

WHOSE HALAL AND WHO'S NOT?

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A recent report published by the Farm Animals Welfare Council (FAWC) on the treatment of animals at slaughter has pushed the "stunned vs. non-stunned" debate firmly back on the agenda. The Council, which has advised the government on issues of animal welfare since 1979, calls for the current exemption of Halal and kosher meat from being pre-stunned to be repealed. This recommendation, which has not yet been put into practice, has caused outcry among British Muslims and Jews, who thought this chapter had been firmly closed since they were exempted back in 1984. But what, if anything, has changed since then, and why are we once again being forced to justify our right to Halal and kosher meat? Erfana Bora investigates and discovers a huge split within the Muslim community.

It was almost two decades ago that a joint committee of Jewish and Muslim groups resolved the furore over pre-stunning by presenting the government with the case for Halal and kosher being essential to fulfil requirements of Divine Law. Now, the publication of this new report has brought history to repeat itself. An emergency meeting of Muslim and Jewish groups was called at Central London Mosque on June 12th, to formulate a joint strategy to counter the recommendations and once again present a unit-ed front to the government. The attendees included representatives of the Chief Rabbi's Office, Jewish Board of Deputies and the Shechita Board. From the Muslim community, representatives of the Muslim Council of Britain, Islamic Medical Council and the Halal Food Authority were amongst those present. The meeting's outcome was a petition and two-page cover letter addressed to all parliamentarians concerned with the new FAWC guide-lines. Signed by all the meeting's attendees, the petition called, once again, for non-stunned slaughter to be allowed to continue.

On the surface of it, this was an admirable display of inter-faith and, I dare-say, 'intra-faith' unity. But in reality, the show of solidarity between the different Muslim groups masked a fundamental split in method and ideology between some of the delegates. Q-News has discovered that the seemingly straightforward attempt to convince the government of the need to continue with the exemption may be undermined by the controversial stance of one lone group in this debate: the Halal Food Authority (HFA). Enter Mr Masood Khawaja, Director of the HFA,

who signed the petition on June 12th, but does not, it seems, really believe that the exemption is necessary at all. In a press release displayed on the HFA website, Mr Khawaja states that "experiments carried out to immobilise the animal through controlled stunning, if successful, would be looked at with an open mind." When Q-News spoke to Mr Khawaja it became apparent that, for reasons of sheer pragmatism, he was behind the scenes eager to endorse any method of stunning which hopes to immobilise animals without the risk of them dying in the process. This would introduce a method of producing Halal meat that is at once pre-stunned, and failsafe, something that is, according to those in the opposing camp, by its very nature an oxymoron. And so, enter Dr Majid Katme, spokesperson of the MCB on issues of Halal meat.

Dr Katme ardently presents the case against all stunning, not only in the case of Halal and kosher meat, but for all other meat, on the grounds that non-stunned meat is better for the health of the nation. He cites numerous scientific studies that have shown stunning has a detrimental effect both on meat quality and safety. More specifically, in relation to Halal meat, stunning can present major problems that obstruct the process of dhabaha (Halal slaughter). One of these is that currently, a large proportion of animals are killed by the stunning process, which makes the meat carrion and therefore unlawful. According to the FAWC, 33% of stunned chicken is dead before it reaches the blade; this would enter the market labelled 'Halal.' Stunning can also cause haemorrhaging and subsequent retention of blood that is required to flow away. Moreover, stunning causes massive changes in the chemical composition of the meat as the animal goes into stress and shock, releasing hormones into the muscle tissue. Not only this, but stunning also increases the risk of the spread of BSE. The picture then, does not look too good. These salient arguments against stunning render such meat to be at the very least non-tayyib (good/wholesome), if not Haram (impermissible).

But these issues did not seem to concern the director of the Halal Food Authority. Mr Khawaja, instead, wants a system whereby licensed slaughter men operating in licensed slaughterhouses would stun meat before slaughter to bring about immobilisation before the process of dhabaha, with vets on hand to ensure that animals are well treated before slaughter. When asked about checking each animal to determine it was still alive between stunning and slaughter, he deemed it an unnecessary or unworkable idea, and gave the analogy of cooking rice and not having to check whether each individual grain of rice in the pot was cooked through before you can eat it.

Mr Khawaja obviously does not realise the implications of potentially Haram meat being passed through his proposed system, and to liken this to someone eating a couple of grains of undercooked rice is about as crass an analogy you can get. To think that the HFA have such disregard for the welfare of the Muslim community's physical and spiritual state and yet is widely considered an authority on Halal food in this country is in my opinion, scandalous.

Another problem with Mr Khawaja's proposal is that it leaves Jewish concerns for kosher meat out in the cold. For meat to be kosher, no stunning may be used in any circumstances, and so to call for mass 'controlled' stunning shows no regard for the joint work carried out with Jewish groups over the years. And the plain truth is, that on this issue at the very least, the old maxim could never ring more true: if united we stand, then divided we must surely fall.

Perhaps the deciding factor in this debate should be the insistence on following the sunna and the safe, healthy option. As Dr Katme points out, what Allah ordained for His prophets must be returned to as our example, and we should not pander to the relentless needs of Muslim consumers, who want massive amounts of cheap meat. It is after all, this excessive demand for meat that allows Muslims to buy pork-injected chicken without checking where it is from or at whose hands it has been processed. Although, as Mr. Khawaja points out, three million chickens are slaughtered in the UK for the Halal market per week, and 'controlled immobilisation' is the only way to cater for this demand, we need to have an overhaul of the way we deal with Halal meat in this country. We have reached crisis point, with the biggest irony of all in this debate being that 90% of all dhabiha in the UK is stunned anyway (due to both ignorance of the current exemption on the part of slaughter men and the chance of making a tidy profit) and the only way we can break this system down is through education of the masses and drastically downsizing our appetite for meat. This, and support for organic and fair trade foods will not only put the Halal back onto our plates, but also the tayyib.

I believe we need a united front against stunning or else we will lose not only the Halal and the tayyib, but our voice and our rights. There should be no shame in saying we cannot have an 'open-minded' attitude when it comes to stunning. Such an attitude, after all, conforms only to the convenience of those who have no idea what Halal and kosher means, both spiritually and practically, to Muslims and Jews.