



Religious Slaughter

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This note describes the methods of slaughter used by the Jewish and Muslim religions. It also contains the recommendation of the Farm Animal Welfare Council Report to end the religious exemption for slaughter without pre-stunning. The Government's response, in April 2004, rejected that recommendation.

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1 Legislation

British legislation, now implementing EC legislation, requires the pre-stunning of animals before slaughter in normal circumstances, so that death should be painless. Religious slaughter, on the other hand, is a controversial issue, because the animals are not stunned. The requirement in British legislation for the pre-stunning of animals in slaughterhouses has always provided exemptions for the Jewish and Muslim methods of slaughter. The Jewish method of slaughter is called Shechita. Food fulfilling the requirements of Jewish law is called Kosher. The Muslim method is called Halal. The exemption dates back to the *Slaughter of Animals (Scotland) Act 1928* and the *Slaughter of Animals Act 1933* (which applied to England and Wales). The European Directive requiring the stunning of poultry and animals before slaughter (Directive 74/577/EEC) did not affect the position of religious slaughter. More recently, Council Decision 88/306, approved the (Council of Europe) *European Convention for the Protection of Animals for Slaughter, 1979*.¹ This convention allows for ritual slaughter in *Article 17*.

1 Each Contracting Party may authorise derogations from the provisions concerning prior stunning in the following cases:

slaughtering in accordance with religious rituals,...

2 Each Contracting Party availing itself of the provisions of paragraph 1 of this Article shall, however, ensure that at the time of slaughter or killing the animals are spared any avoidable pain or suffering.

Schedule 12 of *The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995* (SI 731) lays down additional provisions for slaughter by a religious method.²

A proposal by the European Commission for common welfare rules at slaughter for farm animals in the EU would require pre-stunning before slaughter. However, the proposal would include an exemption to allow slaughter to be carried out in accordance with religious rites without prior stunning, in line with current practice in the UK.³

2 The extent of religious slaughter

Complete statistics of religious slaughter are not kept, but the Meat Hygiene Service [MHS] Animal Welfare Review 2003 contained some information:

The tables below show the number of animals killed for the production of Kosher and Halal meat.

Numbers of Animals Slaughtered for Kosher Meat 1-7 September 2003

Species	Not Stunned	Post-Cut Stun	Stun method
Cattle	365(2)	361(3)	Captive bolt
Calves	8(1)	8(2)	Captive bolt
Young lambs	1704(5)	0	-

¹ Council Decision of 16 May 1988 on the conclusion of the European Convention for the Protection of Animals for Slaughter, 88/306/EEC, 1988 OJL 137

² http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si1995/Uksi_19950731_en_19.htm#sdiv12

³ Defra Press Release, *Eu proposal to create level playing field for welfare at slaughter*, 27 January 2009

Number of premises in brackets

i.e. three out of five premises producing Kosher meat practice post-cut stunning of cattle.

Numbers of Animals Slaughtered for Halal Meat 1-7 September 2003

Species	Not Stunned	Stunned	
		Captive Bolt	Electric
Cattle	0	850(8)	0
Calves	0	0	0
Young lambs	5141(5)	0	103944
Other sheep	11454(4)	688(3) (no post-stick)	18392(30) (no post stick)
Goats	62(2)	0	12(3) (no post-stick)

In addition at one premises 150 other sheep were stunned by concussion.

The majority of animals destined for the Halal trade in both the red meat and white meat sectors are stunned before slaughter. Stunning is a reversible process. An animal must be bled immediately after the delivery of the stun.

The following tables indicate the number of birds slaughtered by religious methods:

HALAL

Species	Not Stunned	No. of premises	Stunned	No. of premises	
Broilers	134,289	8	1,898,689	17	
Hens	11,495	5	92,296	6	
Turkeys	0	0	0	0	
Ducks	36	2	0	0	

KOSHER

Species	Not Stunned	No. of premises
Broilers	33,456	5
Hens	4,405	4
Turkeys	749	4
Ducks	574	3

Birds killed by the Kosher method are not stunned prior to slaughter. This process is closely monitored by MHS staff, and also by the Shechita Board. All persons who carry out Kosher slaughter are licensed slaughterers, and also recognised by the Shechita Board in charge of Kosher food production.⁴

Thus, the vast majority of halal meat comes from animals that were stunned before slaughter. In both Denmark and New Zealand pre-stunning is a legal requirement for Halal slaughter, with the consent of the Muslim population.⁵

The New Zealand Islamic Meat Management Site explains:

NZIMM

New Zealand Islamic Meat Management (NZIMM), brings together Halal the Shariah of Islam with the most modern developments in meat and food production. Managing Director Dr Haj Mohamed Abdel-Al is the pioneer of pre-slaughter stunning which is now the yardstick for Halal use around the world. This standard meets the highest levels of animal welfare, hygiene and efficiency. Multilevel auditing of Halal slaughtermen and processes ensures compliance. New Zealand food production comes with the highest Halal standards in the world. New Zealand Halal Processed Food Management is a subsidiary of NZIMM.

New Zealand Meat Processing Industry

Certified New Zealand meat processing plants process 28.3 million lambs and sheep, 2.7 million cattle and 600,000 deer every year. Most of this is exported in frozen form, but an increasing volume is sent to other countries in chilled packs. (...)

Over the past few years stringent codes have obligated the processor to kill all livestock in a humane manner. It so happens that meat from relaxed animals tastes better and stores longer. Halal slaughter ideally advances the animal welfare requirement through the use of electric pre-slaughter head stunning.⁶

However, there is no single authoritative body that can definitively rule as to the Muslim law on this subject. Shechita slaughter, necessary for orthodox Jews, always requires that the animal is not pre-stunned. Three premises producing kosher meat, as noted in the table, practise post-cut stunning of cattle.

3 Does Religious Slaughter cause particular suffering?

The Farm Animal Welfare Council, in their Report of 1985, concluded that religious slaughter involves the animal in greater suffering than methods involving pre-stunning:

The up-to-date scientific evidence available and our own observations leave no doubt in our minds that religious methods of slaughter, even when carried out under ideal conditions, must result in a degree of pain, suffering and distress which does not occur in the properly stunned animal.⁷

More research to support this view was published by Craig Johnson in 2009 in New Zealand. The *New Scientist* reported:

⁴ Meat Hygiene Service, *Animal Welfare Review 2003*, pp13-4

⁵ Report on the Welfare of Livestock when Slaughtered by Religious Methods, *Farm Animal Welfare Council HMSO 1985*, p.40

⁶ <http://www.muslimleague.org.nz/modules/wfchannel/index.php?pagenum=4>

⁷ Farm Animal Welfare Council, *Report on the Welfare of Livestock when Slaughtered by Religious Methods*, HMSO 1985, para 92

Johnson's work, funded by the UK and New Zealand agriculture ministries, builds on findings in human volunteers of specific patterns of brain electrical activity when they feel pain. Recorded with electroencephalograms, the patterns were reproducible in at least eight other mammal species known to be experiencing pain. Johnson developed a way of lightly anaesthetising animals so that although they experienced no pain, the same electrical pain signals would be reliably detected, showing they would have suffered pain if awake.

The team first cut calves' throats in a procedure matching that of Jewish and Muslim slaughter methods. They detected a pain signal lasting for up to 2 minutes after the incision. When their throats are cut, calves generally lose consciousness after 10 to 30 seconds, sometime longer. The researchers then showed that the pain originates from cutting throat nerves, not from the loss of blood, suggesting the severed nerves send pain signals until the time of death. Finally, they stunned animals 5 seconds after incision and showed that this makes the pain signal disappear instantly.⁸

4 Labelling

Another important issue relates to labelling. Much of the meat from animals slaughtered by religious methods is not sold as such, because it comes from the wrong cut of meat. The Farm Animal Welfare Council in its 1985 report estimated that no more than an estimated third of the weight of all animals slaughtered according to Jewish methods finds its way into Kosher shops and a high proportion of Shechita meat is therefore distributed to the open market.⁹ Many people believe that if such meat had to be labelled as coming from animals slaughtered without pre-stunning, they would not buy it. That might undermine the economics of Kosher meat.¹⁰ Proposals for such labelling requirements have tentatively appeared in EC documents, but have always been fiercely resisted.

The Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) flagged up the issue in 2003, but without any recommendation to tighten up labelling rules.

183. During our consultations concern was expressed to us about meat from animals slaughtered without pre-stunning (including meat from the hindquarters of some animals and meat from rejected animals) being placed, unidentified, on the open market rather than being consumed by the Jewish community. As a result, larger numbers of animals are slaughtered without pre-stunning than would be necessary if all carcasses, and the entire carcase were acceptable. FAWC will return to the consumer choice implications of this in a future report.¹¹

In its response in April 2004, the Government announced consultation on a voluntary labelling scheme. A PQ in April 2007 shows no real progress on labelling:

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
(1) what estimate he has made of the proportion of meat prepared according to shechita that is sold without labelling to this effect;
(2) if his Department will consider introducing mandatory labelling of all meat prepared according to halal and kosher rules.

⁸ "Calves feel the pain of religious slaughter", *New Scientist*, 17 October 2009

⁹ Farm Animal Welfare Council, *Report on the Welfare of Livestock when Slaughtered by Religious Methods*, HMSO 1985, para 27

¹⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 3 May 1991

¹¹ Farm Animal Welfare Council, *Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing Part 1 Red Meat Animals*, June 2003

Mr. Bradshaw [holding answer 18 April 2007]: DEFRA has made no estimation of the proportion of meat prepared according to shechita that is sold without labelling to this effect. Compulsory labelling of meat would require action at the European level, and this is not an area where the Government expects to see changes in labelling law in the foreseeable future. However, there is nothing to stop such information being provided voluntarily.¹²

The labelling issue was raised again in November 2009 in a report in the European Parliament by MEP Renate Sommer, of the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee. She covers nutritional and origin labelling, but also proposed the category “Meat from slaughter without stunning”.¹³ The report has not yet been adopted by the Committee, nor the European Parliament as a whole. Even if the proposal were adopted by the parliament, it would only go forward if approved by the European Commission and the council of Ministers.

5 The RSPCA position

The RSPCA view comes in para 7.10 of *RSPCA Policies on Animal Welfare* (Revised 2006):

The RSPCA is opposed to the slaughter of any food animal without rendering that animal insensible to pain and distress until death supervenes.

It notes that *The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995* state that all animals slaughtered in a slaughterhouse or knacker’s yard must either be instantaneously slaughtered by means of a mechanically operated instrument or stunned, and continues:

The 1995 Regulations exempt the Jewish method of slaughter, shechita, and the Muslim method of slaughter halal. While respecting individual religious practices, the Society opposes these exemptions on welfare grounds. All meat from animals killed in this way should be clearly labelled.

An earlier booklet describes their position:

The RSPCA recognises that in any democratic country it is a fundamental right of religious groups to practice their beliefs without hindrance, but where these beliefs are directly responsible for animal suffering, that right has to be challenged. Surely it is not unreasonable to suggest that, in the light of new scientific knowledge and society’s more caring attitudes to animals, religious traditions might be changed to secure an animal’s welfare before and during slaughter.¹⁴

6 Eid-el-Kebir

Every spring this festival near Paris includes the slaughter of large numbers of sheep outside slaughterhouses. In February 2003, as in previous years, DEFRA issued a statement:

LIVE SHEEP EXPORTS

In response to concerns about the welfare of British sheep exported for slaughter in France during the Muslim festival of Eid-al-Adha, Animal Welfare Minister Elliot Morley said:

¹² HC Deb 23 April 2007 c906W

¹³ “Sommer calls for nano labels and introduces warning on GDAs”, *Agra Europe*, 27 November 2009

¹⁴ RSPCA Farm Animal Welfare Booklet (1995)

"The Department enforces animal health and welfare rules rigorously. All consignments of sheep for slaughter or further fattening are subject to strict scrutiny. Since the resumption of live sheep exports this includes - pre-export veterinary inspection for health and fitness to travel, tighter animal health controls over the pre-export mixing of animals and checks on the premises of destination to confirm that it is an approved abattoir or other permitted premises. Defra would prefer a trade in meat rather than live animals for slaughter. However, the law is clear that we may not prevent exports on the grounds that the animals might be subject to poor welfare in the country of destination. For this reason we welcome the steps taken by the French Authorities to stop the horrendous practices seen in past years. We understand that this year special arrangements will be made to ensure that all animals must be slaughtered in approved abattoirs in accordance with welfare and hygiene rules."¹⁵

The Festival in the UK is a festival of sacrifice. Muslims are supposed to slaughter a sheep and distribute at least part of the animal to the poor. British Muslims often prefer to send money to the country from which their families originated. Some, however, want to slaughter sheep in this country.

Under British law slaughter must take place only in licensed slaughterhouses, "unless the slaughter is carried out in the presence of an authorised person".¹⁶ The Ministry of Agriculture has tried hard to prevent slaughtering taking place outside the slaughterhouse. They have produced leaflets in five languages and distributed them in Mosques. If Muslims wish to slaughter in the slaughterhouse, they are encouraged to let a licensed Muslim slaughterman do it for them and just to watch their sheep being slaughtered. If not, then they can slaughter a sheep under the supervision of a licensed slaughterman. Most of these animals would be pre-stunned, which is acceptable to most Muslims. Some more traditional Muslims feel that pre-stunning violates the Koran.

7 The Farm Animal Welfare Council Report

The Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) 2003 Report on welfare at slaughter recommended an end to the exemption by which some animals are slaughtered without stunning. In the meantime, it recommended improvements in practice:

Slaughter without pre-stunning

189. Government should arrange re-evaluation of all restraining pens currently in use, particularly in terms of the efficiency of restraint of animals of various sizes.

192. The legislation prohibiting the lifting of sheep by the fleece should be enforced by the OVS [Official Veterinary Surgeons].

193. Alternatives to manual restraint methods for sheep should be explored by the industry for use at slaughter without pre-stunning.

197. Where an animal has not been stunned, the OVS must ensure that nothing is inserted into the neck wound post-cut.

201. Council considers that slaughter without pre-stunning is unacceptable and that the Government should repeal the current exemption.

203. Until the current exemption which permits slaughter without pre-stunning is repealed, Council recommends that any animal not stunned before slaughter should receive an immediate post-cut stun.¹⁷

¹⁵ DEFRA News Release, *Live Sheep Exports*, 3 February 2003

¹⁶ 1995 SI 731 schedule 12 http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si1995/Uksi_19950731_en_19.htm#sdiv12

¹⁷ Farm Animal Welfare Council, *Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing Part 1 Red Meat Animals*, June 2003

In May 2009 FAWC published a report on welfare at slaughter of white meat animals, like chickens. Again it criticised slaughter without stunning, noting that a bird retains consciousness for around 20 seconds after the neck cut is made:

207. FAWC is concerned about the pain and distress experienced by conscious birds, in particular that likely to be generated by a neck cut and, where practised, subsequent manipulation of the wound. Following consideration of the available evidence, FAWC is in agreement with the prevailing international scientific consensus that slaughter without pre-stunning causes pain and distress. On the basis that this is avoidable and in the interests of welfare, FAWC concludes that all birds should be pre-stunned before slaughter.

208. FAWC is mindful that for certain sections of British society, the method of slaughter of animals for food is part of religious faith and an associated way of life. We welcome the EU-sponsored project on religious slaughter aimed at improving knowledge and expertise through dialogue and debate on the welfare, legislative and socio-economic aspects (<http://www.dialrel.eu>). We also recognise the difficulties of reconciling scientific findings with matters of faith. We urge Government to continue to engage with the religious communities to enable progress to be made.

Recommendations

209. Slaughter of poultry without pre-stunning causes significant avoidable pain and distress. Government should engage with the appropriate communities to ensure that avoidable pain and distress is prevented.

210. Where poultry are not insensible to pain or distress during slaughter, manipulation of wound surfaces of the neck should not take place.¹⁸

8 The Government's Response to the 2003 FAWC Report

The Government in April 2004 announced that it would be consulting on its draft response to the FAWC report. It rejected the idea of a ban on the production of kosher or halal meat. It saw merit in FAWC's idea of stunning cattle immediately after being cut, because they take time to lose consciousness. However, it would not make that mandatory. The Government also suggested a voluntary scheme to label meat resulting from slaughter without pre-stunning. Many other FAWC recommendations – in relation to slaughter but not religious slaughter - were accepted:

Animal Welfare Minister Ben Bradshaw said that the FAWC recommendation that the Government should ban religious slaughter without stunning on welfare grounds had understandably been deeply contentious for the Jewish and Muslim communities across the UK, to whom this is a matter of fundamental concern. Mr Bradshaw said: "We are grateful to FAWC for their work, seeking to improve the welfare of farm animals - a goal we share. We also accept that there are deeply held beliefs on both sides of aspects of this argument. We will not ban the production of halal or kosher meat. A ban could in any case simply result in kosher and halal meat being imported. We would, therefore, be exporting the problem, resulting in no overall improvement in animal welfare".

While the Government is proposing to reject the FAWC recommendation to ban slaughter without prior stunning, Mr Bradshaw said proposals for a post-cut stun for cattle should receive further consideration while accepting at the same time the depth of feeling and deeply held beliefs of some religious groups.

¹⁸ FAWC, [Report on the Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing Part 2: White Meat Animals](#), May 2009

"The Government sees some merit in the FAWC recommendation that cattle slaughtered by having their throats cut should receive an immediate post-cut stun because of the time it takes cattle to lose consciousness, but we do not intend to pursue a mandatory system for this and intend to explore whether progress can be made on a voluntary basis. We would welcome the views of the communities concerned."

Mr Bradshaw also suggested that the consultation provides an opportunity to start a debate on whether meat from animals slaughtered without prior stunning for the kosher and halal markets should be labelled voluntarily. This however is a matter for the Food Standards Agency.

The issues associated with labelling centre around the fact that some of the meat from animals slaughtered by the religious slaughter method, where the animal has not been stunned, finds its way on to the ordinary meat market. At present, it is not required to be labelled as having come from an animal that was slaughtered without prior stunning.¹⁹

On 8 March 2005, the Government produced a fuller response to the FAWC Report:

Recommendation 197: Where an animal has not been stunned, the OVS must ensure that nothing is inserted into the neck wound post-cut.

Response: Do not accept. The Government is committed to respect for the rights of religious groups, and in view of the assertion by Shechita UK that the insertion of the slaughterman's hand into the wound to check that all the vital structures have been cut cleanly is an essential part of shechita slaughter, we will not be legislating against it. We accept that such action will stimulate nociceptive pathways and in a conscious animal may lead to a perception of pain. However the length of time for an animal to lose consciousness after the neck cut is disputed. We will continue to explore with the religious authorities whether, following the cut, there could be a greater delay before this inspection is carried out.

Recommendation 201: Council considers that slaughter without pre-stunning is unacceptable and that the Government should repeal the current exemption.

Response: Do not accept. The Government does not intend to ban the slaughter of animals without prior stunning by religious groups. We agree with FAWC that the scientific evidence indicates that animals that receive an effective pre-cut stun do not experience pain at the time of slaughter. The balance of current scientific evidence also suggests that those cattle which receive an immediate post-cut stun are likely to suffer less than those that do not. However we recognise that this latter conclusion is disputed. The Government is committed to respect for the rights of religious groups and accepts that an insistence on a pre-cut or immediate post-cut stun would not be compatible with the requirements of religious slaughter by Jewish and Muslim groups. However, others, particularly consumer and welfare groups, oppose slaughter without prior stunning and do not wish to eat meat that has not been stunned prior to slaughter. Meat from these animals can find its way onto the ordinary meat market but is not identifiable by consumers at the point of sale. As part of the wider process of review and consultation on labelling meat, the Government will work with consumer and industry groups to consider whether this problem can be addressed through a voluntary system of labelling, bearing in mind that an early EU agreement on meat labelling according to slaughter method is unlikely.

¹⁹ Defra Press Release 127/04, *Government response to the Farm Animal Welfare Council Report on the welfare of farmed animals at slaughter or killing: part 1 red meat animals*, 1 April 2004

Recommendation 203: Until the current exemption which permits slaughter without pre-stunning is repealed, Council recommends that any animal not stunned before slaughter should receive an immediate post-cut stun.

Response: Partially accept. The Government does not intend to make it a compulsory requirement for animals to receive an immediate post-cut stun. The Government considers that the current balance of scientific evidence suggests that cattle which have not received a pre-cut stun would benefit from an immediate post-cut stun. However, we recognise that this conclusion is disputed. The Government is committed to respect for the rights of religious groups and accepts that a compulsory immediate post-cut stun on cattle would not be compatible with the requirements of religious slaughter by Jewish and Muslim groups. We will continue to discuss with the religious authorities the extent to which a voluntary immediate post-cut stun might be introduced in a manner that is compatible with their beliefs.²⁰

9 Australian Brand

An announcement in October 2008 showed Australia much keener to exploit the opportunities of halal meat than is the UK:

A unique Halal brand of meat produced in Australia is set to hit markets across the globe, Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) announced last week. The brand, which was developed last year by MLA for use in the Middle East red meat market has now gone global. It currently supports the majority of Australian-produced Halal red meat sold in the Middle East, and is now set to appear with Australian red meat sold in Islamic countries around the world.

MLA's Middle East regional manager, Ian Ross said the global expansion of the Halal brand is an important step towards expanding markets for Australian red meat.

(...) "Australia is the only country in the world with a globally-endorsed and certified Halal brand underpinned by government legislation," he added. (...) It is estimated that there are over 2 billion Muslims around the world and that the market for Halal products globally is worth \$570 billion annually.²¹

10 The position in summer 2009

A PQ in May 2009 shows that the issue has not been forgotten, despite the lack of change:

David Taylor: There have long been pre-stunning requirements for animals slaughtered for food, but exemptions have been made for religious slaughter, mainly affecting halal and the slaughter of lambs. Will the Minister come to a meeting that I have organised after the recess to view a video produced by EBLEX—the English Beef and Lamb Executive—that shows the effects of such slaughter? It cannot be allowed to continue and we must end those exemptions. It is cruel, unacceptable and antediluvian. We must make progress on this issue, and I hope that the Minister will be able to attend the meeting that I have organised.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jane Kennedy): I will be happy—perhaps that is not the right word—to come to the meeting and view the video, although I shall do so with a sinking heart. My visit to an abattoir for pigs and cattle last week sharpened my awareness of the issues. We have a long tradition of religious tolerance, which has led to the exemptions that my hon. Friend

²⁰ [Defra response to FAWC recommendations](#), March 2005

²¹ "Australian halal brand goes global", *Agra Europe*, 15 October 2008

mentions, but I will come to the meeting and I will talk with him about diary arrangements. I am aware that this is an issue of acute concern across the UK.²²

In June 2009, EU farm ministers reached agreement on new rules aimed at protecting the welfare of animals at slaughter. *Agra Europe* noted:

[M]ember states will have the option to apply an exemption for religious slaughter methods which do not require the stunning of the animal before killing. This was a controversial point among certain member states, including the Netherlands, a council official said after Monday's Council talks in Luxembourg.²³

²² HC Deb 21 May 2009 c1627

²³ "New EU slaughter rules agreed", *Agra Europe*, 26 June 2009