Veganism and the Major World Religions

The major world religions all support a plant-based diet for animal welfare, human welfare, environmental, and health reasons.

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. Cattle contribute 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. Jains consider 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”. 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 com-
Judaism forbids ts'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). Revered rabbis, including Moses Maimonides, wrote that we should show mercy to all living creatures. By contrast, factory farms routinely confine animals in cramped spaces; often drug and mutilate animals; and deny to 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 opined, “The current treatment of animals in the livestock trade definitely renders the consumption of meat as halachically unacceptable [not kosher].”

Other Jewish values favor vegetarianism. Judaism advocates treating the environment respectfully, but 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.

The Abrahamic Religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam

**Judaism**

The Torah (Hebrew Scriptures) describes veganism 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).

Genesis 1:28 relates God that gave humans “dominion” over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” 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.

In Genesis 9:3, God gives humans permission to eat meat after the Flood. However, God also restricts humankind’s exploitation of animals. For example, many of the Jewish kosher dietary laws aim to minimize animal suffering. And, this concession to humanity’s violence and sinfulness comes with a curse – animals who were once friends of humanity will henceforth “fear and dread” people (Gen. 9:2).

**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 health 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 plant-based 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” (In an Age of Hunger, p.181).

Ironically, Sider has added, these animal products are also 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 harmful effects of animal-based foods on human health, Christian principles favor a plant-based 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 Mohammad 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 Mahayaddeen 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).

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. 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:

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).

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 you 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.”
Conclusion: The Golden Rule

Though not always practiced, the major world religions all support vegetarianism. Indeed, vegetarianism reflects the nearly universal Golden Rule, which has been expressed in different ways: Christianity (and Mormonism) – “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 prefer 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 others that which if done to you 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 abusing 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 booklet was written by Prof. Gene Sager of Palomar College and revised by the SERV Writing Committee.

Representative Books
Rynn Berry. *Food for the Gods: Vegetarianism & the World’s Religions*
Andrew Linzey. *Animal Gospel*
Al-Hafiz B.A. Masri. *Animals in Islam*
Katherine Wills Perlo. *Kinship and Killing: The Animal in World Religions*
Lewis G. Regenstein. *Replenish the Earth*
Richard H. Schwartz. *Judaism and Vegetarianism*

Representative Web Sites
General: serv-online.org
Taoism: ivu.org/history/east/china.html
Hinduism FaithAndFood.com/Hinduism.php
Jainism FaithAndFood.com/Jainism.php/
Buddhism shabkar.org/
Judaism jewishveg.org
Christianity ChristianVeg.org
Islam islamicconcern.com/
Mormonism LDSVeg.com/ChrisFosterPhd.htm
Baha’i Faith FaithandFood.com/Bahai.php