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Atheism in the American Animal Rights Movement: An Invisible Majority

Abstract

Previous research has alluded to the predominance of atheism in participant pools in the Nonhuman Animal rights movement (Galvin and Herzog, 1992; Guither, 1998) as well as the correlation between atheism and support for anti-speciesism (Gabriel et al., 2012; The Humane Society, 2014), but no study to date has independently examined this demographic. This article presents a profile of 210 atheists and agnostics derived from a larger survey of 287 American vegans conducted in early 2017. Results demonstrate that atheists constitute one of the largest movement demographics, and these vegans are more likely to adopt veganism out of concern for other animals. While atheist and agnostic vegans did not register a higher level of social movement participation than religious vegans, they were more intersectionally oriented and more likely to politically identify with the far left. Given the Nonhuman Animal rights movement's overall failure to target atheist demographics, these findings suggest a strategic oversight in overlooking the movement's most receptive demographic.

Keywords

Animal Rights, Atheism, Secularism, Social Movements, Veganism

Introduction

The relationship between atheism and anti-speciesism has shown promise in previous research, but it has only been mentioned parenthetically in studies that otherwise prioritize race, class, gender, social values, political attitudes, and other demographic profiles of Nonhuman Animal rights activists, vegans, and vegetarians. This research supports that fundamentalist

religious views are correlated with a resistance to anti-speciesist values (Dhont and Hodson, 2014; Monteiro, 2012; Peek et al., 1997), while atheism and agnosticism are correlated with support for Nonhuman Animal rights (Gabriel et al. 2012, The Humane League 2014). Indeed, atheists and agnostics, while comprising just 1-9 per cent of the general American population¹ (Williamson and Yancey, 2013), predominate as the largest category in religious affiliation in demographic surveys of the Nonhuman Animal rights movement (Galvin and Herzog, 1992; Guither, 1998).

Perhaps due to the movement's historical association with religious institutions and tactics, vegan atheism (a term I use as shorthand for atheistic anti-speciesist activism) has remained almost completely unstudied by social movement scholars, policymakers, and nonprofits. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Western Nonhuman Animal rights movement positioned violence against other animals as evidence to moral depravity and prescribed Christian values as a cure for this social ailment (Beers, 2006; Davis, 2016; Ritvo, 1989). In the era of European colonialism and American imperialism, ruling parties pointed to the 'barbarities' of colonial subjects and Western foes evidenced in their treatment toward other animals as justification for the need for civilization. Domestically, Nonhuman Animal welfare was also politicized in the racial suppression of Blacks, Latinxs, and other communities of color. Progressive-era activists essentially believed that beastly humans could be domesticated for assimilation into 'civilized' society such that their relationships to other animals became allegorical. The early movement was highly anthropocentric, concerned as it was with the wellbeing of humans rather than the actual wellbeing of other animals (Boddice, 2008). Organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Movement funded targeted humane

¹ Estimates vary based on variations in study design and sample populations.

campaigns that were designed to cultivate and Christianize the socially marginalized via their treatment of Nonhuman Animals.

The religious frame was a dominant one in first wave Nonhuman Animal rights, but it would be challenged by new ideologies of modernity (Maurer, 2002). Philosophy's humanism, for instance, advanced the notion of individualism to the potential benefit of Nonhuman Animals (Preece, 2006), although it certainly centered, as its name suggests, humans (Singer, 2002 [1975]). Nineteenth century humanitarians, many of whom were critical of organized religion, were also major advocates of vegetarianism and rights for other animals (Beers, 2006). Likewise, the rise of science as an institution and the window of opportunity provided by Darwin's evolutionary theory sparked a renewed interest in secular, rationalist, and evidence-based anti-speciesist claimsmaking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, claimsmaking that had already been brewing in philosophical thought of the Enlightenment era.

As the movement entered its second wave in the late twentieth century, it seemed to exhibit an element of identity crisis. The movement, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, was marked by a strong anti-science position specifically in its single-issue focus on resisting vivisection (Jasper and Nelkin, 1992). Yet, modern anti-speciesism was also informed by rational argument and scientific evidence in support of nonhuman sentience, animal agriculture's relationship with climate change, and the deleterious impact of animal protein on the human body (Freeman, 2014; Iacobbo and Iacobbo, 2006; Maurer, 2002; Munro, 2005). The evangelicals and missionaries that had once dominated its rank-and-file had been replaced by civil rights activists of a secular persuasion. However, claimsmaking continued to accommodate religious frames even though most activists were not religious themselves.

Historian Rod Preece (2006) rightly observes that there is '[. . .] no orthodoxy in the history of animal ethics' (2). Perhaps a result of this muddled framework, the atheism and the associated preferences for secular and scientific claimsmaking remains somewhat of an unknown in the movement. This study will present a history of atheism, and, to a lesser extent, secularism in the American Nonhuman Animal rights movement to ground the relevance of the demographic analyses, but it is not designed to test organizational justifications for continued atheist invisibility. Instead, I aim to initiate an inquiry into the under-researched vegan atheist demographic with an examination of findings derived from my 2017 online survey of American vegan respondents. Veganism and anti-speciesism frequently overlap, but this study cannot assume that all vegan respondents were necessarily involved with the vegan movement or the Nonhuman Animal rights movement. However, research (including this study) supports that the majority of vegans are, in fact, politically engaged (Wrenn, 2017a), most frequently in Nonhuman Animal rights (McDonald, 2000). For this reason, this study contextualizes results within the politics of the Western Nonhuman Animal rights movement.

I argue that the American movement is not only characterized by a white, middle-class, and female majority; it is also patently atheistic. I further argue that, based on the high levels of pro-social behavior that this atheist demographic exhibits, the movement could benefit from strategically engaging the atheist community. However, doing so would require a delicate negotiation of these potential benefits with the extreme stigma attached to atheism. It could be that the movement may not wish to incur such additional costs given the stigma already attached to Nonhuman Animal rights activists and vegans.

Literature Review

Negotiating Religion and Science in the First Wave of Anti-Speciesism

Veganism is a political and dietary practice that entails the eschewing of animal products. Dietary vegans concern themselves only with animal-based foods, but political vegans may also refrain from consuming animal-based clothes, entertainment, or labor. Veganism as a political concept originated in the nineteenth century, formalizing with the establishment of the United Kingdom's Vegan Society in 1944. In Eastern cultures, however, vegan lifestyles have been relatively familiar for thousands of years. Prior to the expansion of Western markets, plant-based consumption was normative for most, and these material practices were reinforced by Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism and other religious doctrines which encouraged respect for Nonhuman Animals (Kemmerer, 2012).

In the West, where material conditions allowed for the resource-intensive rearing of 'livestock,' cultural norms developed that were, by contrast, heavily speciesist (Nibert, 2013). Systematic violence against Nonhuman Animals grew in both scale and severity under the industrial revolution, with nonhuman bodies and labor providing the raw materials for capitalist growth. The gratuitous oppression of Nonhuman Animals, often linked with violence against vulnerable human groups, would encourage many to question the ethics of domination. Indeed, the callousness of capitalist enterprise ran contrary to hegemonic Christian teachings of love, kindness, and piety. Beginning in the seventeenth century, debates surrounding nonhuman ethics were couched in religious frameworks and considered the possibility of nonhuman souls. However, some enlightenment thinkers began to consider the importance of sentience, rationality, and natural rights as relevant to humanity's obligation to other animals (Maehle, 2012), as, indeed, philosophy of the era debated the social role of religion itself. In this section, I

explore the tension between religion and science in the anti-speciesist repertoire. Although this does not focus on atheism per se, American atheists tend to be motivated by scientific and empirical epistemologies (Williamson and Yancey, 2013). Subsequently, these themes likely influence the predominance of atheism among today's ranks.

Religious revivalism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century positioned itself as the moral resistance to the sweeping social changes that were feared poised to despoil humanity. Vegetarianism was employed by early evangelists, usually as a means of practicing temperance and achieving spiritual purity (Shprintzen, 2015). Christian minister William Cowherd, for instance, is generally credited as the founder of organized vegetarianism in the West. At times, this spiritual vegetarianism would be blended with humane efforts.

Vegetarianism and concern for other animals was not simply a demonstration of personal faith, but a means of bettering society. By way of an example, the Alcotts blended their romanticism with anti-slavery abolition, plant-based diets, and simple living in their Fruitlands communal experiment in New England (Francis, 2010). Likewise, temperance activist Asenath Nicholson operated a vegetarian boardinghouse in the slums of New York City, and was also active in resisting American slavery and organizing assistance to the diseased and starving in Ireland (Murphy, 2015).

The late nineteenth century saw a spike in humane claims-making corresponding with the upheaval wreaked by industrialization and modernization that drew concerns about the moral wellbeing of the populace, particularly its children. The Nonhuman Animal rights movement had gathered momentum at this time, and eagerly capitalized on this political opportunity by promoting spiritually-oriented humane literature, a campaign Janet Davis (2016) describes as a 'gospel of kindness.' Another consequence of the industrial age was the growth of the scientific

institution and its influence on culture and knowledge production. Welfare activists and vegetarians alike began to incorporate scientific frameworks into their outreach efforts. Some activists, however, such as antivivisectionist Frances Power Cobbe, remained ardently distrustful of science, having been made vigilant by many years battling the ‘smooth cool men of science’ (Kean, 1995). Scientists had successfully wielded their newfound cultural power to justify and legitimize all variety of cruelties against the marginalized, both human and nonhuman, in the name of scientific inquiry and societal betterment (Ryder, 1989).

The scientific institution upturned Victorian mores regarding privacy, etiquette, and morality (Ferguson, 1998). Whereas welfare activists had been encouraging kindness toward other animals for the benefit of society, scientists were encouraging their objectification for the same reason. To the movement’s horror, scientists’ newfound social power increased the credibility of their speciesists claims. The rise of scientists also challenged religious appeals for social work as social Darwinism excused the suffering of society’s most vulnerable as a consequence of natural course. Furthermore, the scientific institution challenged the traditional class structure given that many emerging medical practitioners hailed from the middling classes. For these reasons, science remained alien or antagonistic to the aristocratic and relatively conservative elites who led the first wave of Western anti-speciesism. Occupation in the sciences offered a rare opportunity for social mobility, disrupting the cultural association of violence against animals (farming, tanning, slaughtering, butchering, and petty cruelty) with the lower classes (Ryder, 1989). It was now the powerful who were conducting violence against Nonhuman Animals. As a result, many activists took to discrediting science itself in hopes of curtailing its hegemonic rise.

Other activists opted to capitalize on the cultural enthrallment with science. By the mid-nineteenth century, religious frames continued to dominate, but health frames also grew in popularity, as evidenced in the celebrity of Sylvester Graham and John Harvey Kellogg, both of whom built careers on their variation of a 'natural' diet. As the legitimacy of science grew, activists were eager to employ a scientific framework to lend credibility to their anti-speciesist claims. The Progressive Era humanitarian movement, which was often characterized by an anti-speciesist element, drew on Darwinian theory as evidence to their argument that humans and other animals were interconnected in a universal kinship. Like Kellogg, they, too, leaned on scientific research in support of substitutes for 'meat,' 'leather,' and other animal products (Jarvis, 2009). Activists could now draw on science to demonstrate the superiority of their position. In an age in which illness and premature death were commonplace, this approach was a potent one. Where vegetarianism had once been prescribed for spiritual health, now it was also prescribed for the physical.

This changing framework was a source of disagreement, to be sure, as some activists criticized other activists for overreaching their claims and insisted on scientific credibility. Playwright and vegetarian icon George Bernard Shaw, for instance, maintained the importance of rationalist argumentation throughout his career, disparaging early vegetarian claims that plant-based living was the cure to all ailments (Holroyd, 1997). Shaw emulated romanticist Percy Shelley, incidentally, who was also an ethical vegetarian and humanist. Some activists were also hostile to vaccination science, not simply because it necessitated vivisection, but also because of the high likelihood that vaccinations would be used in lieu of structural changes needed to alleviate the oppressive, unsanitary living conditions endured by the poor (Jarvis, 2009). The role of rationality also kickstarted The Vegan Society, with early editorials espousing the importance

of backing vegan claims with evidence and advising activists to distance themselves from the spirituality and astrology that surfaced regularly in competing vegetarian literature (James, 1948). Indeed, the persistence of secular anti-speciesist claimsmaking is credited for easing the first wave into a modern era in which the old religious, moral reform approach had become antiquated (Li, 2012).

If this rigorousness in accountability benefited the movement, perhaps it is commendable, yet there are other limitations to this shift in claimsmaking which should be addressed. First, Darwin's revelations did not create some new impetus for Nonhuman Animal ethics among the public, and, for that matter, his idea that humans shared kinship with other animals had already been well examined by philosophers (Boddice, 2008). The movement's move to incorporate rationality, in other words, was not a golden ticket to anti-speciesism. Even atheist humanitarian Henry Salt supported anthropocentrism, sanctioning the use of other animals as long as it was perceived to be humane. For him, the abuse of Nonhuman Animals did not necessarily derive from religion specifically, but rather from the failings of human culture. Furthermore, Darwin's evolutionary work encouraged a great surge in vivisection as researchers eagerly pursued greater scientific understanding. Thus, as Preece (2006) argues, Christianity's advancement of anti-speciesism may have been complex and spotty, but perhaps it was more favorable than is warranted at least when compared to the scientific approach.

Secular Reasoning and Atheistic Tendencies in Second Wave Anti-Speciesism

Religious and philosophical studies have each investigated animal ethics extensively, but generally stop short of atheist thought. Socha's (2014) *Animal Liberation and Atheism* is the only monograph to as yet offer an explicitly atheist critique of institutionalized religions and their

speciesist positioning of Nonhuman Animals. Otherwise, very little second wave commentary exists in published form. Ethicist Bernard Rollin (2009) offers a brief commentary in which he concludes, '[. . .] religious belief is neither necessary nor sufficient for assuring ethical behavior [. . .],' but his dismissal of religiosity is not a common one. Michael Fox (1983) also touched on the movement's frustration with religious and economic counter-claimsmaking that pitted anti-speciesism as communistic, atheist, and unpatriotic in an editorial for the short-lived *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*. Fox was critical of the church's attempt to enforce 'simplistic and moralizing conformity,' but he was by no means attempting to defend atheism. Rather, his argument suggests that the Nonhuman Animal rights movement was wary of atheist stigma and eager to disassociate itself from the stereotypes lobbed by speciesist institutions. Activists, he assured readers, were not atheistic; they were only practicing '[. . .] thoughtful enquiry into society's religious and political values [. . .]' (172). Their view of 'god' was one of universal love, not the more common interpretation of patriarchal domination. Furthermore, according to Fox, all 'religious and spiritually enlightened people of the world,' be they anti-speciesists or not, are morally obligated to resist amoral atheism as it surfaces in science and technology.

The two titans of twentieth century vegan philosophy, Peter Singer (2002 [1975]) and Tom Regan (1983), were a bit more forgiving in this regard, both offering secular arguments for Nonhuman Animal rights that might easily appeal to atheists. Regan continued to see promise in a religious argument, however, even producing a documentary in the 1980s on religion's congruence with anti-speciesism. Writes one biographer: 'Regan bucked the trend among secular animal rights philosophers and spoke patiently and persistently to the best angels of religious ethics' (Halteman, 2018: 153). Singer, perhaps the leader of this secular trend, has been critical

of religion's role in upholding speciesism. The Catholic Church in particular is identified as a bane to the advancement of other animals, but the average practitioner, too, was '[. . .] limited by the basic outlook of their religion' according to Singer (2002 [1975]: 197). In his subsequent publication, *Practical Ethics* (1979), he charges that, '[. . .] our everyday observation of our fellows clearly shows that ethical behavior does not require belief in heaven and hell' (4). For Singer, ethics can instead be rooted in '[. . .] benevolence and sympathy for others [. . .]' (4). Elsewhere, he muses: '[. . .] religions often reflects [sic] the speciesism of the human beings who developed them' (Singer and Mason, 2006, p. 253). An atheist himself, he stops short of producing an explicitly atheist theory with regard to Nonhuman Animals, relying instead on notions of utilitarianism, pragmatism, and effective altruism.²

Beyond the academic discussions, movement strategists applied expressly secular political logic to anti-speciesist efforts, inspired as they were by the rational model of bureaucratic efficiency (Garner, 1998; Stallwood, 2014; Ryder, 1989). The second wave of the Western Nonhuman Animal rights movement reached its crest in the 1980s and 1990s at least in part due to the success of this rational model. At the same time, however, its commitment to religious framing was partially renewed. As I uncovered in my doctoral research at the North Carolina State University Tom Regan Animal Rights Archive, second wavers employed religious frames as part of a variety of other tailored campaigns. This tactical diversification reflects the movement's professionalization: its need to mobilize resources necessitated a variety of approaches to appeal to the widest possible audience (Wrenn, 2020). Composed by such heavyweight theorists as Tom Regan and Carol Adams, contributions to early outreach literature indicate that movement leaders were deeply invested in the 'promise' of religion.³ Yet, even

² Singer has elsewhere written on the topic of atheism and morality, however (Singer and Hauser 2017).

³ See *PETA News* 1 (8) and *Animals' Voice* 2 (4).

areligious frames were subject to religious interpretation. In their profile of the movement, sociologists Jasper and Nelkin (1992) refer to the Nonhuman Animal rights as a ‘moral crusade’ with tactics and goals described in religious terms:

The language of moral crusades is sometimes shrill, self-righteous, and uncompromising, for bedrock principles are non-negotiable. In the strident style of Old Testament prophets, scolding and condemning their society, organizers point to evils that surround them and to catastrophes that will befall society in the absence of reform. (8)

Given the highly rationalized movement structure and the adoption of secular claimsmaking, it might be a stretch to liken activists for other animals to ‘Old Testament prophets,’ but it is the case that the denunciation of religiosity in vegan claimsmaking is relatively uncommon aside from the work of Singer.

The Case for Atheism in Third Wave Anti-Speciesism

Likely a consequence of employing religiosity to appeal to a predominantly religious audience, atheism has not been expressly examined in the predominating movement dialogue today. The severity of atheist stigma in American society (Williamson and Yancey, 2013) is likely a consideration for movement decision-makers, yet, the results of this study suggest, the failure to address atheism may be a strategic misstep. Although atheists are generally stereotyped as being immoral or lacking a value system, research demonstrates that this group often outperforms its religious counterparts on a number of ethical measures. Early sociologists, such as Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx, understood religion as an institution of social cohesion, socialization, and social control. As an ideological enforcer, it is potent in its ability to structure social relations, creating pathways of least resistance and adding a sense of order and

predictability to social life. Thus, to deviate from religion, a key social institution, generally entails some level of social innovation. One meta-analysis of atheist and agnostic thought processing finds an association between analytic thinking and religious disbelief (Pennycook et al., 2016). Psychological research also finds that areligious persons are more motivated by compassion and are more generous than their religious counterparts (Saslow, 2013). These findings offer some indication as to why atheists may be more likely to go vegan and advocate for other animals, given their propensity for prosocial behavior and challenging convention. Observes psychologist Ken Shapiro: ‘The way of being of a faithful atheist—awe and wonder, mystery and respect, humility and courage, acceptance of finitude and ultimate aloneness—is consistent with particular attitudes toward and valuation of the ecosphere’ (2018: 212). For Shapiro, an acknowledgement that the material world is not divinely managed and hence invincible instils in the atheist a propensity to care for nonhuman life, particularly given the biological existence of empathy in humans.

Although no previous research has quantified the relationship between atheism and veganism, some does suggest that American Nonhuman Animal rights activists harbor a general suspicion of science (Jamison and Lunch, 1992). This skepticism is a holdover from first wave movement framing that encouraged the distrust of scientific institutions given their propensity for systematic violence against other animals and the manipulative counterframes these institutions provide to protect the practice. However, this skepticism is indicative of rational thought, not anti-science sentiment per se. Indeed, atheists are some of society’s most avid supporters of scientific inquiry, but they do not hesitate to employ mindful skepticism, aware that scientific methods and data can be flawed (Williamson and Yancey, 2013).

Propensity for critical thinking and a comfort with challenging hegemonic institutions are characteristics that likely align atheists with veganism, but it is also their propensity to empathize and extend moral concern. One survey of American Nonhuman Animal rights protesters identified that these activists were more likely to ascribe to an ‘absolutist ethical ideology’ which the researchers define as an ‘[. . .] orientation characterized by the belief that moral principles are universally applicable [. . .]’ (Galvin and Herzog, 1992: 147). About half of the participants in this particular study were atheist or agnostics (only 34 per cent claimed religious membership). Despite this remarkable correlation, the researchers were quick to dismiss the findings, ensuring readers that their results, ‘[. . .] [do] not mean that there is not a religious component to the involvement of many activists’ (145).

Accommodating Stigma

The nexus of veganism and irreligiosity likely poses a dilemma for anti-speciesist charities. Both veganism and atheism are heavily stigmatized, making movement association with either one difficult, much less both. Goffman (1963) noted that individuals burdened with stigmatized identities will often engage in impression management in hopes of controlling how others will view them to avoid undue discrimination. Because vegans frequently disrupt communal food rituals in their unwillingness to consume animal products, they risk alienation from their peers (Bresnahan et al., 2016). Thus, vegans may alter their impressions to manage this stigma (Greenebaum, 2012). One study, for instance, finds that American vegans frequently ascribe to the notion that speciesism is a collective social problem that requires a collective response. Yet, when pressed in social settings, they manage this belief by falling back on individualistic explanations of their veganism so as to avoid ostracization (Turner, 2017). In both

the United States and in the United Kingdom, researchers have documented the deeply negative portrayal of vegans in mainstream media (Cole and Morgan, 2011; Greenebaum, 2016). At the societal level, the relationship between food and national identity in the cultural imagination also puts veganism at a disadvantage. In an animal-based economy, plant-based alternatives can be positioned as a threat to national identity, and many vegan products such as falafel, tofu, tempeh, and tahini are coded as foreign (Wright, 2016). Likely a result of this cultural stigma, the Nonhuman Animal rights movement is generally hesitant to openly and consistently embrace veganism as relevant to its anti-speciesist agenda (Wrenn, 2018).

Religiosity, too, is found to be a key component in maintenance of cultural membership. Atheists are also described as unpatriotic and a threat to national identity. They are arguably the most stigmatized group in American society, such that Edgell et al. (2006) report that, '[. . .] the gap between acceptance of atheists and acceptance of other racial and religious minorities is large and persistent' (Edgell et al., 2006; Edgell et al., 2016). Indeed, these researchers find that American atheists were even more stigmatized than were Muslims following the September 11th terrorist attack. An atheist identity thus comes with considerable social costs. A 2008 religious survey found that 40 per cent of atheists had recently experienced discrimination based on their areligious identification (Hammer et al., 2012). Atheists are, in fact, so marginalized that their marginalization is infrequently acknowledged or taken seriously. Psychological research finds evidence for minority stress, as atheists are quite conscious to their stigma and the discrimination they face (Brewster et al., 2016). While vegans are dismissed as hypermoral (Minson and Monin, 2011; Turner, 2017), atheists are stereotyped as amoral or immoral (Wright and Nichols, 2014). Given the connotations of purity associated with many religions, atheists are also likely to be viewed with disgust for occupying a religious outgroup (Ritter and Preston, 2011).

This creates a certain difficulty for social movements since many are already burdened with the task of advancing a relatively unpopular identity. Social movements must grapple with the construction of a group identity that is welcoming and encompassing for their rank-and-file, but does not repel audiences. McGarry and Jasper (2015) refer to this characteristic negotiation as an 'identity dilemma.' For the Nonhuman Animal rights movement, it could likely swell its ranks should it actively employ atheist claimsmaking or solicit areligious demographics. In doing so, however, it would also risk alienating the wider public given the widespread distrust of atheists. With the acceptance of Nonhuman Animal rights and veganism already tenuous, should the movement adopt an atheist identity, it risks incurring a double jeopardy.

The Nonhuman Animal rights movement probable hesitancy to redirect resources from religious campaigns may also relate to the well-known role that religiosity has played in the civil rights movement, the movement upon which the Nonhuman Animal rights movement perhaps most actively seeks to emulate. Movement organizations are known to be isomorphic in structure and strategy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Characteristically risk-averse, they are more likely to rely on tried and true approaches. There is little evidence of movements appealing to atheist demographics to advance their agendas, but there are numerous examples of movements successfully deploying religiosity (Harris, 2001). Whether or not explicitly atheist frameworks will be successful is beyond the scope of this study, but the receptiveness of atheist demographics suggests that exploring this avenue may prove fruitful. The results presented herein demonstrate an atheist majority with unique movement behaviors that movement leaders will benefit from acknowledging.

Methods

To outline the relationship between atheism and veganism, I revisited the results of an online survey on veganism and political identity that I had previously designed with Qualtrics and distributed in March 2017 in vegan Facebook groups and animal studies listservs. Only Americans and self-identified vegans were invited to participate. Participants were asked to respond to approximately fifty questions measuring basic demographic information, political attitudes, and opinions related to their knowledge of and comfort with diversity within the Nonhuman Animal rights movement and in relation to American society. This survey was part of a larger project measuring diversity in the American vegan movement, such that no additional questions regarding the relationship between religion and vegan were asked of participants. This constitutes a severe limitation, as focused qualitative questioning regarding participants' understanding of how their religiosity or areligiosity informs their veganism would provide the most fruitful information.

Results

Three hundred and sixty-four persons responded, but only 287 respondents qualified to participate and completed the survey. The majority of respondents were atheist (55 per cent) or agnostic (18 per cent) (Table 1). Forty-one percent of all respondents identified as female, 11 per cent identified as male, and 2 per cent identified as non-binary. The remainder did not report their gender. Most men (72.7 per cent), women (71.2 per cent), and non-binary respondents (83.3 per cent) identified as atheist or agnostic. Most of those who did not report their gender (73.1 per cent) were also atheist or agnostic. The sample demonstrated considerable diversity in sexual orientation, with 65 per cent identifying as heterosexual, 6.9 per cent identifying as homosexual,

13.2 per cent identifying as bisexual, and 14 per cent identifying as queer. The majority of homosexual (80 per cent), bisexual (65.8 per cent), and queer (66.7 per cent) respondents identified as atheist or agnostic.

Table 1: Frequencies

Religion	Frequency	Percent
Atheist	157	54.7%
Agnostic	51	17.8%
Christian	24	8.4%
Jewish	19	6.6%
Muslim	2	.7%
Other	34	11.8%
<i>Total</i>	<i>287</i>	<i>100.0%</i>

Most respondents (78.7 per cent) were white, while 2.4 per cent were Black, 4.8 per cent were Latinx, 5.9 per cent were Asian, 5.2 per cent were mixed race, 1 per cent were Native American, and 1.7 per cent did not respond. Atheists and agnostics were also in the majority across all racial categories except Native American (two of the three native respondents indicated they were religious). Otherwise, 76.5 per cent of whites, 57.1 per cent of Blacks, 57.1 per cent of Latinxs, 52.9 per cent of Asians, 60 per cent of mixed-race persons, and 80 per cent of those who chose not to respond identified as atheist or agnostic.

Most participants went vegan out of a concern for other animals, but a Pearson Chi-Square indicates a significant relationship between religiosity and reason for adopting veganism at 19.498 with a significance of .034 (Table 2). The majority of atheists (88.5 per cent) went vegan for other animals, compared to 76.5 per cent of agnostics, 79.2 per cent of Christians, 68.4 per cent of Jews, and 70.6 per cent of other religions (100 per cent of Muslims went vegan for other animals, but only two participants identified as Muslim). Political identification was also correlated with spirituality, with a Pearson Chi-Square of 22.380 and a p value of .013 (Table 3). Atheists were Democrat at approximately the same rate as their spiritual counterparts, but

atheists were more likely to be socialist, anarchist, or undecided. They were less likely to identify as an independent.

Table 2: Religiosity and Vegan Rationale

	Atheist	Agnostic	Christian	Jewish	Muslim	Other	Total
Ethics	139	39	19	13	2	24	236
	88.5%	76.5%	79.2%	68.4%	100.0%	70.6%	82.2%
Health	5	5	4	1	0	5	20
	3.2%	9.8%	16.7%	5.3%	.0%	14.7%	7.0%
Environment	13	7	1	5	0	5	31
	8.3%	13.7%	4.2%	26.3%	.0%	14.7%	10.8%
			Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)		
Pearson Chi-Square			19.498 ^a	10	.034		
Likelihood Ratio			18.102	10	.053		
Linear-by-Linear Association			5.551	1	.018		
N of Valid Cases			287				

a. 10 cells (55.6%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .14.

Table 3: Political Identification of Atheist and Religious Vegans

	Atheist	Spiritual or Agnostic	Total		
Democrat	68	64	132		
	43.3%	49.6%	46.2%		
Republican	2	7	9		
	1.3%	5.4%	3.1%		
Green	17	10	27		
	10.8%	7.8%	9.4%		
Libertarian	1	2	3		
	.6%	1.6%	1.0%		
Other	7	2	9		
	4.5%	1.6%	3.1%		
None	30	25	56		
	19.1%	19.4%	19.2%		
Undecided	4	2	6		
	2.5%	1.6%	2.1%		
Socialist	8	2	10		
	5.1%	1.6%	3.5%		
Anarchist	10	0	10		
	6.4%	.0%	3.5%		
Progressive	5	4	9		
	3.2%	3.1%	3.1%		
Independent	5	11	16		
	3.2%	8.5%	5.6%		
Total	<i>157</i>	<i>129</i>	<i>286</i>		
	<i>100.0%</i>	<i>100.0%</i>	<i>100.0%</i>		
		Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	
Pearson Chi-Square		22.380 ^a	10	.013	
Likelihood Ratio		26.705	10	.003	
Linear-by-Linear Association		.989	1	.320	
N of Valid Cases		286			

a. 12 cells (54.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.35.

Atheists and agnostics were not significantly more likely to be involved with other social movements. An independent t-test found a t score of .337 with a p value of .737 for atheists and involvement (Table 4), and a t score of -.809 with a p value of .419 for both atheists and

agnostics (Table 5). An independent t-test did find a significant relationship between religiosity and support for putting ‘Nonhumans first’ over competing human justice concerns in activism, with a t score of -2.591 and a p value of .010 (Table 6). The Pearson Chi-Square value was low at 6.604, but it was significant at .037. The belief in putting nonhumans first is not simply a measure of movement commitment, but is associated with intersectional failure and sometimes misanthropy within the Nonhuman Animal rights movement. Atheists and agnostics register a more encompassing ethic of compassion. Forty-three percent of atheists and agnostics disagree that Nonhumans should be put first compared to just 27 per cent of religious people (Table 7). Only 1 in 4 atheists and agnostics supported this statement, compared to 39 per cent of religious persons. Atheists and agnostics were also no more or less likely to support coalition building with other social justice movements, with a low Pearson Chi-Square value of just .309 and a p value of .857 (Table 8).

Table 4: Atheism and Involvement with Other Movements Independent Samples Test

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Involvement with Other Movements	Atheists	157	4.4140	3.00010	.23943
	Spiritual or Agnostic	130	4.2923	3.10400	.27224

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	Lower	Upper
Involvement with Other Movements	Equal variances assumed	.003	.955	.337	285	.737	.12171	.36139	-.58962	.83303	
	Equal variances not assumed			.336	271.447	.737	.12171	.36255	.59206	.83547	

Table 5: Atheism and Agnosticism and Involvement with Other Movements Independent Samples Test

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
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		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Interval of the Difference	Confidence of the Difference
								Lower	Upper	
Involvement with Other Movements	Atheists and Agnostics	208				4.2692	3.01279		.20890	
	Religious	79				4.5949	3.12770		.35189	
Involvement with Other Movements	Equal variances assumed	.005	.942	-.809	285	.419	-.32571	.40238	-1.11772	.46631
	Equal variances not assumed			-.796	136.286	.427	-.32571	.40923	-1.13497	.48355

Table 6: Religiosity and Support for 'Nonhumans First' Independent Samples Test

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Agreement with 'Nonhumans First'	Atheists or Agnostic	184	4.2880	3.25235	.23977
	Religious	70	5.4857	3.39541	.40583

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Interval of the Difference	Confidence of the Difference
								Lower	Upper	
Agreement with 'Nonhumans First'	Equal variances assumed	.079	.779	-2.591	252	.010	-1.19767	.46231	-2.10816	-.28718
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.541	120.061	.012	-1.19767	.47136	-2.13094	-.26411

Table 7: Support for 'Nonhumans First' by Religiosity

	Atheist or Agnostic	Religious	Total
Do Not Support	79 42.9%	19 27.1%	98 38.6%
Neutral	59 32.1%	24 34.3%	83 32.7%
Support	46 25.0%	27 38.6%	73 28.7%
<i>Total</i>	<i>184</i> <i>100.0%</i>	<i>70</i> <i>100.0%</i>	<i>254</i> <i>100.0%</i>

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
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Pearson Chi-Square	6.604 ^a	2	.037
Likelihood Ratio	6.660	2	.036
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.563	1	.010
N of Valid Cases	254		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 20.12.

Table 8: Support for Involvement with Other Movements by Religiosity

	Atheist or Agnostic	Religious	Total
Disagree	18 9.7%	5 7.5%	23 9.1%
Neutral	29 15.7%	11 16.4%	40 15.9%
Agree	138 74.6%	51 76.1%	189 75%
<i>Total</i>	<i>185</i> <i>100.0%</i>	<i>67</i> <i>100.0%</i>	<i>252</i> <i>100.0%</i>

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.309 ^a	2	.857
Likelihood Ratio	.321	2	.852
Linear-by-Linear Association	.173	1	.678
N of Valid Cases	252		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.12.

There was not a strong relationship between religiosity and feeling comfortable or welcomed in the movement (Table 9). The Pearson Chi-Square value was low at 1.581 and the p value was not significant at .454.

Table 9: Degree to which Vegans Feel Welcome According to Religiosity

	Atheist or Agnostic	Religious	Total
Uncomfortable	40 21.6%	18 25.4%	58 22.7%
Somewhat Comfortable	48 25.9%	22 31%	70 27.3%
Comfortable	97 52.4%	31 43.7%	128 50.0%
<i>Total</i>	<i>185</i> <i>100.0%</i>	<i>71</i> <i>100.0%</i>	<i>256</i> <i>100.0%</i>

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.581 ^a	2	.454
Likelihood Ratio	1.584	2	.453
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.225	1	.268
N of Valid Cases	256		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 16.09.

Discussion

Results demonstrate that the areligious are a leading demographic in the vegan movement alongside whites and women. This is consistent with previous studies that measured religiosity in the Nonhuman Animal rights movement (Gabriel et al., 2012; Galvin and Herzog, 1992; Guither 1998; The Humane Society, 2014). Other research finds that women comprise 80 per cent of the

Nonhuman Animal rights activists (Gaarder, 2011) and that women are much more likely to be vegan (Wardle et al., 2004; Wright, 2016). Nearly half of the respondents in this study failed to report their gender, but of those who did, women dominated. However, gender and race have already been examined as dominant variables in the American vegan movement (Kymlicka and Donaldson, 2014; Gaarder, 2011), while atheism, despite its comparable relevance, remains invisible in the literature.

More than a majority, atheists also constitute a unique group in their motivational profile. Atheists were more likely to go vegan out of concern for Nonhuman Animal ethics, and this holds consistent with psychological research that finds them more analytically-minded (Pennycook et al. 2016) and motivated by compassion (Saslow, 2013). This ethical motivation parallels with political leanings, with atheists and agnostics about as likely to identify as Democrat and more likely to identify as Socialist and Anarchist. Another extension of these correlations is the vegan atheist disagreement with the concept of putting Nonhuman Animals first. This position has been criticized by movement scholars and leaders due to its tendency to override and dismiss sexism, racism, and other systems of inequality that not only concern neighboring social justice movements, but also vegan activists who themselves experience them (Kymlicka and Donaldson, 2014; Gaarder, 2011). The movement's failure to effectively build coalitions has been a hindrance to its success, and, while the atheist demographic's lower support for 'nonhumans first' suggests a greater interest in this coalition-building, respondents in this study were no more likely than non-atheists to be involved with other movements or to support greater cooperation with other movements.

Although women and people of color have indicated that they often feel unwelcome or unsupported in the Nonhuman Animal rights movement (Wrenn, 2017a; Gorski et al., 2018), this

did not extend to atheists despite the widespread social stigmatization of this group (Edgell et al., 2006; Edgell et al., 2016; Hammer et al., 2012). The reasons for this relative comfort in the Nonhuman Animal rights movement is unclear, although it could be that atheists have little reason to experience overt discrimination if they are not openly identified as atheist. Given that atheism is so rarely discussed and researched in the vegan context, there is little reason to presume that atheists are out in the Nonhuman Animal rights movement.

Conclusion

This study has partially quantified the existence of atheists in the American vegan movement, and qualified, to some extent, their demographic profile. Results discussed herein derive from a larger study on diversity attitudes in the American vegan movement. As such, these findings provide an important starting point, but additional qualitative interviewing would be needed for sufficient examination. It would also be useful to investigate nonprofit leadership to ascertain the level of awareness to atheist ranks and any rationale for avoiding atheist frameworks.

Thus, this survey can only speak to the basic characteristics of this demographic, but it has not measured the reasons for atheist invisibility. It could very well relate to the wider societal stigmatization of the areligious. Historically, Nonhuman Animal rights campaigns appealed to religious hegemony to lend credence to their claims. Religious groups also availed of vegetarianism and kindness to other animals as evidence to their devotion and spiritual purity. These cultural frames leave little room for the recognition of atheists. The movement's contemporary engagement with secular claimsmaking likely accounts for the atheist majority it exhibits today, but its silence on atheist thought must be strategic. In their research of anti-atheist discrimination, Edgell et al. (2006; 2016) find that religiosity is central to group membership in

American culture. Social movements may be hesitant to destroy their chances at societal acceptance by appearing to reject their alignment with mainstream cultural values.

I am further interested in what impact this avoidance may have on the wellbeing of the atheist rank-and-file. A major element of anti-atheist discrimination is the pressure for atheists to pass as religious. This phenomenon disavows the atheist identity and also contributes to the psychological distress of atheist individuals (Brewster et al., 2016). If the Nonhuman Animal rights movement is actively discouraging atheists from expressing their areligious identity, or, worse, if it is pressuring atheist activists to embrace a false religious identity in their interactions with movement audiences, this would constitute a violation of civil rights. This study does not provide evidence to this possibility, but the movement's failure to openly embrace atheism suggests to me that there is potential for this behavior. The Nonhuman Animal rights movement already has a negative reputation for its treatment of fat persons (Wrenn, 2017b), disabled persons (Taylor, 2017), women (Gaarder, 2011), and people of color (Kymlicka and Donaldson, 2014), such that sustaining an anti-atheist bias in its framework is not likely to improve its public relations, at least within social justice spaces.

Reaching out to the atheist community and encouraging atheist vegans to be open about their identity could be one step toward improving movement inclusivity. As evidenced by research on the psychological development of homosexuals (Savin-Williams, 2008) and mentally ill persons (Corrigan et al., 2010), being 'out' is linked with improved self-esteem and quality of life. In the atheist community, coming out allows for an element of agency over their place in society, particularly for those who consider themselves activists interested in recruiting new atheists (Cloud, 2017). As with other stigmatized groups, coming out fosters empowerment, a sense of liberation, and improved confidence (Smith, 2011). However, this research in the

coming out processes for homosexuality, mental illness, and atheism also acknowledges certain costs and risks associated with the strategy. Understandably, many atheists actively conceal their identity as a means of stigma management given that open identification invites more discrimination.

Although not explored in this essay, the atheist movement has consistently demonstrated a hostility to veganism and anti-speciesism despite the fact that atheists are one of the dominant demographics in the Nonhuman Animal rights movement (Wrenn, 2016). What this indicates is that atheists are predominating as vegans and anti-speciesists even though the atheist movement is, in general, hostile to these positions and the Nonhuman Animal rights movement has failed to canvas the atheist community. If the Nonhuman Animal rights movement were to actively solicit atheists, there is reason to believe that this campaign would be hugely successful given that so many atheists are already mobilized despite institutional barriers. The atheist movement's interest in skepticism may also be conducive. Atheists would likely respond positively to the vegan movement's commitment to challenging unsubstantiated claims that protect the use and consumption of Nonhuman Animals as well as the murky science that obscures the role of speciesism in climate change. Within the atheist movement, there is also a growing interest in intersectionally-oriented social justice (Christina, 2012), with atheism positioned as an important cornerstone in challenging race, class, and gender discrimination. Given the centrality of atheism to the vegan base, this framework could be persuaded to include species discrimination as well.

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