

Vegetarianism and the Major World Religions

The major world religions all provide a sound basis for a vegetarian diet, especially as informed by advances in nutrition, ecology, and agriculture. Now that factory farming has become widespread, animal welfare concerns underscore the imperative to avoid consuming animal products.



Society of Ethical and Religious Vegetarians

Eastern Religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism



Hinduism

Hinduism's teachers and scriptures often expressly encourage a vegetarian diet, though not all Hindus are vegetarian. Hindus almost universally avoid beef since they consider the cow (Krishna's favorite animal) sacred.



Mahatma Gandhi, however, took Hindu vegetarian observance one step further by declaring, "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be measured by the way in which its animals are treated." Hinduism's vast scriptures contain thousands of passages recommending vegetarianism based on the profound link between ahimsa (nonviolence) and spirituality. For example, the Yajur Veda says, "You must not use your God-given body for killing God's creatures, whether they be human, animals, or whatever." (12.32) Similarly, Hindu law books base many directives on the principle of the sacredness of all life. Manusmriti asserts, "Having well considered the origin of flesh-foods, and the cruelty of ... slaying corporeal beings, let man entirely abstain from eating flesh." (5.49)

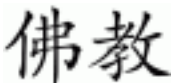
While the violence of slaughter wrongs animals, it also harms those who consume animals. Causing unnecessary pain and death produces bad karma (ill-effects on oneself as a consequence of ill-treatment of others). Belief in the sacredness of life, reincarnation, nonviolence, and the law of karma are central, inter-related features of the Hinduism's "spiritual ecology."

While Hinduism's basis for vegetarianism is deeply spiritual, its practical merit has also been confirmed by science. For example, the prohibition against harming or killing cows frequently benefits nutrition in India. Zebu cattle, prevalent in India, require no special grain feed or pastures and thrive on organic material of no practical use to humans, such as stubble from harvested crops, roadside grasses, and organic garbage from the village. From cattle, Indians obtain milk and dairy foods, labor, transportation, and dung fuel.



Jainism

Vegetarianism is expected practice among Jains, who hold that it is wrong to kill or harm any living being. Jain traditions respect ahimsa (nonviolence), aparigraha (non-acquisition), asteya (respect for other's rights) and satya (truth). While Jains comprise less than 1% of India's population, they contribute more than half of all the money donated in India to provide medical and other social assistance to India's poor people.



Buddhism

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was a Hindu who accepted many of Hinduism's core doctrines, such as karma. His life and teachings offered special insights into how to address problems of human existence, and he explicitly taught vegetarianism as a component of his general instruction to be mindful and compassionate.





The Buddha's first sermon, called the "Four Noble Truths," focused on the nature of suffering and how to relieve suffering. Bhante Henepola Gunaratna, founder and abbot of the Bhavana Society in High View, WV, interprets the Buddha's first sermon as calling for a meatless diet: "Cultivating the thoughts of non-harm and non-injury and abstinence from killing any living being are so crucial for an individual's peace, harmony,

serenity, contentment and attaining liberation from suffering that the Buddha included these principles in the Noble Eightfold Path which is the Fourth Noble Truth of Buddhism." Similarly, the Surangama Sutra states, "...in seeking to escape from suffering ourselves, why should we inflict it upon others? How can a bhikshu [monk] who hopes to become a deliverer of others, himself be living on the flesh of other sentient beings?"

It is not surprising, then, that the term "sentient beings" is used repeatedly in Buddhist writings and refers to humans and animals. Buddhists aim to relieve the suffering of all sentient beings. The Buddha encouraged mindfulness as necessary for leading a compassionate life, and he forbade Buddhists from engaging in occupations that involve killing animals, such as butcher, fisher, or animal farmer.



Taoism

The Chinese religion of Taoism holds nature as sacred, and this view also favors vegetarianism. Taoism teaches that yin and yang are the two fundamental energies in the world, and Taoists have always "taken the accomplishments of yin [the non-violent, non-aggressive approach] and rescue of creatures as their priority." (Journal of the Academy of Religion, 54: no. 1, 1987) For example, the famous Taoist Master Li Han-Kung explicitly prohibited "those who consume meat" from his holy mountain.

Taoism is distinctive in stressing simplicity. As early as the 6th century BCE, the Taoist scripture called Tao Te Ching warned against waste (80 TTC). The Tao Te Ching teaches that simplicity allows the individual to live a peaceful life and it protects nature from overuse and pollution. Modern studies of ecology and factory farming have demonstrated that meat production today is extremely complicated and inefficient. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that meat consumption is far less efficient in producing protein than consumption of beans and grains. Because it requires far more grain, modern meat production requires more pesticides, more water, and more fossil fuel to run tractors to farm the extra fields of grain. Burning more fossil fuel wastes natural resources and pollutes the planet. Taoist simplicity encourages eating vegetables, grains, and fruits instead of meat. According to the Tao, the process of meat production tends to be too yang – too aggressive; it involves extreme and unnecessary impact on the environment.

The Abrahamic Religions: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Baha'i Faith



Judaism

The Torah (Hebrew Scriptures) describes vegetarianism as an ideal. In the Garden of Eden, Adam, Eve, and all creatures were instructed to eat plant foods. (Genesis 1:29-30) The prophet Isaiah had a utopian vision in





which everyone will once again be vegetarian: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb ... the lion shall eat straw like the ox ... They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain" (Isaiah 11:6-9).



The Torah relates God giving humans "dominion" over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). However, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, first Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel, pointed out that such "dominion" does not give humans license to treat animals according to every human whim and desire. The Torah and the rabbinic oral tradition preserved in the Talmud and Midrash contain many instructions on how people should treat animals and the rest of creation. Because Judaism focuses on honoring God as the all-powerful, all-knowing Creator of

the universe, Judaism teaches that we should love and protect all of creation, which belongs to God.

Although the Torah states that, after the Flood, God gave humans permission to eat meat (Genesis 9:3), God also restricted humankind's exploitation of animals. The Jewish people are especially obligated to keep kosher dietary laws and detailed laws requiring humane treatment of animals. Most (but not all) kosher laws deal with meat. For example, Jews may only eat certain animals; they may not consume blood; and they may not consume meat and dairy products together. These laws are divine decrees, given without explicit reasons. However, one of the explanations found in the rabbinic tradition is that the permitted species are in general more peaceful and less violent than others. This serves as an example to humans to refrain from cruelty and other base behavior. There are mystical reasons offered for kosher laws, as well.

Judaism forbids *tsa'ar ba'alei chayim*, inflicting unnecessary pain on animals. For example, Exodus 23:5 requires that one relieve the burden of an overloaded animal, and the Fourth Commandment includes the instruction that Jews must allow livestock to rest on the Sabbath. The parameters of such laws are discussed in the Talmud and codified in the *Shulchan Arukh* (Code of Jewish Law). The revered medieval legal authority/philosopher Moses Maimonides wrote that we should show mercy to all living creatures. The 16th Century mystic Rabbi Moses Cordovero and 19th Century thinker Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch expressed similar sentiments. By contrast, factory farms routinely confine animals in cramped spaces; often drug and mutilate animals; and deny animals fresh air, sunlight, exercise, and any opportunity to satisfy their natural instincts. In response to this, former Chief Rabbi of Ireland Rabbi David Rosen has written, "The current treatment of animals in the livestock trade definitely renders the consumption of meat as halachically unacceptable [not kosher]." Other rabbis, while agreeing that animals should be raised and slaughtered in humane ways, do not agree that such meat is forbidden.



Other Jewish values favor vegetarianism. Judaism advocates treating the environment respectfully, while animal agriculture squanders water, energy, land, and other resources. Judaism holds that human life is sacred, and we should diligently care for our health. Since animal-based foods can increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers, we should move towards a plant-based diet. Judaism encourages us to share our bread with hungry people. Yet, the inefficiencies of animal agriculture waste grains and lands that could be used for staple crops, thereby depriving hungry people of food. In summary, although Judaism does not mandate vegetarianism, many Jewish teachings support the diet.



Islam



The most holy Islamic writings are the Quran and the Hadith (sayings) of Prophet Mohammad, and the latter includes, “Whoever is kind to the creatures of God is kind to himself.” All but one of the 114 chapters of the Quran begin with the phrase “Allah is merciful and compassionate.” Muslims also consider the Hebrew Scriptures holy, and therefore Muslims share with Jews the teachings against cruelty to animals. Both the Quran and the Hadith of Prophet Mohammed provide dietary laws that are similar to those of Judaism (Quran 2:172).



It appears impossible for a faithful Muslim to consume meat produced by the cruel methods of factory farming. Biographies of Mohammed have described the prophet’s love of animals and his opposition to cruelty. The Quran states, “There is not an animal on earth, nor a flying creature flying on two wings, but they are peoples like unto you.” (surah 6, verse 38). Mohammed taught, “A good deed done to a beast is as good as doing good to a human being; while an act of cruelty to a beast is as bad as an act of cruelty to a human being.” (Mishkat Al-Masabih) Muslim theologian Al-Hafiz B. A. Masri, noting the cruelties of Western food production, has called the flesh “sacrilegious meat.” (Animals in Islam, p. 23)

Islam also teaches that people should only eat healthy foods. Numerous studies have shown that the products of modern factory farms, high in fat and laden with hormones and antibiotics, harm one’s health.

A distinctive element of Islam’s mystic branch called Sufism has been its call for compassion. The great Sufi M. R. Bawa Mahaiyaddeen appealed to Muslims to reflect on the meaning of slaughter. When describing Islamic slaughter (qurban) in his *Ninety Nine Beautiful Names of Allah*, he said that the knife-bearer should “... look into the animal’s eyes, he has to watch the tears of the animal, and he has to watch the animal’s eyes until it dies – hopefully, his heart will change.” (Section 182)



Christianity

Christianity, based on Judaism, prohibits cruelty to animals. Jesus’ central teachings involved love, compassion, and mercy, and it is hard to imagine Jesus looking upon contemporary factory farms and slaughterhouses and then happily consuming flesh.



Jesus often challenged people by including everyone within his circle of compassion. He embraced all people, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, profession, social status, or medical status. Although the Bible does not describe Jesus addressing the question of eating meat, many Christians throughout history have believed that Christian love ultimately calls for a vegetarian diet. Examples include Jesus' first followers (the Jewish Christians), the Desert Fathers, Tertullian, Origen, St. Benedict, John Wesley, Albert Schweitzer, Leo Tolstoy, and many others.

Jesus was much more concerned about the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law. He embraced theocentrism, which holds that everything comes from and belongs to God. Like Jesus, Christians hold the Hebrew Scriptures as sacred, and Christians can affirm, as the Psalmist said, "The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made" (145:9). In the face of massive suffering of animals on factory farms, dwindling natural resources, and environmental degradation, Christian principles all point towards vegetarianism. Leading evangelical author Tony Campolo has noted, "Being a vegetarian does have benefits for a hurting planet with limited resources." (How to Rescue the Earth, p. 181)

Christians have always striven to minister to poor and hungry people. However, today the inefficiency of meat eating works against that ministry. In the United States 66% of the grains are fed to animals being raised for slaughter, wasting most grains' calories and proteins. Ron Sider of Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary has observed, "It is because of the high level of meat consumption that the rich minority of the world devours such an unfair share of the world's available food." (Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger, pp. 43-44).

Ironically, Sider has added, by greedily devouring so much grain-fed animal products, we are damaging our own health. (p. 44) The New Testament obligates Christians to protect their health. For example, 1 Cor. 6:19 declares that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, and Christians regularly interpret this as a call to healthful living. Knowing the deleterious effects of animal-based foods on human health, Christian principles favor a plant-based diet.



Mormonism

Mormons believe that God offered new revelations to Joseph Smith in the 19th Century, and subsequent true prophets have presided over Christ's church on earth. Doctrine and Covenants 58:26-29 notes that people should be righteous in all things and "do good," including activities not commanded by scriptures.

Therefore, Mormonism encourages righteous behavior, which presumably would include kindness to animals.

Mormonism condemns killing animals unnecessarily: "And wo be unto man that sheddeth blood or that wasteth flesh and hath no need." (D&C 49:21) Mormonism does not require vegetarianism, but it does discourage eating animals unless necessary:

12 Yea, flesh also of beasts and of fowls of the air, I, the Lord, have ordained for the use of man with thanksgiving; nevertheless they are to be used sparingly;

13 And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine. (D&C 89:12)

In other words, Mormons should only eat animals when non-animal foods are unavailable, and even then they are to consume animals sparingly.



The Baha'i Faith

The Baha'i Faith was founded by Baha'u'llah in 19th Century Persia. Baha'u'llah encouraged compassion for animals, and he wrote, "Burden not an animal with more than it can bear. We, truly, have prohibited such treatment through a most binding interdiction in the Book. Be ye the embodiments of justice and fairness amidst all creation. (Most Holy Book, 187) Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha, Baha'u'llah's son, wrote, "it is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather must they show forth the utmost loving-kindness to every living creature. For in all the physical respects, and where the animal spirit is concerned, the selfsame feelings are shared by animal and man."

Abdu'l-Baha also wrote, "Ye must not only have kind and merciful feelings for mankind, but ye should also exercise the utmost kindness towards every living creature. The physical sensibilities and instincts are common to animal and man ... Sensibility is the same whether you harm man or animal: there is no difference ... Therefore one must be very considerate towards animals and show greater kindness to them than to man. Educate the children in their infancy in such a way that they may become exceedingly kind and merciful to the animals."

Regarding meat-eating, Abdu'l-Baha said, "Truly, the killing of animals and the eating of their meat is somewhat contrary to pity and compassion, and if one can content oneself with cereals, fruit, oil and nuts ... it would undoubtedly be better and more pleasing." (Baha'i National Review)

Reverence for and protection of nature is a central Baha'i tenet, which a plant-based diet generally supports. Baha'u'llah said, "every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidence of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty." (Prayers and Meditations of Baha'u'llah)

Conclusion

Vegetarianism has been a common thread among the major world religions, even if only a minority have adopted the diet as an expression of their faith. For many people of faith, vegetarianism reflects the Golden Rule: Christianity – "So, whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them" (Matthew 7:12); Judaism – "Do not do unto others what you would not wish to be done to yourself – that is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary" (Babylonian Talmud); Islam – "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself"; Baha'i Faith – "Blessed is he that preferreth his brother to himself"; Taoism – "Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss"; Hinduism – "This is the sum of duty: do naught to oth-



ers that which if done to thee would cause pain”; Jainism – “A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated”; Buddhism – “Hurt not others with that which pains yourself.”

With factory farming torturing animals on a scale unprecedented in human history and with the growing environmental crisis threatening human civilization, the wisdom of the world’s religions to respect nature and all its inhabitants has become much more than an expression of ideal behavior. It has become a global imperative.

This essay was written by Prof. Gene Sager of Palomar College and revised for the Society of Ethical and Religious Vegetarians by the SERV Writing Committee.

Representative Books

Keith Akers. “The Lost Religion of Jesus”

Rynn Berry. “Food for the Gods: Vegetarianism & the World’s Religions”

Philip Kapleau. “To Cherish All Life”

Stephen R. Kaufman and Nathan Braun. “Good News for All Creation”

Andrew Linzey. “Animal Gospel”

Al-Hafiz B.A. Masri. “Animals in Islam”

Vasu Murti. “They Shall Not Hurt or Destroy”

Norm Phelps. “The Dominion of Love”

Norm Phelps. “The Great Compassion: Buddhism and Animal Rights”

Lewis G. Regenstein. “Replenish the Earth”

Steven Rosen. “Diet for Transcendence: Vegetarianism and the World Religions”

Steven Rosen. “Holy Cow: The Hare Krishna Contribution to Vegetarianism and Animal Rights”

Richard H. Schwartz. “Judaism and Vegetarianism”

David Sears. “A Vision of Eden: Animal Rights and Vegetarianism in Jewish Law and Mysticism”

Michael Tobias. “Life Force: The World of Jainism”

Paul Waldau. “The Specter of Speciesism: Buddhist and Christian Views of Animals”

Kerry Walters and Lisa Portmess (eds). “Religious Vegetarianism: From Hesiod to the Dalai Lama”

Representative Web Sites

General: www.serv-online.com

Taoism: www.ivu.org/history/east/china.html

Hinduism www.flex.com/~jai/articles/hinmeat.html

Jainism www.angelfire.com/col/jainism/

Buddhism www.veggiedharma.org

Judaism www.jewishveg.com

Christianity www.christianveg.com

Islam www.islamveg.com

Mormonism <http://www.vegsource.com/articles/catano.htm>

Bhai’i Faith <http://food-culture.org/Fieldhouse.pdf>