Religious Slaughter: Promoting a Dialogue about the Welfare of Animals at Time of Killing

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Both the Muslim and Jewish faiths have specific rules for the method of killing religiously acceptable nonhuman animals. Animal slaughter without stunning prior to cutting the throat for the production of food suitable for consumption for Muslim and Jewish people, called religious slaughter, has been a contested issue for a long time in Europe (see Vialles, 1994). When the method of electrical stunning was first introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century, this contested issue led to a “science versus religion” war about the animals’ pain and consciousness at time of killing. Electrical stunning of animals prior to slaughter was welcome and widely accepted, according to Burt (2001), because it addressed issues of civilized, or humane, behaviour and technology that were important to the meat industry.

The first scientific textbook for the meat industry, by Leighton and Douglas (1910), described the goal of the industry as producing the optimum amount of meat of the best quality in the shortest time (Burt, 2001, p. 87ff), and indicated that from about 1927, introduction of electric stunning before slaughter presented new possibilities for achieving such a goal. This new method of stunning presented options of efficiency, low cost, and hygiene as well as the possibility of meeting animal welfare considerations. It also seemed a win-win technology that could be operated with relatively little skill compared to, say, wielding a poleaxe. In the words of Muller (1932), one of its pioneers, the technology indicated “the higher standard of modern civilization” (p. 487, cited in Burt, 2001).

However, this technology was strongly rejected by the Jewish communities, which took issue with injuries to the animals prior to having their throats cut and claimed that the Jewish method of slaughter, shechita, was already addressing animal pain and was ensuring animals’ unconsciousness with the simple cut of the throat. This claim was based on the thorough training of the
slaughter man, the sharpness and size of the knife (specific for each species),
the handling of the animals before slaughter, and the restraining methods
(Regenstein, Chaudry, & Regenstein, 2003).

These arguments are partly echoed in emerging requirements for non-
stunned halal slaughter. In the last twenty years, the Muslim communities in
Europe have increasingly started to question the halal status of the meat that
they buy (see Bergeaud-Blackler, 2004; Lever & Miele, 2012), and the demand
for non-stunned halal meat is increasing.

This special issue of *Society & Animals* is based on the experience of the
international research project Dialrel (2006-2010), which was funded by the
European Union for establishing a dialogue between science and religion with
the Jewish and Muslim minorities in Europe about religious slaughter. The
inspiration for this research was the public concern about the rapidly growing
demand for halal-certified meat in Europe and worldwide. The lack of a com-
mon standard for halal slaughter (that can be carried out either with stunning
or without stunning, depending on different interpretations of the Koran) puts a
growing number of animals slaughtered without stunning at risk. This risk was
widely communicated by animal welfare and animal rights NGOs who also pointed
out the lack of transparency of the meat market, where part of the carcasses of
animals slaughtered without stunning, for production of kosher and halal meat,
are sold in the conventional market without labels (Lever & Miele, 2012).

The overall aim of the project was to facilitate the expression of concerns
about the welfare of animals at time of killing that promoted a heated debate
in Europe at a time in which the European Union was changing the regulation
on “killing animals” (Council Regulation (EC) No 1099/2009, 2009). The
new European Union regulation maintains the exemption of compulsory
stunning in the case of religious slaughter in name of the human rights of
religious minorities (i.e., the right to practice one’s own religion) even though
it has introduced new rules for safeguarding the welfare of animals.

The Dialrel project combined animal science and social research on slaugh-
tering practices: it developed methods for the assessment of risk for the welfare
of animals in slaughterhouses and produced guidelines for safeguarding the
welfare of animals at time of killing (Velarde et al., 2010). It also developed
practical procedures such as consumers’ forums and stakeholders workshops
for gathering concerned parties—religious authorities, NGOs, animal welfare
scientists, halal and kosher meat consumers, supply chain actors, and policy
makers—in order to put the welfare of animals as well as the human right of
practicing one’s own religion on the political agenda and make them
debatable.
The three papers in this issue address these issues and present some of the results of the project. The first paper, by Bergeaud-Blackler, Zivotofsky, and myself, addresses the issue of kosher consumers’ knowledge about religious slaughter practices, consumers’ concerns about the welfare of animals, and the role of kosher food in contributing to Jewish identity and religious practices. It shows that Jews consider kosher food to be of higher quality and shechita slaughter to be the most animal-friendly practice (because the slaughter man has to be highly trained Rabbi in this practice and he has to be a highly respected member of the community).

Therefore, Jews are ready to pay a very high price for kosher meat and consume less of it, and they share the same concerns about animal welfare as non-Jews. However, they rely upon Rabbinic assessment of slaughter practices rather than secular scientific authorities. Even for those Jews who do not buy kosher products, the Jewish method of slaughter is considered an important part of their culture and religion.

The second paper, by Germana Salamano et al., presents the results of an experiment of deliberation in a community of Muslim immigrants in Emilia Romagna in North-East Italy conducted in 2007. The experiment was promoted by the Regional veterinary authorities and consisted of a demonstration of different practices of religious slaughter carried out with pre- or post-cut electrical stunning. Ritual sheep slaughter in this region occurs most frequently during the Sacrifice of Abraham (Id al-Kabir), which falls on the 70th day after the end of Ramadan.

Sheep are often slaughtered outside the authorized premises in such numbers to raise concerns not only among the local health and political institutions, but also among the animal protection organizations and the members of the public. The experiment was instrumental in facilitating a marked increase in the number of animals stunned prior to slaughter in the following years. Moreover, in the same year, stunning prior to slaughter was applied to cattle for the first time.

The last paper, by Beniamino T. Cenci-Goga et al., reports on research conducted in slaughterhouses in Italy, examining the procedures for halal slaughter, which is performed on most animals without stunning. Halal slaughter with prior stunning is accepted for only 5.9% of small ruminants. This research is the first, systematic attempt to analyze the methods of religious slaughter and to discuss the implications for animal welfare. The paper concludes with a reflection on the need for future research that should give priority to the study, implementation, and introduction of new methods that can induce unconsciousness in animals at time of killing without damaging their integrity, as required by Jewish and Muslim religious authorities.
Innovative and less stressful animal-rearing systems, with shorter transport times or even the absence of transport thanks to the use of mobile slaughter containers, and using alternative methods instead of electrical stunning or captive bolt (such as calming pheromones or even drugs that do not have negative effects on meat consumption) could become future practices. These new avenues of research could address some of the ethical dilemmas in current practices of slaughter that increase tensions between different communities.

Notes

1. For a description of the project, see www.dialrel.eu.

References


