

## **Religious slaughter: Is it an animal welfare issue?**

Humanists sometimes receive criticism that their worldview is too “human centric” and does not take into account the welfare of non-human animals and the environment. Whilst it is true that Humanists do not have particular policies regarding animal welfare or the environment, by their nature many humanists are concerned about these issues. Our response is to support the established and impressive work already being done by organisations working to promote the rights and wellbeing of animals, rather than take the issue as our own. Humanists do not have any particular opinion on eating meat, however, regardless of whether or not they eat meat most object to the unnecessary suffering of animals used for food – for example Halal and Kosher laws that do not allow for the stunning of animals before slaughter, and support laws and organisations that work to prevent this practice. With this in mind, we were pleased to welcome Vicky Bond from the Humane League to speak to us at Brighton Humanists about the issue of the wellbeing of animals used for food. The Humane League was founded in the US in 2005, and Vicky is part of the UK branch that was founded in 2016. It works globally, with branches as far reaching as Mexico and Japan. The aim of this organisation sounds simple – to end the abuse of animals raised for food. However, as Vicky’s talk discussed, this is far from simple to achieve.

With the rising popularity of vegetarian and vegan diets, animal welfare has received more and more attention in recent years. There are, however, multiple factors to take into account when considering when, how or if we include meat and animal based products in our diets; the wellbeing of the animals, nutrition and health, and the environmental impact of our food sources. The all too familiar struggle between profit and welfare is leaving millions of animals in appalling conditions and under huge amounts of distress. With our increased understanding of the consciousness and sentience of non-human animals and their complex social natures, alongside the increasing availability of alternative sources of protein, it is becoming increasingly unacceptable to tolerate the way in which animals are made to live with the purpose of providing us with food. I should offer the disclaimer that I have been vegetarian for almost twenty years and am slowly moving towards veganism, so I am already much in the mindset of avoiding animal produce for food, my motives being ethical ones. However, I was still unaware of exactly how animals are slaughtered for food and the reality, whilst maybe not surprising, was still shocking to see. I will endeavour to abide by the example Vicky set in her talk, and will not be trying to persuade people to vegetarianism or veganism, or offering any moral judgement on eating meat, but to take an objective look at the means of meat production and the welfare of those impacted – the animals.

### **The reality of stunning**

When an animal has its throat cut, it will be experiencing pain, fear and the sensation of blood running down their throat. A shocking revelation is how long it takes the animal to lose consciousness; for sheep it takes 70 seconds, cows 55, calves 17, chickens 28 and pigs 18 seconds. We should also bear in mind that we do not know how these animals experience time, it could feel a lot longer to them. It is not only those animals being religiously slaughtered that this process is happening to. The difference lies in whether or not the animal is conscious or, i.e. if it has been stunned beforehand. In some circumstances it is possible to stun an animal before slaughter under Halal, however it is not ever permissible under Kosher conditions. Both laws require that the animal should be alive, with a heartbeat, when it is hung upside down and its throat cut through artery and jugular and a prayer is said. This ritual has its origins in animal welfare as previously limbs would simply be cut off to gain meat from animals, which would be much more unpleasant. However, whilst the

requirement to stun animals before slaughter so they are insensible to pain is a step in the right direction for animal welfare, the reality is not as neat as it may sound and does not guarantee that the animal will be free from suffering.

### **Methods of stunning**

As the most intensely farmed of the animals raised for food, tackling the wellbeing of chickens is one of the biggest challenges the Humane League has faced. 982 million broiler chickens being killed for food in Britain each year are often kept in small cages, with very little freedom. Vicky gave us a look into some of the methods used for stunning these birds.

**Electric waterbath:** this is a process used for chickens in which they are hung upside down and passed through a tank of water with an electrical current running through it. This is designed to paralyze the chickens. They use the lowest effectiveness of stun in order to not kill the chicken and can still be permissible under Halal law. This means that the method is not always effective and so chickens are often still conscious when they go into the scolding tank of water where they will drown. This was a method designed for speed and it certainly does that, with 180-220 birds a minute being processed via this system.

Deemed less stressful than the electric waterbath, an alternative method is **gas stunning**. The chickens are sent into a chamber and a two stage CO2 process is used to render them unconscious. This is still a highly unpleasant experience and it can take ten seconds for them to become unconscious. This method is not allowed in Halal.

Less used is **Low Atmospheric Pressure Stunning (LAPS)** in which the birds are kept in their crates and are brought to unconsciousness by reducing the air pressure in the tank. A pilot study has suggested that this experience induces a kind of euphoria so it could be a much less aversive method than the gas or electrical stunning mentioned above.

With 10 million pigs, 15 million sheep and 2.6 million cattle being killed for food the issue expands beyond chickens. A method used for mammals is an **electrical stun with tongs** to the head or chest before the cut to the throat. This method is effective when done well but the animals are highly stressed in the preceding moments. It is also a method that requires some degree of skill and many factors can reduce the effectiveness of the stun; for example, a sheep's wool could mean the electricity does not pass to the brain and the animal then requires multiple stuns. This method is permitted by Halal but not Kosher law.

For large animals such as cattle a **captive bolt** is used. This bolt passes into the brain and has the same effect as a bullet, causing unconsciousness without pain. Precision is key in this method. If there is even a little movement then the animal will not be rendered fully unconscious so are still aware and feeling pain. A study found that only around 84% of cattle are adequately stunned and as many as 16% need repetitive stunning or are slaughtered semi-conscious. Whilst effective when done right, it seems as though there is still huge room for error, and if the statistic of 2.6 million cattle being brought to slaughter each year is accurate, this would mean 416,000 cattle are being slaughtered each year whilst still partially conscious.

**Gas stunning** is often used for pigs. Pigs like to be in groups for protection and so the separation involved in the slaughtering process is highly distressing to them. In addition, due to their sensitive noses CO2 is highly aversive to pigs and it is suspected this feels like burning in the nose. It is a widely used method in the UK, Australia and throughout the EU and so it is pressing that improvements are made, such as keeping the pigs together, to reduce the unnecessary stress and discomfort. Vicky pointed out that this is an issue for

which the finger cannot be pointed at religious practices as pork is not allowed under either Halal or Kosher laws.

Fish are an overlooked part of the animal welfare discussion. Recent studies indicate fish are able to feel pain and have some degree of sentience, meaning that it is important their wellbeing is taken into account. This is especially true considering the vast numbers of fish that are caught; around 120 billion farmed fish and 2.7 trillion wild fish are caught each year for food. As fish are caught in nets and brought up, not only is this a distressing experience in itself, but as they are brought up to the surface the change in pressure causes the swim bladder to explode whilst the fish are simultaneously being squashed and suffocated under the weight of all the other fish caught in the net. Fish are then either put on ice, have their gills cut, receive a blow to knock them out or are even just left to asphyxiate. It has been found that fish were still conscious after two hours on ice. This is then not to mention the other issues caused by fishing; the damage done by nets, picking up unintended marine life and the waste that is left behind.

## **Conclusions**

Vicky's talk gives rise to the realisation that there is no such thing as humane slaughter. Stunning can be used to ease the pain and awareness of animals when they are about to be killed, however investigation into the conditions and practices done by teams such as the Humane League show that any of the stunning methods used are far from perfect and still leave room for error and unnecessary suffering. This is not to mention that the suffering does not just happen at the moment of slaughter. The conditions that animals are kept in throughout their lives and up to this point are often appalling, with limited space, poor food, lack of ability for social contact and no fresh air.

The Humane League understand the importance of collaboration with businesses and organisations in making effective changes, but Vicky described how they are also prepared to play "bad cop" and put pressure on those organisations with poor practices, holding them to account for their behaviour and making failures in animal welfare known to the public. This has been successful with 75% of UK restaurants committing to eradicating cages for laying hens in their supply chain and 64 brands including KFC committing to dramatically reducing the suffering of chickens farmed for their meat. We are seeing the higher availability of vegetarian and vegan options in restaurants, cafes and supermarkets and many online food sites and books provide meat-free recipe ideas. With more and more alternatives available, causing animals to suffer to provide our food becomes increasingly unjustifiable. A challenge I have been grappling with is that unfortunately, many of these meat and dairy alternatives such as soy beans or plant based milks come with their own dark side of high ecological impact, so these are not always a perfect solution either. As one of our audience members asked Vicky in the Q&A session, at what point do we accept that meat forms a large part of the collective human diet so some pain and distress will necessarily be involved when the time comes for the animal to be killed? Can we really expect it to be a perfect system? No, Vicky responded. However the suffering currently undergone by animals being slaughtered for food is unnecessary and is within our power to change it. It would not be right to enforce people to adopt a different diet, but those who choose to eat meat have the right to understand where it came from and can request that their meat comes from the most ethical sources possible. As it stands currently, I think I will have to end on Vicky's poignant message;

*"If we truly want to keep cruelty off our plates, then we need to keep animals off our plates".*