

Religious Slaughter of Animals

Animal welfare legislation requires animals to be stunned before slaughter in order to minimise suffering. The only exemption is for religious communities to meet Jewish and Muslim religious requirements. Whilst we support the right to religious freedom, we do not think that exemptions should be made on religious grounds to animal welfare regulations which apply without exception to everyone else.

For as long as exemptions are granted – we argue that meat from religious slaughter without pre-stunning should be appropriately labelled, enabling consumers to make an informed choice about the food they purchase.

What is religious slaughter?

According to Jewish law and to Islamic customs, animals must be slaughtered by a single cut to the throat.

The Jewish method of slaughter, shechita, does not permit stunning as Jewish religious tradition dictates animals intended for food must be healthy and uninjured at the time of slaughter. Islamic food rules, for halal meat, can be satisfied with animals stunned before slaughter if animals do not die as a result of the stun, but there is no definitive consensus and slaughter without pre-stunning does also take place.

Animal welfare concerns

In the UK, it is an offence to cause or permit an animal avoidable excitement, pain or suffering. Research shows that it is more humane to stun an animal prior to slaughter than not to do so. The prevailing scientific consensus is that slaughter without pre-stunning causes avoidable pain and distress. Non-stun slaughter is permitted in the UK

despite a recommendation¹ by the Government's own advisory body, the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC), that the practice should be banned. The FAWC report found that animals could remain fully conscious for up to two minutes after having their throats cut. The report concluded that animals slaughtered without pre-stunning are likely to experience "very significant pain and distress" before they become unconscious. Unfortunately, the Government rejected this recommendation, stating the proposal had "understandably been deeply contentious for the Jewish and Muslim communities".²

The recommendation to outlaw the practice is supported by the RSPCA, Compassion in World Farming, the British Veterinary Association, and the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe amongst others.

The EU Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW) similarly conclude: "Due to the serious animal welfare concerns associated with slaughter without stunning, pre-cut stunning should always be performed."³

Extent of religious slaughter

The Government no longer keeps statistics on religious slaughter, and the Government said in October 2010 that it did not know the number of halal slaughterhouses⁴.

In May 2012 The Food Standards Authority (FSA) published findings from a survey conducted into animal welfare in slaughterhouses⁵. Their results indicated that the number of animals not stunned prior to slaughter was 3% of cattle, 10% of sheep and goats, and 4% of poultry.

Industry estimates suggest strong Muslim demand for chicken and lamb has resulted in about 40% of poultry and 25–30% of lamb consumed in the UK meets halal specifications. However, in the production of halal, pre-stunning is common before the animal's throat is cut. Historic data published by the Meat Hygiene Service suggested that around 90% of UK halal slaughter involves pre-stunning. More recent Food Standards Agency figures from 2012 show that more than 80% of animals are stunned before slaughter for Halal meat in the UK.⁶

It is clear that many Muslims accept electrical pre-stunning prior to the cut. The practice is not allowed under strict Jewish traditions and animals slaughtered for Kosher meat are in general not stunned before slaughter. However, in New Zealand, any animal slaughtered by the shechita method is stunned shortly after the cut has been made. These practices show some flexibility in religious interpretation.

Data collected by the EU Dialrel project found that of the UK abattoirs surveyed, 100% of the animals and birds slaughtered for the production of kosher meat were slaughtered without prior stunning. For halal meat, 25% of cattle and 7% of sheep were

¹ <http://www.fawc.org.uk/reports/pb8347.pdf>

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3588405.stm>

³ <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/45.htm>

⁴ HC Deb 19 October 2010 c632W

⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-17966327>

⁶ <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN01314.pdf>

slaughtered without prior stunning. According to these figures, no poultry were slaughtered for halal production without stunning.⁷

Some parts of animals killed by Jewish ritual slaughter methods are not themselves regarded as kosher, and are therefore sold on the general market (currently unlabelled).

Kosher and halal slaughter is prohibited in Latvia, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. A Bill to ban the practice in The Netherlands was rejected by the Dutch upper house in June 2012 following fierce opposition by Jewish groups, and to a lesser extent, Muslim groups.⁸

Religious slaughter and the law

The welfare of animals at slaughter is governed by Directive 93/119/EC⁹ on the protection of animals at the time of slaughter and killing. Directive 93/119/EC has been implemented in United Kingdom by the welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995, as amended, (WASK).¹⁰ Schedule 12 regulates slaughter by the “religious method”.

European Council Regulation 1099/2009¹¹ was published on 18 November 2009 and will replace the Directive from 1 January 2013.

Regulation 1099/2009 requires stunning before slaughter, but allows member states to exempt religious slaughter. However, individual member states can impose stricter rules in relation to religious slaughter and **can refuse to exempt religious slaughter from pre-stunning regulations.**

Unfortunately, the UK (along with the majority of EU members) refuses to do so.

The Government has launched consultations in England, Scotland and Wales on how to bring this Regulation 1099/2009 into force. No proposals have been announced to prohibit non-stun slaughter.

The Government has said it would prefer all animals to be stunned before slaughter, but recognises the requirements of the Jewish and Muslim communities and accepts the importance which they attach to the right to slaughter animals for food in accordance with their beliefs.

In May 2012 The Rt Hon James Paice MP, Minister of State for Agriculture and Food said: *“Killing an animal without stunning is not acceptable in the western world. But we need to be tolerant and understanding of religious communities who want their meat produced in this way.”*¹²

⁷ <http://www.dialrel.eu/images/factsheet-assesment-practices.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4244734,00.html>

⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/food/fs/aw/aw_legislation/slaughter/93-119-ec_en.pdf

¹⁰ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1995/731/contents/made>

¹¹ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2009:303:0001:0030:EN:PDF>

¹² http://www.foodmanufacture.co.uk/Manufacturing/Government-to-review-religious-slaughter-rules?utm_source=copyright&utm_medium=OnSite&utm_campaign=copyright

Prime Minister David Cameron's interview for the Jewish press in March 2011 also indicated that there was no question of a ban¹³.

"We have no plans to outlaw in any way that practise. There's no stronger supporter of shechita in the cabinet than me. The Jewish community has been an absolute exemplar in integrating into British life in every way but integration doesn't mean that you have to give up things that you hold very dear in your religion and it seems to me the issue of shechita is a very good example of that. I fought as a back-bench MP at the last attempt by the Farm Animal Welfare Council to do something to change this and I will always stand up for it."

The Coalition Government clearly does not wish to outlaw Halal or Shechita slaughter, but says it is considering the labelling of meat from religious slaughter in a welfare context.

Key Issue: Labelling

There is no requirement under UK or EU law for the meat from non-stun slaughter to be labelled as such. As a result, non-stun slaughtered meat from religious slaughter is routinely being sold on the general market to unwitting members of the public.

Many food outlets, private and public bodies, including schools and hospitals, routinely serve halal meat to all customers, often for reasons of convenience. A *Daily Mail* investigation found this practice extensive.¹⁴

If slaughter without stunning is still to be permitted, we believe no more animals should be slaughtered under the exemptions than is absolutely necessary to meet religious demand.

The exemption for religious slaughter in schedule 12 of the Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) (WASK) Regulations 1995¹⁵ clearly states that it applies to people of that religion, not to everybody. It therefore restricts religious slaughter to slaughter by the Jewish method for the food of Jews and by the Muslim method for the food of Muslims. As part of their consultation on the implementation of Council Regulation (EC) 1099/2009, the Scottish Government has admitted that this targeting of supply has not previously been enforced. Permitting meat from religious slaughter methods to enter the general food chain is therefore not only ethically unacceptable, it is also unlawful.

We therefore support calls for meat from this source to be clearly labelled. The current absence of labelling deprives consumers of information and consequently serves to fuel the demand for meat from slaughter without stunning.

This view was echoed in May 2012 by Prof Bill Reilly, former president of the British Veterinary Association. Writing in the *Veterinary Record*, he said: *"In my view, the current situation is not acceptable and, if we cannot eliminate non-stunning, we need to keep it to the minimum."*

¹³ http://www.totallyjewish.com/news/national/?content_id=15910

¹⁴ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1313303/Britain-goes-halal---tells-public.html>

¹⁵ Schedule 12.2 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1995/731/schedule/12/made>

*"This means restricting the use of halal and kosher meat to those communities that require it for their religious beliefs and, where possible, convincing them of the acceptability of the stunned alternatives."*¹⁶

In 2008 the then UK Food and Farming Minister Lord Rooker (now Chair of the Food Standards Agency) drew attention to the importance of labelling, stating that halal and kosher meat should be labelled when it is put on sale so the public can decide whether they want to buy food from animals that have bled to death.¹⁷

Proposals for such labelling requirements have tentatively appeared in EC documents, but have always been fiercely resisted by religious lobby groups.

On 16 June 2010 MEPs voted overwhelmingly in favour of German MEP Renate Sommer's proposals on food labelling¹⁸. Amendment 205 of these proposals covered the labelling of ritually slaughtered meat and proposed changes to the draft legislation so that meat and meat products from ritually slaughtered animals must carry the label "Meat from slaughter without stunning".

However, on 7 December 2010, following intense lobbying from Jewish groups, the Council of Ministers approved a draft of the new food information regulation¹⁹ but without amendment 205. The decision to drop the amendment was criticised by the NSS and several animal welfare organisations including Compassion in World Farming (CIWF) and the British Veterinary Association's (BVA).

The basis of opposition to labelling

An argument often put forward by religious groups against the labelling of products from religious slaughter is that this would be discriminatory and cause prejudice. However, to uphold their objection is to discriminate against the majority of consumers, denying them any right of choice and deliberately misleading them about the source of their meat. We believe such concerns are not sufficient to deny consumers more accurate information.

Advocates of religious slaughter also point to Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights²⁰ which provides for a right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion which includes the freedom to manifest a religion or belief in, *inter alia*, practice and observance. This aspect of Article 9 however, is a qualified right, which means that an interference with the right can be justified in certain circumstances. We believe the welfare of animals provides such a justification.

Furthermore, some Christians have argued that their rights under Article 9 are infringed by not being able to avoid meat which has been dedicated to another god. Many Sikhs also consider it against their religion to eat ritually slaughtered meat. This further strengthens the case for labelling.

¹⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-17966327>

¹⁷ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/halal-and-kosher-meat-should-not-be-slipped-in-to-food-chain-says-minister-805396.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=REPORT&reference=A7-0109/2010&language=EN>

¹⁹ <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/10/st16/st16555.en10.pdf>

²⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Convention_on_Human_Rights

Another reason advanced against labelling is the potential loss of income to the halal/kosher industry, making it uneconomic²¹. The Jewish lobby group Shechita UK argue that if religiously slaughtered meat were to be labelled as ‘meat from slaughter without stunning’ the market value of the product would drop and this could in turn represent a large financial loss to the abattoirs that produce kosher meat.²²

This reason implicitly accepts two powerful arguments for labelling: that a material proportion of those buying meat that is not pre-stunned would not do so if they knew its source and that the quantities involved are substantial. It glosses over two further — understandably unstated — ethically dubious underlying assumptions, that:

1. It is acceptable to mislead the public in this way, and the legislative process should be complicit in this deceit.
2. The necessity to subsidise the religious slaughter industry is more important than informing customers that meat they buy has been slaughtered in a way that they would not like and may consider unnecessarily cruel.

The debate should, however, consider the impact on consumers in this regard, a significant number of whom would be alarmed to find that simply not buying or eating labelled halal and kosher meat does not mean that they have avoided it.

As long as religious groups retain the privilege of an exemption from legislation aimed at ensuring animals do not suffer avoidable distress or pain, we maintain it is only fair that consumers have the right to information that enables them to avoid such products if they so wish.

Campaign: What Next?

EU welfare at slaughter Directive 93/110 will be replaced by Regulation 1099/2009 in January 2013. While this Regulation allows religious slaughter to continue, individual member states can impose stricter rules in relation to religious slaughter.

The UK government launched a consultation in September 2012 on how to bring the directive into force. The Government said considerable concern had been expressed by welfare organisations and members of the public about the welfare of animals slaughtered without stunning in accordance with religious rites. The Government also confirmed that it would prefer to see all animals stunned before slaughter but recognises the right of members of religious communities to eat meat prepared in accordance with their religious beliefs. The Government therefore confirmed that it does not intend to ban religious slaughter without stunning.

The NSS responded to this consultation, again calling for the Government to adopt new stricter national rules to ensure all animals are stunned prior to slaughter and that non-stun slaughter is prohibited. Until

What you can do

To take part in the DEFRA consultation on Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing please visit <http://www.secularism.org.uk/consultation--welfare-of-animals.html>

²¹ <http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/33399/the-beginning-end-kosher-meat>

²² <http://www.shechitauk.org/act-now-to-shichita/faq-about-labelling.html>

Using this briefing to inform your letter, please [contact your MP/MSP](#) to let them know that you oppose exemptions from animal welfare legislation that permits slaughter without pre-stunning.

Please ask them to support any proposals that ensure that meat from animals slaughtered without pre-stunning, is clearly labelled.

Please send any replies you receive to admin@secularism.org.uk