



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.
 - EU law, like UK law before it, requires farm animals to be stunned before slaughter. However, there is an exception for religious slaughter.
 - The Jewish method of slaughter, Shechita, requires animals not to be stunned before slaughter. Islamic food rules, for Halal meat, can be satisfied with animals stunned before slaughter, but there is no definitive ruling and slaughter without pre-stunning does also take place.
 - There is particular concern about the Islamic festival of Eid-el-Kebir, where believers traditionally slaughter a sheep themselves.
 - The Farm Animal Welfare Council has concluded that slaughter without pre-stunning does cause suffering to the animals.
 - Much of the meat on an animal killed by religious slaughter may not qualify as Kosher or Halal meat. There is no requirement that it should be labelled as meat from an animal killed without pre-stunning.
 - The European Parliament voted in June 2010 to require compulsory labelling for all meat from animals killed without pre-stunning. The Council of Ministers would have to approve that legislation.

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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). Schedule 12 of *The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995* (SI 731) lays down provisions for slaughter by a religious method, additional to EU law.¹

EU law on slaughter is now contained in [Council Regulation \(EC\) No 1099/2009 of 24 September 2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing](#). Paragraph 18 of the preamble explains the position on religious slaughter:

Derogation from stunning in case of religious slaughter taking place in slaughterhouses was granted by Directive 93/119/EC. Since Community provisions applicable to religious slaughter have been transposed differently depending on national contexts and considering that national rules take into account dimensions that go beyond the purpose of this Regulation, it is important that derogation from stunning animals prior to slaughter should be maintained, leaving, however, a certain level of subsidiarity to each Member State. As a consequence, this Regulation respects the freedom of religion and the right to manifest religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance, as enshrined in Article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

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:

¹ http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si1995/Uksi_19950731_en_19.htm#sdiv12

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	-

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.²

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.³

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.⁴

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 above, practise post-cut stunning of cattle.

² Meat Hygiene Service, *Animal Welfare Review 2003*, pp13-4

³ Report on the Welfare of Livestock when Slaughtered by Religious Methods, *Farm Animal Welfare Council HMSO 1985*, p.40

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

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.⁵

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

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.⁶

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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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

⁵ Farm Animal Welfare Council, *Report on the Welfare of Livestock when Slaughtered by Religious Methods*, HMSO 1985, para 92

⁶ "Calves feel the pain of religious slaughter", *New Scientist*, 17 October 2009

⁷ Farm Animal Welfare Council, *Report on the Welfare of Livestock when Slaughtered by Religious Methods*, HMSO 1985, para 27

⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 3 May 1991

all carcasses, and the entire carcase were acceptable. FAWC will return to the consumer choice implications of this in a future report.⁹

In its response in April 2004, the Labour 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.

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.¹⁰

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 covered nutritional and origin labelling, but also proposed the category "Meat from slaughter without stunning".¹¹ The stunning category was approved by the European Parliament on 16 June 2010.¹² In order to go forward it will require approval by the European Commission and the Council of Ministers.

A letter to the *Independent* by Henry Grunwald QC, Chairman Shechita UK, criticised the proposals in the November 2009 report:

The Jewish community is fully supportive of providing consumers with information about the origins of their food and we urged MEPs that if they wanted to label meat and meat products, labels should include those killed by electrocution, shooting, gassing or clubbing as well as the many millions of animals that are mis-stunned during the stunning process. But to single out one method is suspicious, troubling and discriminatory.

It is a popular myth that shechita is a painful method of slaughter. There is ample scientific evidence to the contrary. (...) And shechita accounts for only 0.03% of all animals slaughtered each year for food in the UK. The real concern for animal welfare activists should be the far greater numbers of animals mis-stunned by captive-bolt or electricity every year. Both Defra and Compassion for World Farming recognise that 9% of animals are mis-stunned.¹³

5 The RSPCA position

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

⁹ Farm Animal Welfare Council, *Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing Part 1 Red Meat Animals*, June 2003

¹⁰ HC Deb 23 April 2007 c906W

¹¹ "Sommer calls for nano labels and introduces warning on GDAs", *Agra Europe*, 27 November 2009

¹² European Parliament Press Release, [MEPs set out clearer and more consistent food labelling rules](#), 16 June 2010

¹³ Letter to the *Independent*, 30 June 1020

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 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.¹⁵

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

¹⁴ RSPCA Farm Animal Welfare Booklet (1995)

¹⁵ Farm Animal Welfare Council, [Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing Part 1 Red Meat Animals](#), June 2003

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.¹⁶

7 The Labour Government's Response to the 2003 FAWC Report

The Labour Government in April 2004 announced that it would be consulting on its draft response to the 2003 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 Labour 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.

"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."

¹⁶ FAWC, [Report on the Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing Part 2: White Meat Animals](#), May 2009

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.¹⁷

On 8 March 2005, the Labour 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.

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

¹⁷ 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

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.¹⁸

¹⁸ [Defra response to FAWC recommendations](#), March 2005