

# *AND IF I DON'T BELIEVE ??? IDEAS FOR VEGETARIANS IN PRISON WHO DO NOT BELIEVE IN GOD*

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*PLEASE NOTE: WE ARE NOT LAWYERS,  
THIS ARTICLE IS NOT INTENDED TO GIVE YOU LEGAL ADVICE,  
WE ARE ADVOCATES AND VOLUNTEER CLERGY,  
WE WANT TO HELP ANY PERSON IN ANY PRISON WHO WANTS A  
VEGETARIAN DIET,  
IF YOU ARE UNCERTAIN OF YOUR LEGAL RIGHTS OR OPTIONS,  
PLEASE BE SURE TO CONSULT AN ATTORNEY.*

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So, you are incarcerated in a prison and request to be put on a vegetarian diet. Maybe you are given a form to fill out that asks for your religion. Or maybe you are referred to a Chaplain or Food Service Manager.

Eventually, though, you may be told that you are not eligible for vegetarian diet.

Why aren't you eligible?

You may be told that "only members of recognized religions that teach vegetarianism are eligible for vegetarian diets."

Or you may be told "You have to be a member of a religion to get a vegetarian diet."

What are you supposed to do? What options do you have?

You may try to explain to prison staff that you have always been a vegetarian. Maybe you try to explain that you are a vegetarian because you don't want to kill animals for food. Or maybe you try to explain that you believe being a vegetarian is a moral way to support the environment and allow more people to be fed.

Maybe that works and your request is approved. But what if your request is still denied? What if you still get the same answer from the prison staff – something like: "Only members of recognized religions that teach vegetarianism are eligible for vegetarian diets."

## *VEGETARIANISM AND THE MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS*

One thing you can do is read out brochure ***Vegetarianism and the Major World Religions***. You can write to us (our address is on the last page) and we will send you a copy.

***Vegetarianism and the Major World Religions*** looks at and explains how many of the world's major religions - Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Mormonism, and the Baha'i Faith – all teach vegetarianism.

We encourage members of these religions to advocate for a vegetarian diet based on their religious convictions.

If you are a member of one of these religions ( Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Mormonism, or the Baha'i Faith) and have requested a vegetarian diet but have been denied your request, please write to us. (Our address is given on the last page.)

We will answer your letter. We can contact prison staff to support your request, and can also get letters from clergy affiliated with your religion to support your request.

## *BUT WHAT IF I DON'T BELIEVE ?*

But what if you are not a member of any of these religions? Or what if you grew up in one of these religions but no longer believe in it?

Some of the volunteers who work with ***Prison Vegetarian Project*** are in the same situation – we believe vegetarianism is an important moral practice though we are not members of one of the major world religions mentioned above.

What else can you do to support your request for a vegetarian diet?

Some of us who do not believe in any of the major religions listed above consider ourselves to be Humanists.

Maybe you are also a Humanist.

## *HUMANISM AND HUMANISTS*

Here is a little about what Humanists believe:

The ***International Humanist and Ethical Union*** states "Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality."

The ***American Humanist Association*** states: "Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity. The lifestance of Humanism -- guided by reason, inspired by compassion, and informed by experience -- encourages us to live life well and fully. It evolved through the ages and continues to develop through the efforts of thoughtful people who recognize that values and ideals, however carefully wrought, are subject to change as our knowledge and understandings advance."

The ***Council for Secular Humanist*** states: "Secular Humanism is a way of thinking and living that aims to bring out the best in people so that all people can have the best in life. Secular humanists reject supernatural and authoritarian beliefs. They affirm that we must take responsibility for our own lives and the communities and world in which we live. Secular humanism emphasizes reason and scientific inquiry, individual freedom and responsibility, human values and compassion, and the need for tolerance and cooperation."

## *SO WHAT DO HUMANISTS BELIEVE?*

A few things are clear about all of these definitions of Humanism:

- Humanists believe in leading moral and ethical lives.
- Humanists believe in the central roles of **reason**, **free choice**, and **cooperation**. These values evolve over time in each person. We have all made mistakes in the past, but we can become more ethical over time.
- Humanists believe that we should act ethically because it is the right thing to do. Humanists do not believe that the reason for acting ethically is based on divine revelation, the teachings of prophets or deities, or a supernatural god.
- Humanists may read the Bible, the Koran, and the Upanishads, but we believe they were all written by human beings like ourselves.

## *WHY WOULD A HUMANIST BE A VEGETARIAN?*

A Humanist might be a vegetarian for the following reasons:

- After having thought about the state of the environment, there is a realization that more people can be fed off of our limited resources by living a vegetarian lifestyle.
- In considering the rights of animals, there is a realization that killing animals for food is unnecessarily cruel.
- In thinking about one's own moral evolution, there is a desire to try to become a more ethical person, and practicing vegetarianism is part of the process of becoming more ethical.

## *IS HUMANISM A RELIGION ?*

All of these statements appear to us to be good reasons why a Humanist would want to be a vegetarian.

But, getting back to our initial point: Do Humanists have a right to get vegetarian diets in prisons if the prisons only allow these diets for people whose religion teaches vegetarianism?

Is Humanism a religion? If it is a religion, do members of this religion have a right to vegetarian diets?

## *WHAT DOES THE UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT SAY ABOUT HUMANISM?*

The Supreme Court has affirmed that Humanism is a religion. See the next page for details on the Supreme Court ruling.

We believe that, as members of a recognized religion that teaches vegetarianism, Humanists have a right to vegetarian diets.

## *HUMANISM AND THE SUPREME COURT*

In a famous legal ruling, the Supreme Court held that Secular Humanism is a religion. The 1961 case was *Torcaso v. Watkins* (367 U.S. 488).

The issue before the Supreme Court concerned the appellant Roy Torcaso. (An appellant is the party or person that brings an action to court.)

Mr. Torcaso was a practicing Humanist in Maryland and he refused to declare his belief in God. At the time, stating a belief in God was required by a Maryland State law in order for a person to be recognized as a notary public.

Mr. Torcaso objected to the State law that was requiring him to state his belief in God. In ruling on the case, the Supreme Court held that the requirement for such an oath "invades appellant's freedom of belief and religion."

In other words, the Court declared that the "no establishment" clause of the First Amendment reached more than churches of theistic faiths.

The First Amendment to the Constitution states in part that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Here is what the Supreme Court wrote:

*We repeat and again reaffirm that neither a State nor the Federal Government can constitutionally force a person to "profess a belief or disbelief in any religion." Neither can constitutionally pass laws or impose requirements which aid all religions as against non-believers, and neither can aid those religions based on a belief in the existence of God as against **those religions founded on different beliefs.** (The emphasis has been added – see the next page.)*

## *WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH VEGETARIAN DIETS IN PRISONS?*

It gets a bit complicated, but it has to do with a footnote to the emphasized section in the above quote that refers to "religions founded on different beliefs." In the footnote to that section, the Supreme Court refers to Secular Humanism as a religion. Here is the footnote:

*Among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God are Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism, and others...*

Here's the point: The Supreme Court considers Humanism to be a recognized religion. So, if you are a person in prison who does not believe in a supernatural god, but you do believe in the Humanist statements we reprinted above, you should be able to state the following:

- I am a member of the Humanist Religion.
  - The Supreme Court has recognized that Humanism is a religion.
  - My request for a vegetarian diet is based on what my religion, Humanism, teaches.
  - Prison regulations allow vegetarian diets for members of recognized religions that teach vegetarianism.
  - My request for a vegetarian diet should be granted because:
    - I am a member of the Humanist religion, which has been recognized by the Supreme Court.
- and*
- Humanism supports the practice of vegetarianism.

## *SUMMARY*

We are eager to hear from people in prison facilities that restrict vegetarian diets to members of particular religions. In particular, we are interested to know whether, if these people base their request for vegetarian diets on their Humanist beliefs, the prisons will grant the request.

If you are a Humanist and are requesting a vegetarian diet, and are having problems getting your request approved, please let us know. We can try to help, with your permission, by asking Humanist clergy to write letters of support to prison officials.

Feel free to contact us for more information or to request assistance:

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*PRISON VEGETARIAN PROJECT IS A PROUD AND GRATEFUL  
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