

History of Vegetarianism



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The history of vegetarianism is also a story of tireless fighters, visionaries and idealists.

Origin of vegetarianism

The inhabitants of the earth were vegetarian since the very beginning, according to the creation story in the Bible (Genesis, 1.29). Many myths and stories from various peoples testify that early in our evolution, people did not eat meat. Even if these narratives cannot be proven, it is at least certain that humans have lived without eating meat most of the time - to this day only the wealthy could afford regular meat consumption.

Religion as origin

The earliest traces of the vegetarian movement come from India, which emerged in the 8th century BC from a predecessor of Hinduism. Even today, most people in India live according to Hindu principles - and many of them are vegetarian.¹

Origin in Europe

Western vegetarianism took some time to get through. The Greek philosopher Pythagoras started it about 530 BC in a school he founded in Italy. By his belief in the widespread teaching of the wandering of souls, the slaughter of all living beings was a murder. For this reason, vegetarianism was also referred to as an "abstention from the spiritual." Pythagoras also did not allow his pupils to eat eggs and to wear woolen clothes.² (Leitzmann, S. 39)

Plato anticipates problems of meat consumption

In Plato's most important work 'The State' he too takes up the idea of ??vegetarian nutrition. There is talk of an originally healthy city in which people eat vegetarian. It was only in the larger, unhealthy city that people began to eat meat. The consequences of this are disgrace, warfare for meadowland and diseases. How right Plato already was with his estimations 400 years before Christ!

Plutarch and his animal love

The activity of Pythagoras and his disciples had a decisive influence on the development of vegetarianism. In his day Plutarch (45-125) had new and unique thoughts about animal love and animal welfare and used these arguments for vegetarianism:

«For a small piece of meat, we take the animal's soul, sunlight, and life time, for which they are created and

naturally.»

Roman period

The gluttony in the Roman Empire are legendary. From this epoch not much is known about vegetarianism. Only the gladiators are known to get their strength and endurance for the fighting in the arenas by a purely vegetarian (= vegan) diet, which consisted mainly of beans.

Dark middle ages

With the decline of ancient culture, the idea of ??vegetarianism in Europe has been forgotten for many centuries. Only a few heretics, such as the Bogomiles and the Cathars, rejected the consumption of meat; the so-called "spirit-baptized" lived ascetic, celibate, and vegetarian from the day of their consecration. Because of their conviction, however, these groups were mercilessly persecuted by the papal church and finally crushed in the end of the 13th century.

Aufleben in der Renaissance

Thomas Tryon (1634-1703) was the strongest driver of vegetarianism. In his work, he emphasized the meatless diet as a spiritual path to God.

«Without suicide and meat consumption, all struggles cease. No cry of horror or miserable moaning is heard anymore by men or animals.»

Other advocates of vegetarianism in this period were the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the writer Voltaire, the theologian John Wesley and the physicist Sir Isaac Newton.

Reforms of the modern age

The beginning of the 19th century can be described as a flowering season for vegetarianism. In this period the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley is considered one of the most important advocates. He added vegetarianism a political-economic dimension, pointing out the resource waste caused by animal feeding and meat production.

First vegetarian club

In England in 1847 the first Vegetarian Association - the British Vegetarian Society - was founded by Bible-Christians. The Vegetarian Society of the United Kingdom (VSUK) is the world's oldest still existing vegetarian organization. With the founding of the association, the term "vegetarian" became the official designation for the meatless diet. Until then, it was often said simply of the plant diet, or less frequently of the Pythagorean diet. At that time a vegetarian diet meant what we now call vegan. According to this, the Vegetarian Society was originally a vegan organization.³ However, a few generations later, a change in dietary habits, which made the distinction between "vegan" and "vegetarian" necessary. In 1944 a new association, the Vegan Society, was established in Leicester, England. Donald Watson, the co-founder, is also the author of the word "vegan" (from "vegetarian").

Movement in Switzerland

The famous physician Maximilian Bircher-Benner (1867-1939), the inventor of Bircher muesli, is regarded as a pioneer of whole-food in Switzerland. He changed his vegetarian dietary guidelines from 1897 in the renowned private clinic at the Zürichberg, where up to 1994 many prominent patients found healing. At the same time, Ambrosius Hiltl opened the oldest still existing vegetarian restaurant in Europe, the Hiltl in Zurich. Originally the restaurant was called little attractive «vegetarian home and abstinence cafe».

In 1900 a life-changing artistic colony emerged in Ascona, which founded an individualistic vegetarian cooperative on the Monte Verita. As early as 1908, the International Vegetarian Union (IVU) was founded when the first World Vegetarian Congress was held in Dresden. For the first time in the first half of the twentieth century the themes of

animal ethics and vegetarianism were also linked. Until then, the fewest animal ethicists propagated strict vegetarianism, and conversely, the fewest vegetarians considered themselves to be animal ethicists. [Magnus Schwantje](#) [2], who lived in Switzerland from 1939-1950, brought this idea to where we live.

Post war period

In the post-war period, the phenomenon of the life reform movement developed mainly in the German-speaking countries. This movement consisted of numerous individual efforts, which, however, were always concerned with promoting a natural way of life. By 1950, it was especially Are Waerland from Sweden who spread the idea of a life reform. On the basis of his teachings, the Waerland movement developed in Switzerland, some of which is still known by the regular publication "regeneration", published by [Edwin Heller](#) [3] in 1966. He, too, is an active advocate of the vegetarian way of life.

Animal rights movement

In the mid-1970s the so-called animal rights movement arose. Peter Singers' book 'Animal Liberation' was the trigger. Singer and other animal rights activists such as Tom Regan and Helmut F. Kaplan demand a vegan diet as their final goal.

Swiss Reform Youth

In 1968, Fredy Forster founded the Swiss Reformed Youth (SRJ) in Switzerland, from which the Swiss Association for Vegetarianism (SVV) was founded in 1993. In 2014, the SVV was renamed Swissveg. Today, it is the largest Swiss organization that is committed to vegetarians and vegans. The European Vegetarian Union (EVU) was founded in 1985 as the umbrella organization of the national vegetarian associations in Europe, which now has around 200 organizations. Awareness of the environmental impact of excessive meat consumption has grown steadily since the 1980s. This led to further milestones in the vegetarian movement, e.g. In 2009 the introduction of the Vegi-Tag in the Belgian city of Ghent, which followed more and more cities all over the world. With increasing prosperity and its partial negative effects on health and the environment, the general population is now increasingly aware of the positive effect of a vegetarian way of life. Nevertheless, vegetarians are still regarded as special or marginalized in the history. To this day, their point of view is smiled, insulted, or combated. But it is thanks to the brave people, who could not be distracted, that the vegetarian thought is more known than ever in the whole world.

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Fussnoten:

1. C. Leitzmann: «Vegetarische Ernährung», 2. Auflage 2010, Seite 37.
2. Ebenda, Seite 39.
3. www.vegsources.com/john-davis/vegetarian-equals-vegan.html [4]

Weitere Infos:

- The history of Swissveg: [Milestones of Swissveg](#) [5]

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Links

- [1] https://www.swissveg.ch/history_vegetarianism?language=en
[2] https://www.swissveg.ch/magnus_schwantje
[3] https://www.swissveg.ch/edwin_heller
[4] <http://www.vegsources.com/john-davis/vegetarian-equals-vegan.html>
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