Ethical veganism as nonreligion in Mr J Casamitjana Costa v the League Against Cruel Sports

Lauren Strumos
University of Ottawa, Canada

Abstract: In January 2020, an employment tribunal in the United Kingdom decided that ethical veganism qualified for protection from discrimination as a philosophical belief under the UK’s Equality Act 2010. This article explores the reasoning behind this judgement, as presented in the preliminary hearing decision for Mr J Casamitjana Costa v The League Against Cruel Sports, to argue that ethical veganism in this context can be conceptualized as a form of nonreligion. This article uses a relational theory of nonreligion to demonstrate how ethical veganism in this case is constructed to be distinct from religious belief while also being conceptually entangled with religion. It contributes to emergent scholarship on nonreligion, and veganism and (non)religion, by demonstrating how a relational framework allows connections among these phenomena to be articulated and explored with greater depth. In addition, this article considers the diversity of ethical veganism as an identity and practice in relation to its legal construction as a philosophical belief. Attention is paid to the ways in which veganism as lived can intersect with religion, nonreligion and areligion.

Résumé : En janvier 2020, un tribunal du travail au Royaume-Uni a décidé que le véganisme éthique pouvait bénéficier d’une protection contre la discrimination en tant que croyance philosophique en vertu de l’Equality Act 2010. Cet article explore le raisonnement derrière ce jugement, tel que présenté dans la décision de l’audience préliminaire Mr J Casamitjana Costa v The League Against Cruel Sports, afin de soutenir que le véganisme éthique dans ce contexte peut être conceptualisé comme une forme de non-religion. Cet article utilise une théorie relationnelle de la non-religion pour démontrer comment le véganisme éthique dans ce cas est construit pour être

Corresponding author / Adresse de correspondance :
Lauren Strumos, University of Ottawa, 55 Laurier Ave. East, Desmarais Building, 10th Floor, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5, Canada.
Email: lstru054@uottawa.ca
distinct de la croyance religieuse, tout en étant conceptuellement enchevêtré avec la religion. Il contribue à la recherche émergente sur la non-religion, le véganisme et la (non) religion, en démontrant comment un cadre relationnel permet d’articuler et d’explorer les connexions entre ces phénomènes plus en profondeur. En outre, cet article considère la diversité du véganisme éthique en tant qu’identité et pratique par rapport à sa construction juridique en tant que croyance philosophique. L’attention est portée sur les façons dont le véganisme tel qu’il est vécu peut se croiser avec la religion, la non-religion et l’areligion.

Keywords
ethical veganism, law, nonreligion, religion, veganism

Mots clés
véganisme éthique, droit, non-religion, religion, véganisme

Introduction
Jordi Casamitjana is a zoologist and ethical vegan who lives in London, England. In 2016, he started working for The League Against Cruel Sports (LACS), a registered charity in the United Kingdom that works to stop humans from killing nonhuman animals for sport. While employed by LACS, Casamitjana learned that the charity was investing pension funds into companies known to conduct testing on nonhuman animals. This troubled Casamitjana (n.d.), as “their investment in such companies was directly contradictory to the reason for the existence and values of the organisation.” Casamitjana raised his concerns to his employers, and they responded by telling him that LACS would reinvest employee funds into ethical alternatives. Describing what happened next, Casamitjana (n.d.) writes:

[Then LACS] admitted to me but not to all my colleagues that [the pension] hadn’t been changed, and finally they stated that I could personally change mine. At my request they sent an email around to staff which gave only one ethical fund alternative, which offered worse rates of return than some of the other ethical pension funds that were also available. When I wrote to my colleagues to tell them that their pension was being invested in nonethical funds, and that there were alternatives to the single alternative that the company was suggesting, I was sacked. I was given no appeal hearing.

In response to his dismissal, Casamitjana filed a complaint with an employment tribunal, arguing that his dismissal amounts to discrimination against his ethical vegan beliefs.1 Before the Tribunal could determine if Casamitjana faced discrimination, however, it first had to decide whether ethical veganism qualified for protection as a philosophical belief under Section 10 of the United Kingdom’s Equality Act 2010, which protects the characteristics of religion and belief from discrimination.

In January 2020, during its preliminary hearing decision for Mr J Casamitjana Costa v The League Against Cruel Sports,2 a Norwich employment tribunal concluded that
ethical veganism constitutes a philosophical belief protected by law. This article analyzes the reasoning behind this decision to argue that ethical veganism in the *Casamitjana* preliminary hearing decision can be conceptualized as a form of nonreligion. It specifically draws on relational theories of nonreligion which frame nonreligion as a phenomenon at once distinct from and related to religion. When applied to law, this relational approach offers insights into how law imagines, defines and categorizes identities, beliefs and practices that are not explicitly or essentially religious, yet remain “conceptually tethered” to religion in a legal framework (Smith and Cragun, 2019: 321). Though scholarship has addressed veganism and the nonreligious, as well as veganism, (non)religion and law, it has yet to engage with emergent theories of nonreligion from the social sciences that help explain the treatment of veganism as a belief in and beyond law. In addition, this article demonstrates that the *Casamitjana* preliminary hearing decision contains a narrow conception of ethical veganism that excludes the diversity of ethical veganism as it is lived.

**Defining “nonreligion”**

Theories of nonreligion often conceptualize nonreligion as that which exists at once in distinction from and in relation to religion. This includes organizations, traditions, social movements and relationships, as well as those who “variably ignore, reject, or are indifferent to conventional religion and its surrogates” (Smith and Cragun, 2019: 322). Those who self-identify as spiritual but not religious, for example, may be considered “nonreligious” in that they overtly distinguish themselves from religion and thus rely upon religion to define this aspect of their identity. For Lois Lee (2015: 32), the relationship between religion and nonreligion is the defining characteristic of the latter, so that the term “nonreligion” “is used to indicate not the absence of something (religion) but the presence of something (else), characterized, at least in the first place, by its relation to religion but nevertheless distinct from it.” Hence nonreligion is not (yet) conceptualized as a self-contained concept; scholars rely upon religion to demarcate nonreligion as an object of study. Nonreligion is accordingly fluid and unstable, being dependent upon an understanding of what counts as “religion” in a given empirical or theoretical context. Moreover, nonreligion differs from what Lee (2015) and Quack (2014) understand to be “areligion,” which is something absent of religion and unrelated to it.4

Important to this relational approach is that nonreligion constitutes more than a lack of religion and that the nonreligious—including but not limited to self-identifying atheists, humanists and agnostics as well as those simply indifferent to religion—are not a uniform group. Qualitative research using a lived (non)religion framework demonstrates that the nonreligious are diverse and complex in regard to their identities, experiences, practices and ethics (Beaman, 2017, 2020; Salonen, 2018; Zuckerman et al., 2016). Some nonreligious individuals reject or ignore religion, while others engage in practices traditionally deemed religious, like prayer, and hold certain religious or theistic beliefs, including a belief in God (Baker and Smith, 2009; Smith and Cragun, 2019; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2015). Nonreligious identities are also fluid, much like those of the religious. Jacqui Frost (2019: 830) finds in her research that “some nonreligious people are
relatively certain or uncertain about their nonreligion for long periods of time, whereas others describe a more context-dependent and fluid engagement with certainty and uncertainty.” Cultural and historical contexts that vary by country further create some distinctions among the nonreligious (Clarke and Macdonald, 2017; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, 2020). Linda Woodhead (2017: 249) notes, for instance, that Britain’s nonreligious population or “nones” may have started to increase before that of the United States and Canada, where “the rise of no religion” occurred during the 1960s (Brown, 2017; Clarke and Macdonald, 2017).

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory, Johannes Quack (2014) constructs a relational theory of nonreligion that frames the relations nonreligion has with religion as being direct and indirect. The religiously indifferent, for example, may not have a direct or explicit connection to religion, but a relationship with religion nevertheless emerges when they are repositioned in relation to religion by scholars (Quack and Schuh, 2017; Schuh et al., 2019). Nonreligion in this framework occupies various positions outside of a religious field, constituting a “religion-related surrounding” that is marked by “ambiguity or contestation” over a religious field’s border and various positions on each side of it (Schuh et al., 2019: 14). The borders of religious fields and religion-related surroundings are “not static,” but reflect “the perspectives of those who assess them and on the strategic movements of all actors involved (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993; Bourdieu 1996)” (Quack, 2014: 450). This context-dependent approach is conducive to a moderate social constructionist view of (non)religion (Beckford, 2003). Indeed, as Cora Schuh, Johannes Quack and Susanne Kind (2019: 13) explain: “What counts as religion, areligion, and nonreligion is not defined a priori but analyzed instead as an object and outcome of social (including scholarly) constructions and contestations.” The definition of religion, and the boundary between religion and nonreligion, varies according to the social actors who interpret and employ these concepts.

This article follows suit by not starting from the premise that ethical veganism is intrinsically religious, nonreligious or areligious. Instead, it analyzes how ethical veganism in a particular legal context is positioned to be distinct from religion while being conceptually entangled with religion. In this case, ethical veganism as a form of nonreligion is related to religion not at a “borderland of the religious field,” but within a legal one (Schuh et al., 2019: 16). Bourdieu (1987) also viewed law as a social field with power relations among social actors, including competitive struggles over the interpretation of legal texts which themselves may contain symbolic power. Instead of focusing on social actors, however, this article is concerned with the phenomenon of ethical veganism and how it is positioned to encounter religion in law. It thus contributes to an understanding of how something other than social actors or groups can be conceptualized as a form of nonreligion in a context not exclusive to religious fields.

**Defining “veganism” and “ethical veganism”**

The term “veganism” denotes the lifestyle and identity of those who avoid using and consuming nonhuman animals and their products. In addition to meat, dairy and eggs, vegans commonly eschew clothing, entertainment and products deriving wholly or partially from animals, including those tested on them. Nathan Stephens Griffin
Strumos (2017) clarifies that while the lifestyle practice of veganism is relatively fixed, veganism as an identity is much more fluid and complex. There are multiple motivations to become and remain vegan, particularly those related to personal health, the environment and animal ethics, and these can interact with one another and change shape over time. Hence veganism is a multifaceted phenomenon, and it cannot be categorized exclusively as areligious, nonreligious or religious. It is more fruitful to think of veganism as being entangled with diverse identities, perspectives and experiences that can be areligious, nonreligious or religious. For example, one of Griffin’s (2017: 46) interviewees, a Seventh Day Adventist, describes a process to becoming vegan that is rooted in discussions and connections she had with God. Some individuals and groups link veganism to teachings or principles of the world’s religions, including *ahimsa* as found in Jainism and other South Asian religions. Veganism also manifests in ways that have no discernible ties to religion, such as anarchists who see veganism as “a practice of political solidarity with non-human creatures” (Portwood-Stacer, 2012: 91). Corey Lee Wrenn (2019a) shows that veganism intersects with nonreligious identities like atheism and agnosticism. Overall, veganism as it is lived by individuals is incredibly diverse and requires context to be categorized in relation to religion.

“Ethical veganism” is defined by the moral and ethical concern for nonhuman animals used in the production of food, products, entertainment and science. It often highlights humans’ systematic oppression and exploitation of nonhuman animals and their capacity to suffer under these conditions. As utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1879: 311n) famously wrote: “[T]he question is not, Can they *reason*? Nor, can they *talk*? But, can they *suffer*?” Suffering in this case is more than physical pain—it is also emotional and psychological, emerging from being killed and used alive by humans. This suffering may occur from the moment of birth, an example being the psychological distress a dairy cow and her calf experience after being separated from each other immediately after or within a few days of the calf’s being born (Kolbe, 2018). Such instances of suffering are brought to the forefront in theories of veganism from Critical Animal Studies (CAS). An interdisciplinary field, CAS emerged in response to the human oppression, domination and exploitation of nonhuman animals. It analyzes human–nonhuman animal relations and hierarchies in concept and actuality, often combining scholarship with activism to encourage societal change. Veganism has become “a central part” of CAS (Quinn and Westwood, 2018: 9). It embraces veganism as a way to challenge the systematic exploitation of nonhuman animals, while actively dismantling oppressive hierarchies of speciesism which pervade societies at the “politico-economic, sociocultural, and psychosomatic levels of existence” (Weitzenfeld and Joy, 2014: 3).

**Ethical veganism in Casamitjana**

**The religious roots of veganism**

The Tribunal in the *Casamitjana* preliminary hearing decision presents Casamitjana’s veganism first and foremost as a philosophy, and it draws on religion to do so. It turns to the religious concept of *ahimsa*, described by Anne Vallely (2002: 32) as “an ethic of non-interference and a method of disconnecting or separating oneself from the violence
of everyday life.” Not speaking of ethical veganism specifically, but veganism more generally, the Tribunal states:

Philosophically, the concept of veganism is rooted in the ancient concept of Ahimsa, which is one of the main premises of the ancient Indian religion of Jainism. Ahimsa means “not to injure”, compassion being the key feature of many Indian religions. The word appears to be derived from the Sanskrit “to strike”. Himsa is “to injure or harm” and Ahimsa is the opposite of this, i.e. “to cause no injury and to do no harm”. Ahimsa is one of the cardinal virtues and an important tenent of Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism and is a multi-dimensional concept inspired by the premise that all living beings have the spark of the divine spiritual energy and therefore to hurt another being is to hurt oneself. The Claimant is a firm believer that one should live following the principles of Ahimsa. (para. 11)¹⁰

Although veganism is “unknown to traditional Jainism” (Flügel, 2012: 977), some individuals like Casamitjana link veganism to the compassionate teachings of ahimsa. This connection is reflected in scholarship that also ties veganism to ahimsa (Hirschler, 2011: 156) and addresses a small movement of Jains who are “transitioning to and advocating veganism” (Tuminello, 2018: 94). Other accounts of veganism likewise frame it as a philosophy of compassion, but without discernible ties to religion. CAS scholar John Sorenson (2010: 174) writes:

[Veganism] is the logical outcome of the recognition that animals are not property but individual beings who have their own interests, which should be considered. […] Veganism is expression of animal rights philosophy through the effort to reduce, as much as possible, the exploitation of animals. Becoming vegan expresses a commitment to minimize harm and avoid a diet based on misery and demonstrates compassion and concern for the well-being of others.

Compassion and avoiding harm are included in the descriptions of both the Tribunal and Sorenson (2010), but only the former mentions religion, while the latter appears areligious.

The Tribunal later moves away from religion and turns to a definition of veganism from the United Kingdom’s Vegan Society, which defines veganism in part as: “A philosophy and way of life which seeks to exclude, as far as possible and practical, all forms of exploitation and cruelty to animals for food, clothing or any other purpose and by extension promotes the development and use of animal free alternatives for the benefit of humans/animals and the environment” (para. 13).¹¹ Following this definition, the Tribunal proceeds to make three conclusions:

Ethical vegans could be said to be morally orientated and opposed to all forms of exploitation of all animals and to embody genuine philosophical concern for all sentient life. (para. 14)

It is clear veganism is living according to a belief or conviction that it is wrong to exploit and kill living beings unnecessarily and that moral conviction is cogent, serious and important. (para. 15)
The philosophy defined by the Vegan Society is clearly one that the Claimant adheres to and does constitute the basis of his philosophical belief acting as a moral framework. (para. 16)

It is somewhat difficult to discern from these statements the Tribunal’s definition of (ethical) veganism, but it is clear that morality and belief are prominent in it. Ethical vegans are “moralistically orientated,” live according to a “belief or conviction” that is also a “moral conviction,” and Casamitjana’s veganism is a “philosophical belief” that provides him with “a moral framework.” Yet belief and morality are not rooted in religion in this description. Indeed, there is no mention of Jainism, Buddhism or Hinduism after the Tribunal introduces the Vegan Society’s definition. Although the Tribunal first recognizes veganism as having a direct relationship with religion, it proceeds to construct ethical veganism in distinction from religion as a morally orientated philosophical belief.

Commenting on the Vegan Society’s definition, Brian Dominick (2015: 24–25) states: “[Y]ou will almost never hear this nuanced definition from hardcore vegans, who are far more likely to drop ‘seeks to’ and ‘as far as is possible and practicable’ from their versions.” “Of course,” Dominick (2015: 25) continues, “at its base veganism is just a lifestyle not necessarily accompanied by a philosophical analysis, let alone a strategic program for improving the lot of nonhuman animals.” Thus, although the philosophical character of Casamitjana’s veganism is certainly not unfounded, its construction excludes interpretations of veganism which are not philosophical or solely based on animal ethics. Critical race feminist A Breeze Harper (2020: xxv), for example, identifies her veganism with *ahimsa*, but it was her experiences with institutional racism, heterosexism and sexism that initiated her transition into veganism, not a concern for nonhuman animal exploitation.

**Ethical veganism as a philosophical belief**

For a philosophical belief to be protected from discrimination under Section 10 of the United Kingdom’s Equality Act 2010, it must fit the legal requirements of a philosophical belief provided by the Statutory Code of Practice on Employment from the Equality and Human Rights Commission. The Code specifically states that a philosophical belief must:

- be genuinely held;
- be a belief and not an opinion or viewpoint based on the present state of information available;
- be a belief as to a weighty and substantial aspect of human life and behaviour;
- attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance;
- be worthy of respect in a democratic society, not incompatible with human dignity and not conflict with the fundamental rights of others. (para. 2.59)

The Tribunal analyzes ethical veganism in *Casamitjana* under each of these threshold requirements and concludes that it qualifies as a protected philosophical belief. In
reaching this conclusion, the Tribunal draws upon the Vegan Society’s definition and Casamitjana’s daily practice as an ethical vegan to demonstrate his sincerity. The Tribunal states, for example, that Casamitjana does not “visit or attend zoos, circuses, animal fights, animal races or any form of spectacle with live animals” (para. 20.13); he “showers with vegan friendly shampoos and soap” (para. 22.1); “tries to avoid sitting on leather seats or holding onto leather straps” (para. 20.17); and “does not wear any clothes, shoes, hats or fashion accessories that contain animal products” (para. 20.11). Casamitjana’s ethical veganism also influences his relationships with other people: “Since becoming a vegan, he has not dated anyone who was not a vegan and he would not share a property with anyone who was not also a vegan” (para. 20.20). Based on the evidence submitted to the Tribunal on behalf of Casamitjana, the Tribunal concludes in its first stage of analysis that there is “no doubt” Casamitjana “genuinely and sincerely holds his beliefs in ethical veganism” (para. 33).

In the second stage of analysis, the Tribunal explains its decision for why ethical veganism constitutes a belief and not a mere opinion or viewpoint. It states:

[E]thical veganism carries with it an important moral essential. [...] It is clear it is founded upon a longstanding tradition recognising the moral consequences of non-human animal sentience which has been upheld by both religious and atheists alike. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the Claimant personally holds ethical veganism as a belief. He has clearly dedicated himself to that belief throughout what he eats, where he works, what he wears, the products he uses, where he shops and with whom he associates. (para. 34)

The Tribunal’s reference to “a longstanding tradition” may point towards veganism’s philosophical roots in ahimsa, but “religious” is only explicitly mentioned here alongside “atheists.” That the Tribunal mentions atheists alongside the religious adds weight to the construction of ethical veganism as a belief that is philosophical and not religious. Presumably, ethical veganism cannot be considered a religious belief if its moral content is shared with atheists. From a broader perspective, the Tribunal’s recognition that “the moral consequences of non-human animal sentience [is] upheld by both religious and atheists alike” reflects how the moral underpinnings of ethical veganism manifest in religious and nonreligious contexts. It also suggests that ethical veganism can be seen as a site of intersection between religious and nonreligious ethics (Salonen, 2019).

The Tribunal continues its analysis by determining that ethical veganism is “a weighty and substantial aspect of human life and behaviour” (para. 35) that constitutes a belief. The Tribunal asserts that this belief is:

[A]t its heart between the interaction of human and non-human animal life. The relationship between humans and other fellow creatures is plainly a substantial aspect of human life, it has sweeping consequences on human behaviour and clearly it is capable of constituting a belief which seeks to avoid the exploitation of fellow species. (para. 35)

Ethical veganism here is constructed relationally, extending beyond the individual human to “fellow species”. The Tribunal echoes this perspective when it later asserts: “The belief [of ethical veganism] concerns the relationship between individuals and
other living things in diet, clothing, consumption, travel and relationships and indeed many other aspects of daily life / living” (para. 37; emphasis added). Significantly, relationships with “other living things” are not exclusive to the lives of ethical vegans, but “individuals” more broadly. What is characteristic of ethical vegans is that they structure these relations “to avoid the exploitation of fellow species” in concept and practice (para. 35).

Through acknowledging everyday relationships between human and nonhuman animals, the Tribunal touches upon an aspect of social life largely ignored by sociologists (Carter and Charles, 2016). Clifton D Bryant (1979: 417) first drew attention to this problem by calling on sociologists to acknowledge the “zoological connection”: “Our social enterprise is not composed of humans alone. Creatures of all variety are inextricably involved in many of our behavioral activities and play important interactive roles in society. The animal influence in our lives is enormous and our culture is richly infused with zoological components.” Humans interact with nonhuman animals at work, home and parks, watch them on television screens, and take a “doggie bag” home from restaurants which may contain the flesh of animals killed for food (Bryant, 1979: 403). In Casamitjana, the prevalence of nonhuman animals in everyday social life is made particularly clear by the recorded measures Casamitjana takes to avoid nonhuman animals in food, products, entertainment and more (paras. 20–22.7).

In addition to animals, ethical foundations for veganism may include the concern for the environment. Empirical research locates concerns about animals and the environment as simultaneous motivators for becoming and remaining vegan (Fox and Ward, 2008; Janssen et al., 2016). Yamini Narayanan (2018) connects the suffering that bulls experience in India’s bovine frozen-sperm farms to the world’s climate crisis. Bulls in these farms experience distress such as extreme “boredom and agitation” (Narayanan, 2018: 22), and the methane released in their high numbers constitutes a major contributor to climate change. As a solution, Narayanan (2018: 29) proposes a vegan economy which upholds animal liberation and “the right of the planet itself to life.” From an ecofeminist perspective, Esther Alloun (2015) conceptualizes veganism to encapsulate moral concern for what Western thought traditionally deems “non-sentient” life: “For many advocates that I have met and certainly for myself, veganism is about reducing suffering and exploitation and taking a stand against unjust socio-economic arrangements. A priori, it should therefore not be difficult to expand our ability to care and take actions for trees, forests, mountains, ecosystems and other earth Others.” This form of veganism is holistic, countering the prominent narrative that nonhuman animal suffering constitutes the sole moral basis of ethical veganism.

The Tribunal connects ethical veganism to the environment once during its final stage of analysis. It specifically states: “Given modern day thinking, it is clear ethical veganism does not in any way offend society, it is increasingly recognised nationally, particularly by the environmental benefits of vegan observance” (para. 38). Outside of this description, and the Vegan Society’s definition of veganism (in which environmental benefits come second to nonhuman animals), “the environment” does not appear elsewhere in the Tribunal’s preliminary hearing decision. Largely excluded from Casamitjana are forms of veganism wherein the environment is an integral part of its ethical significance. This absence is not a fault of the Tribunal, which constructs ethical
veganism in response to Casamitjana’s own daily practice and self-understandings of veganism. The point is that Casamitjana reflects a relatively narrow description of ethical veganism which has the potential to be expanded upon in future cases involving veganism.

**Ethical veganism as nonreligion**

The Tribunal constructs ethical veganism as a philosophical belief, in distinction from a religious belief, but it nevertheless positions ethical veganism in relation to religion in two interrelated ways. First, the analysis by which ethical veganism is constructed as a philosophical belief depends upon ethical veganism not being a religion, making religion relevant to its construction. Second, as a protected philosophical belief, ethical veganism is understood by the law to deserve the same legal protection as religious belief. That is, religion is used as a measure for determining the worth of ethical veganism in accordance with the UK’s Employment Statutory Code of Practice. Rather than being overtly tied to religion, therefore, ethical veganism’s relationship with religion is embedded in a legal process of construction that uses religion as a conceptual backdrop. Owing to these relational ties, in addition to its distinctiveness from religion as a philosophical belief, ethical veganism in the Casamitjana preliminary hearing decision can be conceptualized as a form of nonreligion.

Religion plays a key role in categorizing ethical veganism as a philosophical belief. The UK’s Employment Statutory Code of Practice asserts that: “A belief which is not a religious belief may be a philosophical belief” (para. 2.57). In other words, if a belief is not religious, then it may be considered as a philosophical belief. By extension, religion in Casamitjana constitutes the conceptual starting point for ethical veganism to be (1) understood by the Tribunal as a philosophical belief and (2) subsequently analyzed as such. The former exists in a direct, albeit implicit, relationship with religion, or, more specifically, the law’s understanding of what constitutes religious belief. The Tribunal’s analysis of ethical veganism exists in a second-hand relationship with religion, for it hinges on the initial identification of ethical veganism as a belief that is not religious.

The protective framework of the Code does not have threshold requirements for a religious belief to be protected from discrimination under Section 10 of the Equality Act 2010. For a philosophical belief to be protected under law, it must be shown to deserve the same protection automatically afforded to religious belief. This observation is particularly evident in previous legal cases that address nonreligious and philosophical beliefs, such as the UK House of Lords 2005 Williamson decision. In this case, Lord Nicholls determined that:

The atheist, the agnostic and the sceptic are as much entitled to freedom to hold and manifest their beliefs as the theist. These beliefs are placed on an equal footing for the purpose of this guaranteed freedom. Thus, if its manifestation is to attract protection under Article 9 a non-religious belief, as much as a religious belief, must satisfy the modest threshold requirements implicit in this article. In particular, for its manifestation to be protected by Article 9 a non-religious belief must relate to an aspect of human life or
behaviour of comparable importance to that normally found with religious beliefs. (para 24; emphasis added)\textsuperscript{17}

“Article 9” refers to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) article that protects “the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.” In Casamitjana, the Tribunal asserts that Section 10 of the Equality Act 2010 mirrors Article 9 of the ECHR (see paras. 24, 30–31), so that the criteria identified in Williamson for “non-religious belief” is also applicable for philosophical beliefs under UK anti-discrimination law. As a philosophical belief worthy of legal protection, therefore, ethical veganism in Casamitjana is seen as having “comparable importance” to that of a religious belief. This view privileges religion over nonreligion by using religion as the baseline to determine whether a belief is nonreligious, and by extension, whether a nonreligious belief is worthy of protection like a religious belief. While religious and nonreligious beliefs “are placed on an equal footing for the purpose of this guaranteed freedom,” they are not treated as such in the process of legal decision-making.

Adapting Cora Schuh, Johannes Quack and Susanne Kind’s (2019) notion of an “assemblage” to Casamitjana helps make clearer the various relations ethical veganism has with religion. In accordance with Quack’s (2014) field theory, nonreligion exists in “a complex web of relationships with different religious others, as well as other non-religious or a-religious actors” (Schuh et al., 2019: 26). The relations of this web or “assemblage” are “not random,” but occur in ways that are “interrelated and structured” in accordance with a social agent’s foci (Schuh et al., 2019: 27). The term “foci” designates the values, themes and objectives of nonreligious actors and their collective self-organizations. The foci of nonreligious agents help determine the specific relations they have among each other and with those of a religious field. These relations may be characterized by conflict, competition, cooperation and dialogue. As Kind et al. (2019: 155–156) summarize:

[A] a mode of nonreligion is necessarily (though not sufficiently) characterized by different foci (values, themes, and organizational objectives), which orient nonreligious activism and inform the kinds of relations (competition, cooperation, conflict, and dialogue) that actors engage in with particular religious and nonreligious others. While different nonreligious actors can collaborate, they can also stand in opposing camps when, e.g. certain nonreligious phenomena are seen to function similar to religion – to be religion-like – and thus just as much the focus of criticism.

In the Casamitjana preliminary hearing decision, ethical veganism appears in a “legal assemblage” whereby it is positioned into relationships with religion to varying degrees of visibility. Its connections to ahimsa and the “religious and atheists alike” draw an overt link to religion (para. 34), while the categorization of ethical veganism as a philosophical belief in relation to religious belief constitutes the background of the Tribunal’s analysis. These relations are structured through a legal process of analysis that recognizes the ethical values of veganism and fulfills an objective to bring it under the protective framework of the Code. This objective is accomplished in part through “an equating tendency” that attributes ethical veganism with a religion-like character.
(Schuh et al., 2019: 28). This religion-likeness derives from the substantive moral quality of ethical veganism, which attributes it with the seriousness of a philosophical belief (as opposed to an opinion or viewpoint) that deserves protection under antidiscrimination law.

The analogous relationship between ethical veganism and religion is also seen in news coverage of the Casamitjana preliminary hearing. Headlines addressing the case include: “Should veganism be protected in law like a religion? This landmark UK case will decide” (Carter, 2020); “Vegans could get the same legal protections as religious people, as a landmark case is heard in Britain” (Picheta, 2020); and “‘Ethical veganism’ is a protected class akin to religion in the U.K. after a landmark ruling” (Heil, 2020). Describing the outcome of the hearing, an article from BBC News (2020) states: “The judge ruled that ethical vegans should be entitled to similar legal protections in British workplaces as those who hold religious beliefs.”18 Similar to the Tribunal, ethical veganism is discursively constructed in these accounts as being distinct from religion, while still having a “religion-like” status as a belief that can herald protection from the law.

Connections between ethical veganism and religion in a legal context are not unique to Casamitjana. In 2015, the provincial Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) of Ontario, Canada expanded its understanding of creed to include nonreligious belief systems alongside religious ones. As the OHRC (2016) explains: “Creed may also include non-religious belief systems that, like religion, substantially influence a person’s identity, worldview and way of life.” In a preceding 2013 research and consultation report, the OHRC included ethical veganism as a nonreligious belief system alongside atheism.19 The OHRC referred to the UK’s 2010 Grainger20 case while updating its policy on creed (Covey, 2018). In Grainger, the UK’s Employment Appeal Tribunal established five criteria that philosophical beliefs must meet to be protected from discrimination under the 2003 Religion and Belief Regulations, which was later replaced by the Equality Act 2010. These Grainger requirements are now found in the UK’s Employment Statutory Code of Practice, which was used in the Tribunal’s analysis of Casamitjana’s veganism.

Unlike the framework proposed in Grainger, the OHRC (2016) states that a creed “addresses ultimate questions of human existence, including ideas about life, purpose, death, and the existence or non-existence of a Creator and/or a higher or different order of existence.” Covey (2018: 237) considers whether or not ethical veganism could fulfill this criterion in a tribunal or court:

Ethical veganism, as a standalone philosophy, faces difficulties atheist philosophies do not, however, in that it does not, except perhaps idiosyncratically, offer a position on the existence of a deity or other orders of existence. What it does offer in terms of a stance on the purpose of life it offers only in the negative—it is not the purpose of animals to exist as resources for humankind, it is not the purpose of human beings to reign supreme over the Earth. It is here that a test case most risks the need to borrow from existing religious ideology to meet the requirement, thus limiting its general applicability as a legal precedent.

Ethical veganism in Casamitjana offers insight into Covey’s (2018) test case. In the Tribunal’s analysis, the substance of ethical veganism as a moral structure for everyday
human–nonhuman animal relations is not directly linked to religion. Yet the Tribunal still does not treat Casamitjana’s ethical veganism as a “standalone philosophy.” His ethical veganism is linked to the religious teaching of ahimsa, as well as the Vegan Society’s philosophical definition of veganism. It thus “borrows” from pre-established notions of veganism, one of which is designated as religious.

Veganism further intersects with religion in American case law. In its 2012 Chenzira\(^\text{21}\) case, a district court in Ohio concluded that the plaintiff’s vegan practice is sincerely held and merits legal protection from religious discrimination.\(^\text{22}\) This outcome was reached in part by the submission of biblical passages that support veganism as a moral and ethical belief. Covey (2017: 237) rightly points out that veganism in this case did not gain protection in and of itself, but was instead protected as a “lived practice, though unorthodox, of Christianity.” The Chenzira decision contrasts that of the 2002 Friedman case, in which a California court concluded that the plaintiff’s veganism failed to meet the requirements of a religious creed under California’s Fair Employment and Housing Act. The Court asserted: “[Friedman] alleges a moral and ethical creed limited to the single subject of highly valuing animal life and ordering one’s life based on that perspective. While veganism compels [him] to live in accord with strict dictates of behavior, it reflects a moral and secular, rather than religious, philosophy.” The different outcomes of the Chenzira and Friedman cases suggest that there may be advantages to associating ethical veganism with religion in certain legal contexts.\(^\text{23}\)

These examples help demonstrate the particularities of the Casamitjana case. Ethical veganism is not associated with Christianity, nor is it explicitly called “non-religious.” Without drawing upon religious language, the Tribunal places emphasis on the qualitative substance of veganism as a moral restructuring of everyday human–nonhuman animal relationships. Ethical veganism nevertheless encounters religion while remaining distinct as a philosophical belief—it is neither fully associated with religion nor constructed in its absence. This does not mean that ethical veganism is necessarily non-religious in or beyond other legal contexts, nor that someone is nonreligious because they are an ethical vegan. Schuh et al. (2019: 32) write: “As a concept, nonreligion is not an intrinsic characteristic of people, but denotes a position that actors or phenomena can be in relation to certain others, denoted as religious.” Theorizing ethical veganism as non-religion in law thus relies upon the specific context of the case, as veganism may also manifest in ways that are considered religious or areligious. More broadly, ethical veganism in this case suggests a concept of nonreligion that, through a measured process of legal construction, gains substantive meaning in distinction from religion, while it is positioned into direct and indirect relationships with religion.

**Conclusion**

Casamitjana withdrew his discrimination claim by March 2020 following a settlement with the League Against Cruel Sports, which made the following statement:

The only reason for the dismissal of Mr Casamitjana in 2018 was his communications to his colleagues in relation to our pension arrangements. Having revisited the issue we now
accept that Mr Casamitjana did nothing wrong with such communications, which were motivated by his belief in ethical veganism.

We are grateful to Mr Casamitjana for having raised the issue of pensions to us, which allowed us to change our default pension fund to an ethical one closer to our values.  

Although Casamitjana’s discrimination claim did not move forward, the Tribunal’s decision set a precedent for providing ethical veganism with protection as a philosophical belief under anti-discrimination law. This does not mean that all ethical vegans are automatically protected from discrimination under Section 10 of the Equality Act 2010. Casamitjana’s ethical veganism was shown to meet the requirements of a philosophical belief, demonstrating that ethical veganism qualifies for protection if it is sincerely held and conforms to the requirements of the Employment Statutory Code of Practice.

Ethical veganism is constructed in Casamitjana as a philosophical belief first and foremost because it does not conform to the law’s understanding of religious belief. The substantive content of this belief is defined by its moral human–nonhuman animal relationships. This focus captures the deep concern many ethical vegans have for the human-caused suffering of nonhuman animals, which has widespread effects for how they practice and navigate everyday life. Nevertheless, the myriad of ways ethical veganism is lived and can also encapsulate concern for the environment is not captured by the Tribunal’s analysis of Casamitjana’s veganism. Veganism is a diverse and complex phenomenon, being continually shaped and contested by vegans and nonvegans alike (Wright, 2015). Although this case does not offer compelling insights into the diversity of ethical veganism, it does provide an entry point into considerations of nonreligion in law. Ethical veganism in the Casamitjana preliminary hearing decision is at once distinct from and tied to religion, attributing it with a “religion-likeness” that merits it legal protection (Schuh et al., 2019: 28). This observation demonstrates how beliefs that are not necessarily religious, such as ethical veganism, can be conceptualized as a form of nonreligion when positioned in relation to religion within the legal field.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Lauren Strumos https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8781-7077

Notes
1. The League Against Cruel Sports states that they dismissed Casamitjana for gross misconduct (Shipp, 2020).
2. Mr J Casamitjana v The League Against Cruel Sports [2020] UKET 3331129/2018.
3. See Smith and Cragun (2019) for a review of social scientific literature on nonreligion from the mid-2000s onward.

4. In regard to areligion, Quack (2014: 446) states: “The important (not clear-cut but gradual) difference between nonreligious and areligious phenomena [...] is that analyses of nonreligious phenomena require a relation to ‘religion,’ while areligious phenomena are generally described and analyzed without any reference to religious phenomena.”

5. James A. Beckford (2003: 4) states, “The sedimented meanings associated with religion in the course of social life constitute authoritative guides not only to usage of the term but also to social action. The category of ‘religion’ is an abstraction from, or distillation of, these meanings and actions. As such, the category of religion is subject to constant negotiation and renegotiation. Its meaning must therefore be related to the social contexts in which it is used.”

6. There is no single definition of religion in law. For instance, the Supreme Court of Canada in its 2004 Amselem case defined religion subjectively as “freely and deeply held personal convictions or beliefs connected to an individual’s spiritual faith and integrally linked to one’s self-definition and spiritual fulfilment, the practices of which allow individuals to foster a connection with the divine or with the subject or object of that spiritual faith” (Syndicat Northcrest v Amselem [2004] 2 S.C.R. 551, para. 39).

7. The American Vegan Society, founded in 1960, locates veganism in the nonviolent teachings of ahimsa. It describes the pillars of ahimsa as: “Abstinence from animal products; Harmlessness with reverence for life; Integrity of thought, word, and deed; Mastery over oneself; Service to humanity, nature, and creation; Advancement of understanding and truth.” The saying “Ahimsa lights the way” is featured as a header on their website. See: https://americanvegan.org/ahimsa/.

8. The field of Critical Animal Studies largely focuses on nonhuman animals, but scholars like Best (2014) and Weitzenfeld and Joy (2014) call for “total liberation”—liberation of humans, animals and the Earth from their interconnected structures of oppression.

9. Veganism further intersects with nonreligion in critical scholarship that views religion as oppressive and a hinderance to nonhuman animal liberation. For examples, see Socha (2015) and Wrenn (2015).

10. Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism are included in Section 2.53 of the United Kingdom’s Statutory Code of Practice on Employment: “The term ‘religion’ includes the more commonly recognised religions in the UK such as the Baha’i faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Rastafarianism, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism.”

11. The Vegan Society was founded in Britain in 1944 by a group of Vegetarian Society members morally opposed to the human consumption of dairy and eggs. See Leneman (1999) for a concise history of the splinter group and their founding of the Vegan Society. See Wrenn (2019b) for an overview of the significance of the organization, including the Vegan Society’s standardization of the term “vegan.” Although groups like the Vegan Society add some coherence to veganism as a social movement, Wright (2017: 728) clarifies that: “Despite the existence of the Vegan Society, which was founded in England in 1944, vegans tend not to constitute a unified group in possession of a cohesive ideological mandate.”

12. Regarding religious and philosophical belief, the Employment Statutory Code of Practice states: “Belief means any religious or philosophical belief and includes a lack of belief” (para. 2.55); and “‘Religious belief’ goes beyond beliefs about and adherence to a religion or its central articles of faith and may vary from person to person within the same religion” (para. 2.56).
13. Narayanan (2018: 29) also incorporates human rights into her vision of a vegan economy: “Prioritizing the building of a vegan economy and food production system that offers health and generates vegan employment opportunities, and instituting policies that reduce the growth rate of human populations, are all vital for a trans-species inclusive, sustainable planet. Animal and human rights are intimately interlinked and must pave the way for the next major freedom movement in planetary history—animal liberation from human exploitation.”

14. This observation points toward the concept of animal liberation as founded by Peter Singer (1975). Singer (1975) draws on Jeremy Bentham’s (1879) utilitarian philosophy to reason that nonhuman animals deserve the same moral consideration as humans because of their capacity to suffer. Rejecting speciesism and advocating for animal liberation does not entail treating nonhuman animals the same as humans. More precisely, humans ought to extend equal moral consideration to nonhuman animals, who like humans, experience pleasure and pain. Veganism can be seen as a way to reject speciesism and put the theory of animal liberation into practice (Best, 2014).

15. Examples of philosophical beliefs mentioned in the Code (para. 2.57) are “Humanism and Atheism.”

16. *R v Secretary of State for Education and Employment, ex parte Williamson* [2005] UKHL 15, [2005] 1 FCR 498.

17. This passage is quoted in para. 30 of the *Casamitjana* preliminary hearing decision.

18. See Jones (2020) for a BBC news article on the rise of veganism in the UK.

19. This finding does not mean that ethical veganism is legally defined or protected as a creed. Such matters are for courts and tribunals to decide, but the OHRC’s policy can provide guidance to the law’s decision-makers.

20. *Grainger Plc v Nicholson* [2010] ICR 360 UKEAT.

21. *Chenzira v Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center*, No. 1:11-CV-00917 (S.D. Ohio 2012).

22. See *Friedman v Southern California Permanente Medical Group*, 102 Cal. App. 4th 39, 125 Cal. Rptr. 2d 663 (2002).

23. See Lisa Johnson (2015) for an argument that ethical veganism meets the definitional requirements of religion under US federal law and deserves to be protected as such.

24. *Mr J Casamitjana v The League Against Cruel Sports* [2020] UKET Consent Judgement 2 March 2020 3331129/2018.

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