

Humanely Speaking

No Valid Reason For Ritual Slaughter

Every year we kill approximately 600,000,000 farm animals in order to provide food and other by-products, not only for Canadians, but for export. The majority of these animals and birds are killed in plants that are licensed by the Federal Government of Canada. These slaughter houses have to comply with the Federal regulations which require that all these animals be rendered unconscious by an approved, humane method before they are bled, hoisted or processed in any way. The purpose of the regulations is clear. The intent is to ensure that the animals do not suffer in the process of dying.

These regulations came about over 40 years ago. In the 1950s, the humane movement of Canada waged an extensive, vigorous campaign to persuade the Government of Canada to introduce these laws. At the time there were no laws, of any kind, regulating the slaughter of food animals. The majority were killed by methods which were considered inhumane 43 years ago. For example, millions of birds (poultry) were simply put onto a rack and their throats were stuck/cut. They bled to death. Cattle were driven into a pen where they were hit over the head with a sledgehammer. Quite often this method resulted in instant unconsciousness, equally often it didn't and in spite of one or more blows the animals were still conscious when they were hoisted and their throats were cut. Pigs were shackled by the back leg, dragged squealing across the floor of the pen and hoisted on to a moving conveyor belt where they were then stuck in the throat and bled before being immersed in a scalding hot pen to de-hair them.

The Humane Slaughter Act of 1960 brought these practices to an end in federally licensed plants.

Alternative methods of rendering the animals unconscious, such as the use of electric shock (pigs, poultry) and captive bolt pistol (cattle and other animals) were adopted and are now used widely throughout the country.

In 1964, the Government of Ontario produced provincial law which closely paralleled the Federal Act. Some, but not all, provinces have introduced similar legislation.

There is still much to criticize in the slaughtering operations but these are criticisms that have come from new knowledge and a concern to try to make the system even more humane. For example: the electric bath system used for poultry has been criticized as "being less than perfect." In this system, the bird's head is immersed in water which is carrying a current which, in turn, renders the bird unconscious. Unfortunately, not all birds pass through the process with the same degree of success. New methods of rendering poultry unconscious, including the use of argon gas, are becoming more widely used in Europe. This method protects the bird from the very beginning from stress and suffering, stress which is inevitable when a live bird has to be hung upside down on a moving belt before it is introduced to the bath. In the argon gas method, the bird is unconscious before it is taken out of its crate.

And so, in spite of its weaknesses and failures, it can be said that the vast majority of animals killed in Canada for human consumption are protected against unnecessary suffering by the Federal Humane Slaughter Regulations.

But there is one very notable exception to that general rule. I refer to the practice of ritual slaughter, practiced by the Jewish and Islamic faiths in Canada. Both systems are basically the same because they came from the same area, same time and for the same purpose. Both systems

require that the animal or bird is fully alive and conscious before its throat is cut. These animals and birds are subjected to additional stress by being prepared for slaughter in various ways. For example, cattle are restrained by an apparatus which stretches the head forward in order that the shoket (Jewish slaughterer) can cut the throat of the animal more efficiently than if the neck skin is loose and hanging pendulous. Some animals are driven into a cage which then turns the animal onto its back. This makes it easier to cut the animal's throat.

When the Humane Slaughter Act was introduced in 1960, the Jewish ritual slaughter was specifically exempted. The government at the time made it quite clear that their reason for doing this was to avoid offending the Jewish community. Over the years, attempts have been made to encourage the Jewish community (and more recently the same concern would apply to the Islamic faith) to accept changes to bring their system in line with the rest of the animals slaughtered. Generally, these efforts have been conceived by some as being anti-Semitic and even racist.

The original purpose of Kosher or ritual slaughter was quite understandable, and indeed justifiable. It began in an age when there was no refrigeration or similar protection for the consumer and public health was unknown. The prohibition against eating pig meat was given for exactly the same reasons, mainly because it is difficult without modern techniques and refrigeration to avoid the danger of eating spoiled pig meat in hot climates.

But that was then and this is now. And it may well be that change is finally coming. Recently the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe stated quite categorically that the practice of slaughtering animals without prior stunning is “**unacceptable under any circumstances.**”

In response to this declaration, it is interesting to note that in the United Kingdom, the Islamic community has agreed for the animals and birds to be rendered unconscious prior to slaughter.

There is no longer any valid reason for ritual slaughter. Surely the time has now come for Canada to lead the way in North America by removing the exemption given in the Humane Slaughter Regulations to Kosher and Halal slaughter.

And no, I am not anti-Semitic, but I reject an ancient ritual which condemns untold numbers of animals to pain and suffering which is totally unnecessary in this modern era.