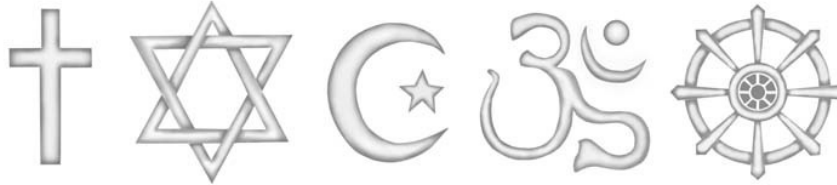


## FAQs on Food, Faith, and Philosophy



### Why is the spiritual aspect of vegetarianism important?

Healthy people need to combine the various things they think and do into a complete whole. Since some sort of spiritual or philosophical orientation is an important part of life for the vast majority of Americans, and often becomes more so as we get older, many people interested in following a vegetarian diet will want to see how it fits in with the rest of their life. Often people find the spiritual reasons for becoming vegetarian very motivating, and find that their decision to become a vegetarian is more sustainable when they fully understand these reasons.

### Can you give me some examples of vegetarian religious leaders and groups in history?

*Thanks be to God, since I gave up flesh and wine I have been delivered from all physical ills.*  
—John Wesley, founder of Methodism

Many famous biblical figures, including Adam, Eve, and Daniel, were vegetarians. The Roman Catholic Church has four vegetarian orders. The Franciscan, Trappist, Benedictine, and Carthusian orders all espouse a vegetarian diet. The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, was a vegetarian, as was the founder of the Salvation Army, General Bramwell Booth. Ellen G. White, a founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was a devoted vegetarian. The famous theologian Albert Schweitzer was a vegetarian, too. Martin Luther King's wife, Coretta Scott King, was a vegan, as is his son Dexter Scott King.

*Veganism has given me a higher level of awareness and spirituality.*  
—Dexter Scott King, son of Martin Luther King

The first chief rabbi of Israel, Abraham Kook, was a vegetarian. So was chief rabbi Shlomo Goren. The chief rabbi of Haifa is also a vegetarian, as are other important rabbis.

Examples in Eastern religions include the famous Hindu leader, Mahatma Gandhi, and the founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha. While we're on the subject of Eastern religion and thought, did you know that Confucius was a vegetarian? In the Muslim world, many people in a sect known as the Sufis also follow a vegetarian diet.

### How important to spiritual practice is following a vegetarian diet?

Vegetarian diets form an important part of the spiritual practice of many people in many religions. However, it should be kept in perspective. It is a part of spiritual life, which includes many other parts as well, such as prayer, proper behavior towards other people, and charity.

## **How will following a vegetarian diet express my religious values?**

What your diet says about your religious values depends on which religious or spiritual orientation you have. While there is plenty of overlap between the different religions, each religion has also some unique features with regard to food in general and vegetarianism in particular.

## **How does following a vegetarian diet express Christian values?**

The Christian values of reverence for human life, honoring creation, loving your neighbor, and compassion are powerfully expressed by the vegetarian, who preserves human health, sustains the environment, makes more food available to the hungry, and shows compassion to animals. While Christianity does not require a vegetarian diet, more and more Christians are going beyond the minimum requirements and consider a vegetarian diet as a further expression of Christian values in their daily life. In his letter to Philemon, Paul teaches the faithful to do good by voluntarily going beyond the legal minimums, "So that the good [we] do might not be forced but voluntary." (Philem. 14) A vegetarian diet reflects the goodness of Christian values that you achieve when you go the extra mile.

## **How does following a vegetarian diet express Jewish values?**

The Jewish values of preserving life and health, avoiding causing pain to animals, preserving natural resources, and providing food for the poor are all embodied in a vegetarian diet. In fact, the Talmud says that "man ideally should not eat meat." Given the harsh conditions on factory farms and what we know about the effect of meat on our health, global hunger, and the environment, some rabbis have begun to say that meat is no longer acceptable under Jewish law. While meat that is certified kosher may be acceptable to observant Jews, it nevertheless violates the basic tenets of Judaism.

Many rabbis also point out that the Torah states that the original diet meant for mankind was vegetarian, and that the prophets teach that the diet in the world to come will again become vegetarian. Also, the book of Daniel describes, in a very compelling way, how greater health is obtained by following a vegetarian diet. Finally, nowhere in the Torah is there a commandment to eat meat.

## **What Buddhist values are expressed by following a vegetarian diet?**

Four of the major themes that run throughout Buddhism are the importance of great wisdom and great compassion, the interconnectedness of all living beings, and the importance of generating good *karma* (the idea that our thoughts and actions affect our future lives). The vegetarian diet expresses these values well; it is a very wise diet, because it is good for our health and the health of the environment, it is compassionate, it honors our interconnectedness with the animals, and it does not result in bad *karma* since it does not harm other conscious beings (humans or animals).

Buddha's admonition not to eat meat couldn't be clearer when he says, "Whoever consumes meat extinguishes the seed of great compassion." The Dalai Lama advocates a vegetarian diet, saying, "I do not see any reason why animals should be slaughtered to serve as human diet when there are so many substitutes. After all, man can live without meat."

## **What Hindu values are expressed by following a vegetarian diet?**

Two fundamental concepts of the Hindu scripture are *ahimsa* (the practice of not causing harm to other living beings) and *karma*.

In the Vedic scriptures there are many passages that support vegetarianism. One passage states, "Having well considered the origin of flesh foods, and the cruelty of fettering and slaying corporeal beings, let man entirely abstain eating flesh." Emphasizing the Hindu concept of the unity of all life, Srila Prabhupada, the founder of the Hare Krishna movement, said, "Everyone is God's creature, although in different bodies and dresses."

Perhaps one of the most famous vegetarians of recent times is Mahatma Gandhi, who said, "I do feel that spiritual progress does demand at some stage that we should cease to kill our fellow creatures."

### **What Muslim values are expressed by following a vegetarian diet?**

Mohammed was thought to be concerned about the welfare of animals. The Koran says, "There is not an animal on the earth, nor a flying creature flying on two wings, but they are peoples like unto you." Tradition, or *hadith*, quotes Mohammed as saying, "Whoever is kind to the lesser creatures of God is kind to himself." With this in mind, a Muslim would have a definite basis for selecting a vegetarian diet.

However, except for a mystical Muslim sect called Sufis, and the Hunza, a group that lives in the foothills of the Himalayas in northern Pakistan, vegetarianism has not been widespread among Muslims. This may be beginning to change as some Muslims are starting to explore the benefits of a vegetarian diet. It should be mentioned that the Hunza are acknowledged to be the healthiest people in the entire world.

### **Are there some other smaller religions that also advocate a vegetarian diet for their followers?**

In the Sikh religion, originating in India, the Namdhari sect and the Bhajan Golden Temple movement are strictly vegetarian. According to Sikh scholar Swaran Singh Sanahi, "Sikh scriptures support vegetarianism fully." The Jain religion, also originating in India, follows the *ahimsa* principle (not causing harm to other living beings) quite strictly. The Jains are famous for their devotion to and advocacy of vegetarianism.

### **Have there been great thinkers and philosophers who taught the vegetarian way?**

Some of the biggest names in philosophy have spoken out against using animals for food. While these philosophers were all people of deep faith, often their support of vegetarianism was advocated in a secular context as well as a religious one.

The concerns of the great philosophers who supported the vegetarian way were mostly centered on the harsh treatment of animals raised for food, and how such treatment would affect mankind. For instance, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant warned that hardening our hearts towards animals would affect our dealings with other humans. Voltaire, a well-known French philosopher, took issue with some people of his day who had no regard for animals at all, saying, "How pitiful and what poverty of mind, to have said that animals are machines deprived of understanding and feeling." Another French philosopher, Rousseau, thought that eating meat was not part of the natural human diet.

The famous Roman philosopher, Seneca, and the great Greek philosophers Plato, Socrates, and Pythagoras are all thought to have been vegetarians. In fact, until the Renaissance, vegetarians were known as Pythagoreans. Confucius, the famous Chinese ethical philosopher and teacher, was also a vegetarian. These men were all concerned with the cruelty to animals that comes with using them for food.

*Nature has endowed man with a noble and excellent principle of compassion, which extends itself also to dumb animals—whence this compassion has some resemblance to a prince towards his subjects. And it is certain that the noblest of souls are the most extensively compassionate.*

—Francis Bacon, developer of the scientific method