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Vegans argue they're a 'creed' under Ontario human rights law

New definition opens door to protections for people opposed to eating meat or wearing leather



CARLOS OSORIO / TORONTO STAR

Nick Wright is the founder of Animal Justice, a group that has been fighting to have ethical veganism recognized in Ontario as a protected human right.

By: **Dan Taekema** Staff Reporter, Published on Thu Feb 04 2016

You are what you eat.

At least that's what advocates of veganism argue now that the Ontario Human Rights Commission has updated its definition of the word "creed." The advocates suggest the change makes ethical veganism a protected human right.

"Creed may also include non-religious belief systems that, like religion, substantially influence a person's identity, worldview and way of life," reads the revamped [policy on preventing discrimination based on creed](#), released Dec. 10.

The policy doesn't directly refer to ethical veganism — a practice of not eating or wearing animal products for reasons of conscience — but that hasn't stopped groups such as Animal Justice, which advocates for humane treatment of animals, from heralding the change a victory.

“In modern times, more and more people have ethical systems and practices that aren’t rooted in a traditional organized religion,” said Nick Wright, founder of the group. “This change is important for ethical vegans, because in instances where accommodation is required they’ll have a legal right to enforce it.”

Renu Mandhane, chief commissioner for the OHRC, said the “door is open” for ethical veganism to be considered a creed, but added the final decision rests with the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal.

“Somehow this has been spun out to suggest that our policy says that ethical veganism is a creed, which it doesn’t,” she said. “The tribunal is the place to make these decisions because its decisions are made based on facts.”

The commission policy is designed to guide employers and service providers in how to respect human rights and accommodate people based on their creed.

Camille Labchuk, executive director of Animal Justice, has been fighting for veganism to be recognized by the Human Rights Code since she was a law student in 2011.

“I wouldn’t call it an epidemic, but I do hear cases regularly of people who feel they have faced discrimination for their beliefs about animals,” she said.

Animal Justice believes the updates could assist vegans in cases where students refuse to dissect animals, wear a work uniform with an animal-based component such as a leather belt or even ensure vegans aren’t excluded at work events held at steakhouses.

“This is a really big step forward for human rights in Ontario,” said Labchuk. “It protects people like ethical vegans for whom not doing harm is more important than anything.”

Ethical veganism refers to people who not only follow a vegan diet but also extend the philosophy to the rest of their life and oppose harming animals or using any animal by-products.

But some critics say ethical vegans may have bitten off more than they can chew.

“The Human Rights Commission and the Human Rights Code were put into place to combat real persecution based on a person’s cultural, ethnic or religious affiliation,” wrote Amanda Hohmann, of B’Nai Brith’s League For Human Rights, in an email to the Star. “Should the interpretation of what constitutes creed be broadened to the point where any meaningful protection becomes difficult, this would weaken the effectiveness of existing legislative protections.”

Dominique Clement, a sociology professor at the University of Alberta, said he suspects the Ontario human rights tribunal won't ever actually recognize veganism, but if it does, it will come down to whether or not accommodating their "creed" is reasonable.

"If the person works in a restaurant, for example, and doesn't have to wear leather, then that is absolutely a legitimate objection," he said. "On the other hand, if you want to work at Danier, then you can't ask your employer not to be around leather."

However, he added it's crucial for human rights law to evolve over time, so there is a chance ethical vegans will one day be recognized.

"The idea of veganism as a creed sounds crazy," he said. "But keep in mind there was a time when the idea that gay people and lesbians have a right to not be discriminated against was equally absurd."

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THE EATING SPECTRUM

From fruitarians to omnivores, the spectrum of dietary distinctions comes in many flavours.

Fruitarian: The option for those who prefer food that hasn't fallen far from the tree, fruitarians survive on a diet of strictly fruits, seeds and nuts.

Raw Vegan: Pick it, wash it, eat it. This diet consists of raw vegetables and combines the concepts of veganism and raw foodism. It excludes all meat and animal products, as well as food cooked at a temperature above 48C.

Vegan: Vegans eat only plant-derived foods. They don't consume any meat or products from land or sea animals, including milk, eggs or even honey.

Vegetarian: To put it simply, a vegetarian is someone who does not eat meat. Instead, vegetarians consume vegetables, beans, grains and nuts.

Lacto-ovo vegetarian: "Lacto" means milk and "ovo" means eggs. Lacto-ovo vegetarians eat mainly vegetables, but also consume eggs and dairy products such as milk, cheese, and yogurt. They do not eat meat, poultry, seafood or fish.

Pescatarian: Preferring to stick to seafood, pescatarians do not eat land animals or birds, but do consume fish, shrimp and crabs, along with vegetables from both land and sea.

Omnivore: Opting for the best of both worlds are the omnivores. They eat foods that are of both plant and animal origin.