

If we exempt ritual slaughter from animal welfare laws we open the door to far worse crimes

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Jewish and Muslim sensibilities about ritual slaughter are given protected status, despite these practices being inhumane. Matthew Syed argues that religious exemptions in this area are a slippery slope into far worse crimes.

I'll be honest: I love meat. I like steak medium rare, lamb pink, and I am not averse to the occasional veal Milanese, particularly when it is served at Brocca, a rather nice Italian restaurant I know. But, like most carnivores in this country, I also believe that animals should be slaughtered humanely. In fact, I think it is imperative.

The law, unsurprisingly, takes the same view. Animal welfare legislation requires animals to be stunned before slaughter in order to minimise suffering. The stunning renders the animals largely impervious to pain before they are killed. There are also other rules and regulations that seek a balance between the rights of the animal and the practicalities of eating meat on a mass scale.

Some campaigners reckon that the law should go further to protect animals; others think that it is already too onerous.

But this is the stuff of democracy, isn't it? People with different opinions trying to reach a conclusion based on something approaching rational deliberation. And for those who disagree with the conclusion, there is always the opportunity to campaign, to proselytise, and, indeed, to stand for parliament if they so wish. That is how you change the law.

But it isn't the only way. When it comes to meat, it turns out that there are exemptions. Jewish and Muslim sensibilities about ritual slaughter are given protected status, despite these practices being inhumane. Kosher meat is taken from animals that are never stunned pre-slaughter. Halal animals are stunned sometimes, but not always. Both types of meat are routinely served in restaurants, without labelling. The exception was granted on grounds of religious freedom.

Now I want to point out here that I don't have any problem with religion. If you think that there is a divine rule that bans you from eating animals slaughtered in the name of anyone but "Allah"; or animals that weren't killed by men trained for the purpose; or carcasses that haven't been patted on the head by a rabbi, that is your business. Hell, you can eat your food while balancing a copy of the Holy Book on your head if you really want to.

But I do have a problem with the law having get-out clauses. I do have a problem with rules being swerved around. The law is not a pick'n'mix counter. The right to religious freedom is not an absolute right to do what you like, whether killing animals inhumanely, barring gay couples from your B&B, or forcing your daughter into a marriage she doesn't want. Religious customs, like secular ones, must operate within limits.

And when those who make the laws start to grant exemptions, however well intended, it is not just animals that suffer; it is all of us. Just look at how this legislative fear of offending religious sensibilities has shaded into a deeper cultural impotence when it comes to standing up to crimes such as female genital mutilation, "honour" abuses and the more ludicrous aspects of Sharia. Look at how it has caused us to pull our punches on issues such as the burka.

Secular liberalism, we should remember, is not a wishy-washy doctrine. It is a positive, muscular and rather wonderful creed. It is about the principle of "live and let live", but within limits. When people behave in illiberal ways; when they trample on the rights of others (human or animal); when they try to exempt themselves from the law, we should confront them. Indeed, religious freedom itself can only survive in a society when it is protected from the illiberal tendencies of others.

Of course, if religious groups wish to change the law, on animal slaughter or anything else, that is their right. But let them argue for it openly, like anyone else. To be fair, some Jewish and Islamic scholars have argued that ritual slaughter is not inhumane, but they have been powerfully contradicted by the Farm Animal Welfare Council, the EU's scientific panel on animal health and welfare, and the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe.

But this is how it should be. Let us have the give and take of rational debate. Let us decide on the basis of evidence and reason. And let us examine the arguments of religious groups on their merit, and without fear of being labelled antisemitic, anti-Islamic or anti-religious.

Matthew Syed is a columnist and feature writer for The Times. This article first appeared in the [Times \(£\)](#) and is reproduced here with the author's permission. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the NSS.

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