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

Mara Miele
MieleM@Cardiff.ac.uk

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 Dialrel1 (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 common 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 slaughtering 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.