



The Association of
Muslim Lawyers (UK)

RELIGIOUS SLAUGHTER AND THE WELFARE OF ANIMALS

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A campaign is once again underway to discredit the religious slaughter of animals for food. The Islamic way of slaughter or *halal zabah* is particularly targeted. Liberal opinion in Britain - more so the animal rights lobby - is apparently shocked at the inhumanity of it all. Calls are being made to the authorities to intervene now and legislate without delay, depriving the Muslim community of an aspect of their religious freedom. In a letter on 20th June 1998, Jack Cunningham, the then Secretary of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, assured the Muslim community that “the government fully recognises the right of Muslims to practice the requirements of your religion without discrimination”. He added: “I should like to stress that the government remains fully committed to permitting slaughter by the Muslim method when it is properly carried out”. One can only hope that the government is able to honour such noble intentions in the face of the growing propaganda onslaught from the anti-Muslim lobby.

There is evidence that ministers are often taken for a ride by these vociferous lobby groups. Elliot Morley, Minister for Farm Animal Welfare, for example, joined in the chorus by issuing a press release on 9th March 1998, stating that during the ‘*Eidul Kebir*’ (*Idul Adha*) festival in France, “sheep are inexpertly killed without stunning and sometimes with blunt knives”. This was then circulated to ‘those involved in the live sheep trade’ with a note of blessing from the then Secretary of State himself. Quite understandably, the animal rights lobby and the media jumped for joy and mounted a fresh campaign to slaughter Islam itself.

But fears of cruelty to animals in *halal zabah* are ill-founded. *Al-zabah* is a humane and hygienic method of killing animals for food. It involves a deep and sharp cut to the front of the neck, severing the trachea, oesophagus, blood vessels, and the head off the chest bone. This initiates a massive haemorrhage, which quickens death. *Al-zabah* is painless as the first incision and the resulting haemorrhage induces anoxia (lack of oxygen) in the brain cells, which acts as a powerful pain-killer. The animal remains conscious but totally insensitive to pain, severe bleeding having disabled the sensory centre.¹ Bleeding itself is not painful. If it were, we would not be prepared to donate blood!

Questions are raised however, about the seemingly painful convulsions we witness in slaughtered animals. Dr. Ghulam Mustafa Khan asserts that as far as bleeding and convulsions are concerned, it can be said that the cruelty lies in the eye of the beholder who is unaware of physiological principles.² Dr. Lord Horder GCVO, MD, FRCD, describes the slaughtering of animals without the use of stunning as painless. He says: “the animal loses consciousness immediately. It is difficult to conceive of a more painless and rapid mode of death. For a few seconds after the cut, the animal makes no movement. Its body is then convulsed. The convulsive movements continue for about a minute and then cease. The interpretation of this is clear. The cut is made by a knife so sharp and so skilfully

handled that a state of syncope with its associated unconsciousness follows instantaneously upon the severing of the blood vessels, the rapid loss of blood and the consequent significant fall in blood pressure. The movements of the animal which begin after about 90 seconds are epileptiform in nature and are due to the bloodless state of the brain (cerebral ischemia with complete anoxaemia). Sensation is abolished at the moment of the initial syncope.”³

In view of such clear evidence, the claim that *al-zabaha* is cruel stands thin. Clearly, inadequately informed pre-judgement has come in the way of an objective fair view on the matter. If the issue is to spare unnecessary pain while killing animals for food, then there is little doubt that *al-zabaha* and the Jewish *shachita* are the most humane.

So why is the animal rights lobby hell-bent against *al-zabaha*? An age-old Islamophobic arrogance to ‘civilise’ Muslims is one possible explanation. There is nothing new about this. Europe and particularly Britain carries the heavy burden of ‘civilising’ Muslims from the colonial times. Lord Kingsale wrote to Miss MacNaughton in the early part of this century: “I was able to induce some of the Mohammadans in the part of Assam in which I lived to have all their animals shot by a revolver before their throats were cut, but it took a great deal of persuasion and constant looking after. I doubt that now I have left they will continue in their old and barbarous way”.⁴ Lord Kingsale does not shy away from wearing the ultimate colonial glory, claiming further on: “I had more or less complete power over these people”. That power-paranoia and civilising zeal lives on to this day but takes on new dimensions. In today’s power-less post-colonial times the same old game is being played out in the name of animal rights and humane killing.

The tone of today’s ‘civilisers’ is barely different from the Lord Kingsales of yesteryears. “There is therefore no reason to permit halal slaughter here”, cries Mr. Brian Sewell in his article, ‘My beef with ritual slaughter’ (Evening Standard 7.7.98). He goes on to say: “And we should rise in anger against those who export European animals to suffer oriental cruelties and death”. A day later the anti-*halal* frenzy was further whipped up by Shelly Dawson in the letter page of the same Evening Standard: “How many programmes do we see on TV about animal rescue, about cruelty to animals, about the cruelty of fox hunting? Yet halal slaughtering is deliberately ignored. Why?”.

It is, however, hard to imagine what touch of humanity there is in killing the poor animal twice - once by pistol and then by cutting its throat. Pre-historic man (we are told) used the poleaxe to stun animals. The pistol was the first mechanised stunner, which replaced the poleaxe. Today’s captive-bolt differs from the ordinary pistol in that the bolt in it is captivated, but that does not make it any more humane than the ordinary pistol in which the bolt is free. It produces the same injury as the poleaxe, resulting in the shaking of the brain. The pain suffered by the animal is the same. Dr. G. M. Khan maintains that calling the pistol a humane killer is a scientific distortion.⁵ Yet, this method was recommended to the Admiralty by Lord Lee of the Farnham Commission and became a legal requirement in 1919. It was replaced by electric stunning by the *Slaughter Act 1933*.

Electric stunning has been challenged and gradually abandoned in many countries because of its disadvantages. Denmark took the lead. It was given up in the USA (1953), Holland (1955) and Britain (1958) and replaced by CO₂ (Carbon Dioxide) gas stunning. Even if strictly practised, CO₂ stunning is nothing but chemical strangulation. At the beginning of the century CO₂ was used as an anaesthetic for humans but promptly abandoned as it was found not to be humane. There is little doubt that the animal rights lobby’s preferred method of stunning is a great deal crueller than any other method. Blackmore (1982) maintains: “Electric stunning of calves by the ‘head only’ method is inhumane in all circumstances”. Whilst Gregory and Watton (1984) state: “Head to back stunning involves a cardiac arrest in all the sheep”, Althen (1977) adds: “from the psychological standpoint, the stunned animal is highly stressed”. Yet, animal rights enthusiasts happily uphold it in one form or another simply because they don’t know any better. Cruel trial and error experiments are made only at the cost of the poor animals.

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The current law in Britain - *Animal Welfare (Slaughtering and Killing) Regulations 1995* - respects the Muslim (and Jewish) religious methods of slaughter. The propaganda hype by both Mr. Brian Sewell and Shelly Dawson based on apparently "irrefutable evidence that Muslim slaughtermen in Britain lack training and skill and are unsupervised" (Evening Standard 7.7.98) is most certainly ill-informed. On 14th July 1998, Mr. Johnstone McNee, Chief Executive of the Meat and Hygiene Service (Evening Standard 14.7.98) made a big hole in such false claims. He stated that all slaughtermen, including all Muslim slaughtermen, hold religious slaughtermen's licences, which are issued after careful assessment of the applicant's competence, knowledge and fitness to hold them, by an authorised veterinary surgeon. He also assures that official veterinary surgeons take whatever action is appropriate to ensure compliance with the law, and challenges the likes of Brian Sewell saying: "if anyone has evidence of cruelty or poor practice, they should get in touch with us".

It is only natural that in a democratic and pluralist society such as ours, there will be divergence of views, differences of opinion and conflicts of interest. It is for the government of the day to come to sensible arrangements between these differences. Prior to any settlements, however, that are to be reflected in the law, the government must consult all parties involved and give equal weight to all arguments presented. Some parties do present themselves more forcefully than others, and so, the views, needs and requirements of minorities that are less vocal must especially be invited. The law should not reflect the views only of those that shout the loudest. ✓

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References

- ¹ Dr. G. M. Khan, *Al-Dhabh: Slaughtering animals for food the Islamic way*. pp. 23-25. Green Link, London.
- ² *Ibid*. p. 25.
- ³ Dr. Lord Horder as quoted by Dr. Abdul Majid Katme in his paper 'An up-to-date assessment of the Muslim method of slaughter' - delivered at a UFAW (Universities' Federation of Animal Welfare) symposium on Humane Slaughter and Euthanasia, held at the Zoological Society in Regent's Park, London, on 18th - 19th September 1986. p. 9.
- ⁴ As quoted by Miss MacNaughton in 'The Mohamman Slaughter' section of her book *Pistol v Poleaxe*, Chapman and Hall, London, 1932.
- ⁵ Dr. G. M. Khan, *ibid*. p. 31.