



'What do humanists eat?'

Marilyn Mason

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

Humanist principles can lead to very different conclusions about the right way to eat; humanists, like most other people, enjoy celebrating with food.

In a Religious Education context 'What do humanists eat?' is a question humanists are sometimes asked, and, because we tend to think about what we eat and where it comes from, we will usually give thoughtful, reasoned responses. The only problem is that the answers may be many and various, and will very much depend on which humanist you ask. Of course, this can also be true of religious believers, who are by no means uniform in their thinking or adherence to rules¹, but, in some ways, food stands as a paradigm of the humanist worldview, which involves a commitment to reason and to trying to live a good life, but with no authority or rulebook to direct or enforce any particular way of doing so. There are no food rules or taboos in Humanism – apart from those of the surrounding culture, so, for example, most British humanists probably have reservations about eating horsemeat or locusts, though not all – see the section below on omnivores. On food, as on so many other issues, humanists have to work out and act on their own values, and we can be as conflicted about the ethics of food as anyone else.

For this article, I conducted some informal research: I discussed the ethics of food, attitudes to food rules and food as celebration, with a random group of humanists, those from my local humanist group who get together monthly for coffee and conversation; I also asked British Humanist Association members for their ideas and opinions, which drew an interesting, varied, but, inevitably, self-selected range of responses. This second group can be assumed to be more interested and confident in their values and choices than the first 'focus group', which was more of a cross-section.

What do I eat?

For the record, I would describe my own attitude to food as 'confused ethical, could do better': I am concerned about the environmental effects of my food choices, worry about the depletion of fish stocks in our oceans, try to eat only humanely farmed dairy products and meat (and not very much of the latter), and dither between locally produced food (low in food miles) and

¹ See, for example, [Shap Journal 2007 on 'Diversity and Difference'](#)



imported food (not only more interesting, but providing income – and, if Fairtrade, reasonable working conditions – in developing countries and often lower in its carbon footprint than food produced in Britain or Europe). I sometimes eat organic because I think organic farming is better for the environment, but am not convinced that it is any healthier or that organic farming could feed the world. Unlike many environmentally-concerned people, I am not particularly worried by GM foods, which may have the potential to feed the world's hungry. A recent local discussion, 'Food – is it ethical to eat?', left me even more confused about the right thing to do, so complex are the issues. I really think that I ought to be a vegetarian or a vegan, but my weak will and liking for the occasional slice of (free range) bacon or chicken prevail. But for a mixed faith gathering or a get-together of my 'greener' friends, I would serve all or mostly vegetarian food – as I think that most people can eat vegetarian food, and much of it is delicious.

The random sample

The humanist 'focus group' confirmed my impression, gained when working at the British Humanist Association, that there was a higher than average proportion of vegetarians among humanists. Out of the 40 or so active members in my local humanist group (those who come to meetings and social events) there are three vegans and several more vegetarians, and there was one vegan and one vegetarian in my smaller "focus group" of nine people. This is indeed much higher than the national average², and humanist social gatherings always have to provide vegetarian and vegan alternatives.

In the course of our discussion it emerged that others ate little meat, largely on environmental grounds, and several chose to eat only free-range meat on animal welfare grounds (many humanists extend their concerns about suffering to other animals, not just humans, as people often assume). Also, for environmental reasons, several tried to eat seasonal and local or organic food as much as possible. The vegetarian cited animal welfare as her reason, while the vegan disliked the exploitation of animals for any product, even honey, but also admitted to squeamishness about meat. One humanist said that the over-indulgence he had observed when living in the USA had persuaded him to moderate his own consumption, and he expressed this in terms of revulsion against excess and waste, as did a couple of older humanists who recalled and had been influenced by war-time rationing. A couple also took Fairtrade into account when shopping for food. Our discussion confirmed a general thoughtfulness about food and where it comes from and a diversity of approaches, but also perhaps that this sample of humanists was largely middle-class and well informed about food and environmental issues.

Humanist vegetarians and vegans

The wider humanist community is just as diverse, though I received most responses from vegetarians and vegans. There is an active Humanist Vegetarian Group whose website³, includes articles on topics such as 'Darwin and Human Kinship with Non-human Animals', 'Do animals feel love?', 'Help save the planet: vegetarianism and the environment', titles which

² For comparison, a Food Standards Agency UK wide survey of 3,627 adults in Aug/Oct 2007 found 2% of respondents "completely vegetarian", and an additional 5% "partly vegetarian" (more in England than Scotland). A Defra survey UK wide survey of 3618 adults on attitudes, knowledge and behaviour in relation to the environment, published November 2007 found 3% of respondents to be vegetarian, an additional 2% vegan, and an additional 5% who ate only fish and/or chicken as well as vegetarian food. The highest number of vegetarian/vegans was found in 16-29 year old females at 7%. See <http://www.vegso.org/info/statveg.html> for more information.

A 2001 Bromley Hospitals NHS Trust guide for staff on all religions, *To Comfort Always*, in the section on humanist patients, stated: 'Diet, no special needs but a higher proportion are vegetarian/vegan than in the population as a whole'.

³ The Humanist Vegetarian Group, its 'ThinkHumanism' HVG Forum, and many interesting articles, can be found at <http://www.humanist.veggroup.org>.



reflect the main humanist grounds for vegetarianism: compassion for kindred creatures, on Darwinian principles⁴, and concern for the environment.

Some humanists start as vegetarians and, driven by logic and the wish to be ethically consistent, become vegans. 'I am a vegan humanist and take the view that all creatures, including humans, should be treated with compassion and be allowed to live a life free from fear, pain, captivity, and exploitation,' writes one. 'All animal produce used in food whether from meat, fish, milk or eggs involves some or all of these and I choose to have a diet based on vegetable matter... Also, the production of meat causes around 18% of greenhouse gas emissions (more than cars) so I am trying to save the planet too!' Another vegan argues that the task of justification rests with the carnivores: meat-eating 'is unnecessary and probably cruel. The vegan diet requires less land, water and fuel in production, because these resources can go straight into growing vegetable matter and not into a wasteful intermediate expenditure by being used to feed and nurture animals.' Another writes: 'For me, humanism is about making personal choices based on facts as well as accepting that the consequences of your actions lie solely with you... I know I would be unable to kill a living being and feel that it would be deeply hypocritical for me to allow someone else to do the 'dirty work' on my behalf. For me the only choice was to have nothing to do with the inherent cruelty that all forms of animal exploitation entail and go vegan.' Some vegans and vegetarians cite humanist philosopher Peter Singer on speciesism⁵: for example, Singer asks whether we would treat orphaned human beings with similar mental capacities to non-human animals in the same way we treat those animals; if not, he argues, this is speciesist prejudice at work.

Vegans and vegetarians also claim that their diet is healthier⁶, and one lifelong vegetarian, raw food vegan and athlete, says that his choice is partly health-driven⁷.

Humanist omnivores

On the other hand, another humanist writes: 'I've no qualms about eating whatever is indigenous wherever I am. I've had snakes and fried caterpillars in Thailand, and all manner of parts of reindeer in the Scandinavian Arctic, among other things. I have asked, but never got a satisfactory reply from vegetarians to the question of what they would eat if they lived in the high Arctic or on high mountains, where vegetables will not grow. To me, animals are the better way of utilising the available resources in these areas, instead of burning fossil fuels to import things for human consumption. The Welsh hills are more suited to raising sheep than anything else, so let's use them that way'. Another says, 'Eating meat is a natural part of the human diet. Provided meat, poultry or fish is produced and killed humanely I have no problem. I do try and ensure the fish, if caught wild, is from sustainable sources... I have a vegetarian sister who has a dog and two cats and buys more meat than we do!' Another humanist omnivore comments: 'We know that animals can suffer, and we have an obligation to minimise that suffering ... and to make their lives as enjoyable as possible while they are being reared for meat. I am a supporter of Compassion in World Farming⁸ for these reasons, and I always try to buy ethically reared and slaughtered meat, though it is expensive and not always

⁴ 'Man in his arrogance thinks himself a great work, worthy of the interposition of a deity. More humble, and I believe true, to consider him created from animal.' (Charles Darwin, quoted in Keynes, R. 2001: *Annie's Box, Charles Darwin, his Daughter and Human Evolution*. London, Fourth Estate.

⁵ See Peter Singer 'All Animals Are Equal' (from Tom Regan & Peter Singer (eds.), *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, New Jersey, 1989, pp148-162) at <http://www.animal-rights-library.com/texts-m/singer02.htm>; and *Speciesism* at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speciesism>

⁶ From a 2003 study: 'It is the position of Dietitians of Canada and the American Dietetic Association that appropriately planned vegetarian diets are healthful, nutritionally adequate and provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases.'

http://www.eatright.org/cps/rde/xchg/ada/hs.xsl/advocacy_933_ENU_HTML.htm

⁷ See 'Rawfighter thinking clearly about diet and fitness' at www.rawfighter.com.

⁸ See the website of Compassion in World Farming at <http://www.ciwf.org.uk>.



available, especially in restaurants. I also try not to use businesses which sell halal or kosher meat.'

Traditions and celebrations

Humanists' attitudes to other groups' food traditions are normally tolerant and accommodating, as long as they do not involve cruelty or impinge on other people's freedoms: 'Living in a free, democratic, secular society,' writes one humanist, 'means that everyone has to tolerate other people's religious practices, but not to the point of restricting one's own freedoms, or secular or cultural practices.' For humanists, tradition or authority cannot outweigh objections to cruelty, to animals as much as humans, and there is a current humanist campaign against ritual slaughter in the UK, because of the legal exemption from pre-stunning given for slaughter for religious reasons⁹. Pre-stunning is widely acknowledged to alleviate animals' pain and distress¹⁰, and has been accepted by some religious authorities.

As for food traditions, there are very few that one could call specifically humanist, and we generally borrow and adapt the celebrations and foods of our surrounding cultures, many of which have become, or always were, quite secular¹¹. For us in Britain that means birthdays and anniversaries, Easter, Bonfire Night, Christmas, New Year, and for some humanists, 'Winterval' or the Winter Solstice. For example: 'My family are all humanists for three generations, so when we celebrate being together at Christmas we are not celebrating Christ anymore than we are celebrating Janus in January or Thor on Thursdays. We are celebrating being together, a year that has passed and a new year to come, and we are celebrating it at that time of year because it is winter – when people have traditionally celebrated these things in hope – and because it is the time, in a country where public holidays have largely been dictated by the Christian calendar, when everyone is on holiday. Food is an important part of that celebration for me, especially the shared experience of eating things that you would not usually eat, and praising the cooks (in my case, mother and grandmother).'

Occasionally humanists will create a new food for a new occasion, for example, on the internet one can find recipes for 'primordial soup' to celebrate Charles Darwin's birthday. But it is not easy to create a tradition, and some humanists occasionally express a kind of wistful envy of, for example, Jewish traditions that revolve around family meals, or Thanksgiving, which could certainly be adapted to humanist beliefs. Humanists tend not to want to thank deities for their good fortune or to say traditional 'graces', but have created their own forms of thanks directed to the fellow-humans who help to get food to our tables¹². Most of us, of course, share the widespread human appreciation of food and hospitality as a way of giving and sharing, and of bringing people together for celebration, pleasure and companionship. As one humanist put it: 'Food can give a great deal of pleasure, and some of my food decisions are more to do with fulfillment than either health or ethics. I enjoy cooking for other people and eating with friends, and on these occasions, the food I make may not be the healthiest, but it is tasty and enjoyable.'

Further reading

'Holiday Party' - a joke to share with anyone who has ever had to cater for a diversity of food rules and preferences at <http://www.snopes.com/holidays/christmas/humor/party.asp>

⁹ See <http://www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/ethical-issues/Ritual-Slaughter>.

¹⁰ For example, see Farm Animal Welfare Council (1985) 'Report on the Welfare of Livestock when Slaughtered by Religious Methods' (London: HMSO)

¹¹ For more on humanist celebrations see

<http://www.humanismforschools.org.uk/pdfs/religious%20festivals%20and%20ceremonies.pdf>

<http://www.humanismforschools.org.uk/pdfs/celebrations%20and%20ceremonies.pdf>

¹² There are examples of "humanist graces" at

<http://secularseasons.org/celebrations/graces.html#graces>