

Experiences of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Vegans in the UK



Ellie Atayee-Bennett, E.Atayee-Bennett@soton.ac.uk

Department of Sociology, Social Policy, and Criminology, University of Southampton

Supervisors: Dr Bindi Shah, Dr Emma Roe, Dr Heidi Armbruster

Background

Veganism is of huge contemporary significance with the number of people embracing the vegan lifestyle increasing exponentially. Estimates range between 600,000 [1] and 3.5 million [2] vegans in the UK. Religion remains significant in contemporary society, with up to 2/3 of the population of England and Wales identifying with one of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) [3].

Studies on veganism tend to focus on the secular context however, rarely attending to the intersection with religious belief and practice. The vegan experience of religious groups is therefore very much absent from the academic literature. Vegan organisations, activists, writers, and campaigns are emerging in all three Abrahamic religions, prompting a small, albeit growing, population of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim vegans, therefore this research is of timely importance.

Research Aims

This research seeks to understand

1. How religious and cultural practices, beliefs, and values shape one's vegan experience
2. How religion is embodied through veganism, and
3. How Jewish, Christian, and Muslim vegans are reshaping and redefining what it means to be Jewish, Christian, and Muslim through veganism in late modern Great Britain.

The findings will contribute to increased understanding, more effective communication both within and between religious and vegan communities, and improved vegan advocacy efforts.



Key Messages

An individual's own religious beliefs and values shape their understanding and practice of veganism

For some, veganism could be considered a religious practice, giving them the sense of being better practitioners of their religion

Religion is being reinterpreted and transformed in late modernity, through veganism and reflexivity

Methodology

Sample:

36 participants:
12 Jewish vegans,
12 Christian vegans,
12 Muslim vegans
Aged 18+
UK resident for 5+ years

Methods:

36 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted online exploring food, veganism, religion, and everyday experience

Three WhatsApp diary groups (one for each religion) spanning 3-4 months exploring everyday experiences and meal diaries

Virtual participant observation comprising six online calls which involved cooking demonstrations and/or kitchen tours



Preliminary Findings

- For the majority of participants, their main motivation for practicing veganism is a high concern for ethical living. Some were concerned predominately by the mistreatment of animals, some by environmentalism, and some a combination.
- Ethics were understood from a religious perspective. Participants spoke of religious ethical teachings, they told religious stories, and they described religious concepts.
- All participants connected veganism to their religious beliefs and practices in some way, with many explaining that for them, veganism was a means through which they performed religious requirements. For these individuals, they demonstrated a performance of veganism in a "religious" or "cultural" way.
- For many participants, religion was a key part of their everyday lives and they were actively practising, disproving cultural associations with veganism and secularism.
- Reflexivity was common among all participants, aligning with social theory on reflexivity in late modernity. All participants described to some degree a reflexive process, involving both personal reflection and research drawing on a wide range of resources when evaluating and coming to decisions.
- Participants mostly led a very individual and somewhat isolated vegan experience, rarely engaging with the wider vegan community.
- Participants veganised cultural foods and rituals so as to still be able to observe religious rituals and festivities, but in a vegan way.
- The vegan label often trumped halal and kosher labels, with veganism widely considered to be an ideal solution for following religious dietary injunctions in the West.
- This research suggests a transformation of religion in modern society, with a focus on ethics and a desire to respond to the ethical crises of the day.

References

- [1] The Vegan Society (2022) 'Worldwide Growth of Veganism'. Available at: <https://www.vegansociety.com/news/media/statistics/worldwide>
- [2] Petter, O. (2018) 'Number of vegans in UK soars to 3.5 million, survey finds', Independent, 3 April. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/food-and-drink/vegans-uk-rise-popularity-plant-based-diets-veganism-figures-survey-compare-the-market-a8286471.html>
- [3] Office for National Statistics (2020) 'Exploring religion in England and Wales: February 2020'. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/exploringreligioninenglandandwales/february2020>

