In particular, the data on diet and lifestyle of Seventh-Day Adventists are dissected in detail and compared to non-Adventist populations.

The conclusions they reach are that the components of a Californian Seventh-Day Adventist vegetarian lifestyle including diet, exercise pattern, tobacco and alcohol use, and philosophical and religious beliefs together promote an increase in longevity. For men who live to the age of 30 years, life expectancy is 7-28 years longer than for the general population; for women the figure is 4-42 years longer. A modest effect was also found in an Oxford study of UK vegetarians, which found that they lived longer than non-vegetarians—although the results were possibly related to excess mortality in the non-vegetarians in the first 5 years of the study.

The benefits of vegetarianism seem to be most apparent for coronary heart disease (CHD), with significant reductions seen in both Adventist and non-Adventist vegetarians by comparison to excess mortality in the general population. This result comes as no surprise in view of the success of vegetarian diets in CHD regression studies, and the sanctioning of CHD risk-reduction health claims by the US Food and Drug Administration for components of the diet that reduce serum cholesterol (eg, β-glucan from oats, soy protein, plant sterols, and nuts). Total cancer mortality is also lower in both Adventists and non-Adventist vegetarians than in the general population—largely because of a reduction in the rate of lung cancer. Furthermore, vegetarians are thinner than non-vegetarians and are at a reduced risk of developing diabetes.

Mark Steel, in his brief history of the French Revolution, *Vive La Revolution* (Scribner, 2003) mocks historians who seek to explain historical events by saying, in effect, that everyone went mad. But for Wheen, there's no "in effect" about it. He ridicules the left for seeking rational explanations for such seemingly irrational outrages as Nazism and terrorism, much preferring the "obvious" answer that, like those prepared to follow David Koresh—the religious sect leader who was killed when US agents stormed his compound in Waco—the people involved just went nuts. He is left, therefore, like the people he is attacking, groping for simplistic explanations (everyone went nuts) for complex phenomena (what is it that drives people to, say, violence?).

And if the world's problems truly can be placed at the door of a handful of nutters who have the wrong ideas in their heads, what simpler solution could there be than a witch-hunt? As far as witch-hunts go, however, you could do worse than grab your pitchfork and follow Wheen. You might find yourself protesting as yet another theorist is chucked into the flames, but with Wheen as your guide, at least you'll never be bored.

Stuart Watkins e-mail: stuart_pauluk@yahoo.com