

Veganism in Religious Spaces and throughout the Religious Calendar

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

Ellie Atayee-Bennett

8 October 2022 | Annual Meeting of the IAVS 2022

Disclaimer

Where religious spaces and the religious calendar are concerned, food is a prominent feature and so much of this presentation will explore food. I do recognise however that veganism is much more than a diet, it is an all-encompassing lifestyle, and indeed this was how all of my participants understood veganism too.



My PhD

What is my Research Topic?

Topic: Experiences of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim vegans in the UK

Context: Late Modern Great Britain

Research Interests: Sociology of religion, vegan studies, food studies, late modernity



Rationale

- Veganism is growing exponentially and is thus of timely importance
- Religion is still relevant – Estimates suggest up to 2/3 of the population of England [1] identify with one of the Abrahamic religions
- **Veganism within religious and ethnic groups is very much absent from the academic literature**
- Valuable insight into how vegan and religious lifestyles come together and complement one another
- More effective communication and advocacy between vegan and religious communities



[1] 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>

Methodology

36 participants (12 of each religion)

- Identify as Jewish/ Christian/ Muslim
- Identify as vegan
- Aged 18+
- Live in the UK and have done so for 5+ years



Multiple Qualitative Methods:

- 36 semi-structured interviews: 40mins – 2hrs 25mins (av. 1hr 30)
- 3 WhatsApp diary groups spanning 3-4 months
- 6 Virtual Participant Observations: cooking demonstrations and kitchen tours

Abrahamic Religions on Veganism

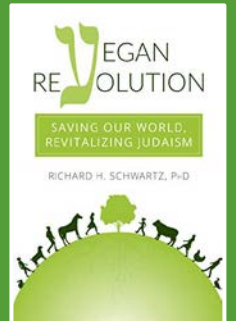
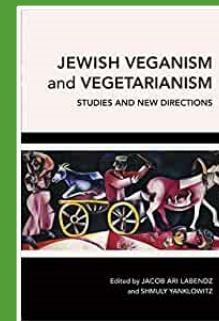
Judaism on Veganism

- Kashrut (Jewish dietary law) generally governs animal products, and the mixing of them, but grape products need to be kosher too
- No laws against veganism, many teachings in support of veganism
- G-d's ideal diet, Israelites punished for craving meat, Jewish values (tza'ar ba'alei chayim - prohibition against cruelty to animals, bal tashchit - not wasting or unnecessarily destroying, tikkun olam - healing the world)
- Some challenges: tefillin, Sefer Torah, mezuzah



Veganism in Judaism

- Various organisations advocating veganism
- Various activists, rabbis, and authors advocating veganism
- In 2017 70+ rabbis called on Jews to adopt veganism
- World's first Jewish Vegan Centre opened in London in 2019



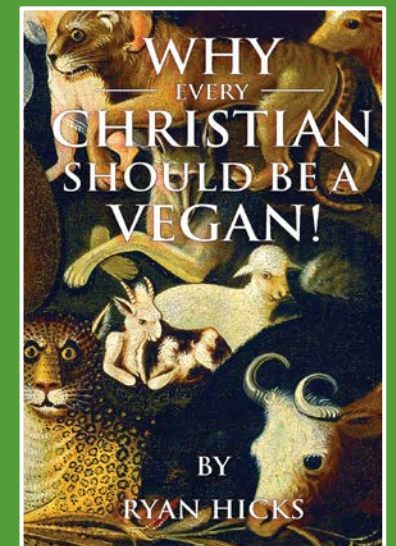
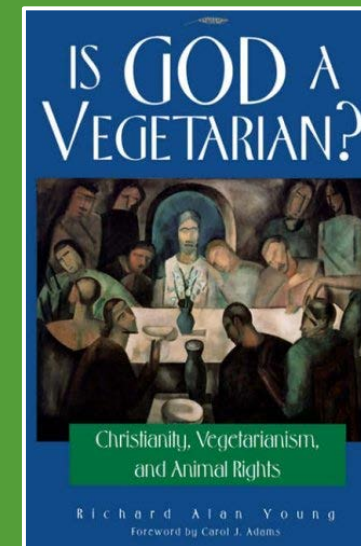
Christianity on Veganism

- No dietary restrictions
- No laws against veganism, many teachings in support of veganism
- God's ideal diet, Israelites punished for craving meat
- Stories of Jesus's life – compassion towards animals
- Christian values – stewardship, animal flourishing
- Veganism is prescribed on Wednesdays, Fridays, and during Lent for Orthodox Christians
- Daniel fast – go vegan for 21 days



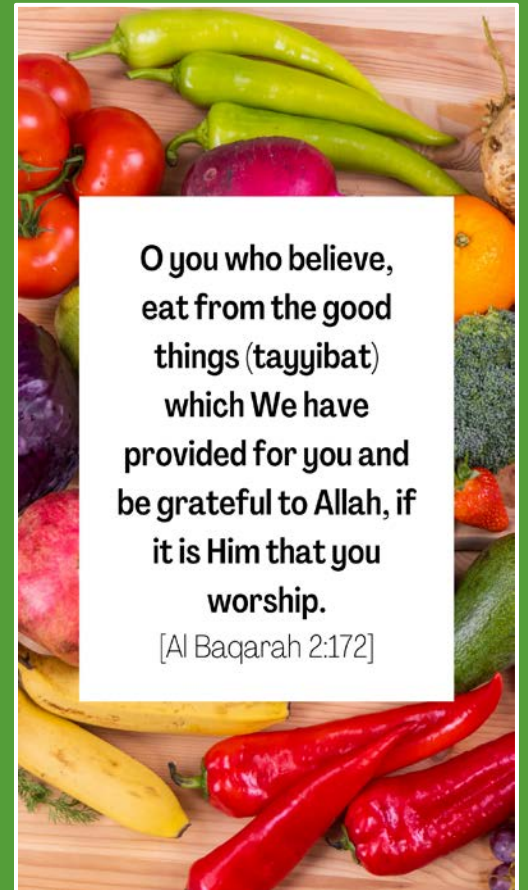
Veganism in Christianity

- Various organisations advocating veganism
- Growing concern where animal welfare is concerned
- Books exploring related topics, some by scholars, some by activists



Islam on Veganism

- Dietary law generally governs meat and tends to focus on halal (permissibility); tayyib (wholesome/pure/lawful/clean) is often neglected
- If there is any doubt whether meat is halal, out of obligatory precaution it should not be consumed; not done in practice
- No laws against veganism, many teachings in support of veganism
- Multiple hadiths concerning the treatment of animals, compassion for animals and looking after the environment
- Islamic values, such as khilafa (stewardship)



Veganism in Islam

- Organisations emerging advocating veganism in Islam
- Numerous online communities and activists
- A documentary in production exploring Muslim vegans



Veganism in Religious Spaces

As reported by my participants

Veganism in Religious Spaces

Food isn't always present in religious spaces, so veganism doesn't always come into it, but when it is present, it can be problematic due to obstacles to commensality, inclusion/exclusion, etc.

Study conducted in 2021 – some COVID restrictions still in place

Religious spaces vary enormously – some are very inclusive, others much less so. This can impact one's experience in these spaces.

Some participants would take (and share) their own food, some would eat beforehand, some would avoid gatherings where food was present, some were very vocal about their veganism, some were very secretive.



Jewish Spaces – Religious Spaces

Participant Experiences

Orthodox Synagogue: Poor provision of vegan food, not able to take own food due to strict kashrut laws

Reform Synagogue: Actively advocates veganism and offers vegan food at all events

Worship: Some participants choose to wear tefillin (leather phylacteries). Of these some used second-hand tefillin whilst others continued use the tefillin they had bought before going vegan

Shabbat Dinner & Festivals: Depends on how open-minded the host is. Generally most family members were happy to cater

Shabbaton: Asked for dietary requirements and provided vegan food

Youth Camps: Everything was vegetarian, even moving towards veganism



Christian Spaces – Religious Spaces

Participant Experiences

Church (Communion): Some denominations use a non-alcoholic wine which is vegan so participants can partake in this; other denominations insist on red wine, so some participants opted out of taking Communion

Church (Tea/Coffee/Cake): General open-mindedness, one Church has provided vegan cake from the second week the participant attended, some participants take own vegan milk

Sunday Roasts & Festivals: Depends on how open-minded the host is. Generally most family members were happy to cater

Christian Workplaces: Canteen always had vegan options

Church Band: Host churches always catered



Islamic Spaces – Religious Spaces

Participant Experiences

Mosque – Dates are common, different cultures will favour different foods, with some having vegan options and others not. Most participants take their own food, eat beforehand, or avoid gatherings where food will be present

Hajj – Very difficult, it is assumed everyone eats meat

Festivals – Depends on how open-minded the host is. Many family members were happy to cater but some participants felt they wouldn't be catered for so avoided the gathering

Convert Circles – Much more inclusive, one participant was on an organising committee so could ensure vegan options would be present



The Kitchen

Everyday foods: Diverse cuisines, veganising dishes, experimentation

Sharing with non-vegans: Boundary management, organisation of space

Judaism in the Kitchen:

Cultural foods: All of my Jewish participants were Ashkenazi and so enjoyed traditional Ashkenazi foods. Many are non-vegan though, so participants had to experiment with recipes and learn how to veganise them

Sharing with non-vegans: Boundary management in line with Jewish law

Extra considerations in the Jewish vegan kitchen: Grape products, tithing products from Israel, replacing foods/crockery in Pesach



Veganism and the Religious Calendar

As reported by my participants

Veganism in the Religious Calendar

Food is central to the majority of religious festivals and rituals, so veganism can cause obstacles to commensality, inclusion/exclusion, etc. Typically there are traditional foods that are associated with different festivals and oftentimes they comprise meat and other animal-based foods.

Participants veganise traditional dishes so as to be able to continue partaking in these festivals and rituals but in a vegan way. Substitution is common too.



Jewish Calendar – Part 1

Rosh Hashanah: Traditional foods e.g. honey cake, apples in honey – veganised

Yom Kippur: Fast day, any food is OK, no traditions as such

Sukkot: Food should be eaten in a sukkah, traditional symbols (lulav, etrog) – vegan

Hanukkah: Traditional foods e.g. doughnuts, latkes, oily foods – veganised

Tu B'Shvat: New Year for the Trees, lots of fruit – vegan-friendly festival



Jewish Calendar – Part 2

Purim: Traditional foods e.g. kreplach and hamantaschen – veganised

Pesach: Seder plate – substitution in line with symbolism

Shavuot: Traditional foods e.g. dairy products and cheesecake – veganised

Shabbat: Challah and kiddish wine, chicken soup – veganised

There are also minor religious observances or cultural days too



Christian Calendar

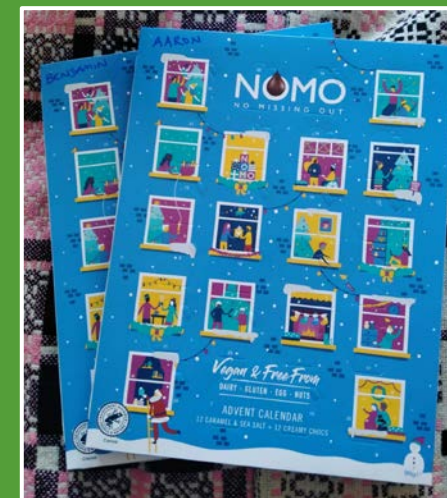
Christmas: Traditional foods e.g. roast dinner, mince pies, advent calendars – veganised or substituting with a vegan product

Easter: Traditional foods e.g. roast dinner, chocolate eggs

Sunday: Traditional foods e.g. Sunday roast

British culture was especially evident among the Christian participants, although not all Christian participants were British

There are also minor religious observances or cultural days too



Islamic Calendar

Ramadan: Month of fasting, dates are common for breaking the fast, any food OK, participants felt a vegan diet tended to help with fasting

Eid-ul-Fitr: Cultural foods e.g. Bangladeshi participants ate biryani, Afghan participants ate kabuli palau, white converts often ate foods from a Muslim country – veganised, sweet treats – veganised

Eid-al-Adha: Animal sacrifice (see next slide), cultural foods as above – veganised

There are also minor religious observances too



Islamic Calendar – Eid-al-Adha

Animal sacrifice is a very contentious issue. Vegan Muslims who do not partake in the sacrifice can experience pushback and stigma from other Muslims. It is also a time of year when vegan Muslims feel ostracised from the wider vegan community and may experience Islamophobia. This results in feelings of loneliness and exclusion.

Animal sacrifice can even be contentious among vegan Muslims. Whilst most do a vegan-friendly alternative, some still partake in the ritual:

- 2 participants are still living at home with parents so don't need to do anything, but intend to do a vegan-friendly alternative in the future
- 8 participants do a vegan-friendly alternative e.g. donating money to pay for vegan food or distributing vegan food themselves
- 2 participants continue to pay for the sacrifice – they consider it to be an obligation and they won't question the religion

What does Islam say? Only one school of thought considers it obligatory; all others say it's "strongly recommended" but that there is no issue in not doing it. Some scholars have now even recommended against the sacrifice.



Thank you!



@E_AtayeeBennett



@ellie.atayee.bennett

www.ellieatayeebennett.com

