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Science

Is Stunning an Animal Before Slaughter More Humane? Some Religious Leaders Say No



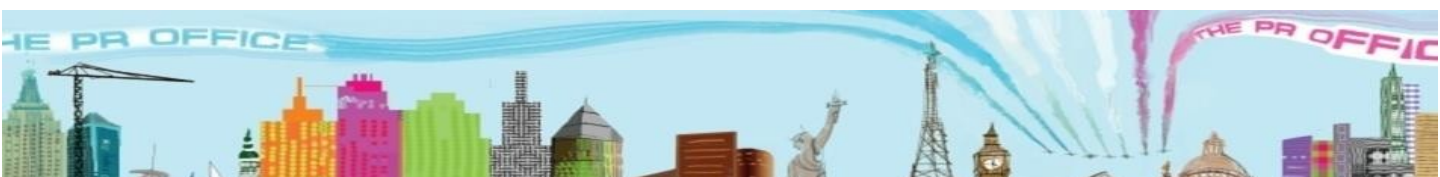
With the start of the new year, Belgium became the latest European country to ban traditional Jewish and Muslim animal slaughtering practices. The move was applauded by animal rights activists but condemned by religious leaders who see the ban as a threat to their communities.

At issue is whether to allow religious exemptions to European Union rules that state animals must be knocked out before they are slaughtered, which supporters say is more humane. The United States has similar regulations, but allows for religious exemptions.

Both faiths require that the animal be treated well in life and be healthy and unharmed before slaughter, which all Jewish religious authorities and some Muslim ones interpret as a prohibition of "stunning" before slaughter.

Religious leaders say minimizing an animal's pain has always been central to their traditions, and a ritual slaughter — carried out with a sharp blade to the neck — should be quick and almost painless.

When they are stunned, animals are rendered unconscious through blunt force, electric shocks, gassing or a steel bolt that penetrates an animal's skull. Stunning has been used for decades and "promotes animal welfare and meat quality,"





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according to the North American Meat Institute, a trade group that represents 95 percent of American red-meat producers.

But kosher-certifying authorities say that no form of stunning before slaughter is permissible, said Rabbi Menachem Genack, who oversees certification for the Orthodox Union, the world's largest kosher certifier. Some halal-certifying bodies agree, but others do allow nonpenetrative stunning before slaughter.

"Animal welfare has been addressed by Islamic legal scholars since very early in Islamic history," said Bogac A. Ergene, a history professor at the University of Vermont and co-author, with Febe Armanios, of "Halal Food: A History."

Everyone agrees that an animal's suffering should be kept to a minimum, he added. What is up for debate now is, among halal meat producers, certifiers and consumers, whether stunning accomplishes that goal. Some argue that stunning itself can cause great suffering, particularly if it is not carried out properly.

Dr. Armanios, an associate history professor at Middlebury College, said that the research on what is more "humane" was inconsistent, with studies that can support either position.

Beyond the concern for animals, Jewish and Muslim leaders see darker motivations behind the effort to outlaw the practices. The historical precedents are grim. The Nazis also cited cruelty to animals when they prohibited slaughter without stunning in 1933.

The Conference of European Rabbis, which includes top religious leaders in 40 countries, called the new ban an affront to European values and said it "put Jewish life at risk."

"What we see in Europe is ominous," Rabbi Genack said.

He said he believed that anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiment was responsible for some — but not all — of the momentum behind the recent bans.

The Belgian law was first proposed by Ben Weyts, a right-wing Flemish nationalist and government minister responsible for animal welfare. On Monday, he retweeted Paul Joseph Watson, a far-right English commentator and contributor to the conspiracy site Infowars, who wrote that the ban "needs to happen in every European country."

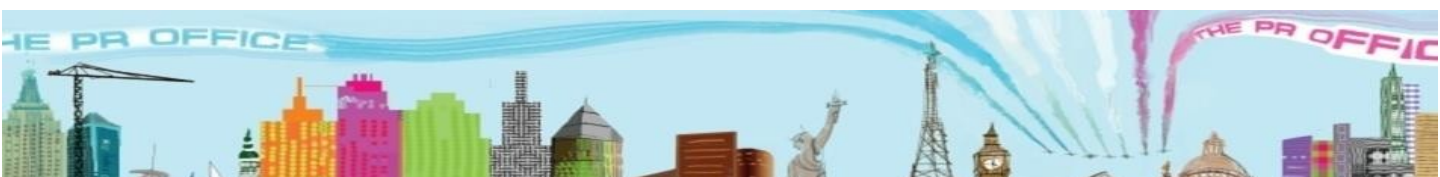
The ban went into effect this month in the northern region of Flanders and will be put into effect in the southern Wallonia region in September. The country's tiny third region, Brussels, will still allow ritual slaughter.

Muslim and Jewish leaders have filed lawsuits challenging the law in Belgium's Constitutional Court.

Belgium joins Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark and Slovenia, which do not allow religious exemptions to the stunning rule. Other European countries have varying requirements, according to a Library of Congress report released last year.

In the Netherlands, the government and religious groups struck a compromise, which took effect a year ago: If an animal is still responsive 40 seconds after its throat is cut, it must be stunned.

Jewish leaders remain divided over whether that method of stunning is acceptable, and how many seconds one should wait, Rabbi Genack said.





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Temple Grandin, a renowned expert on humane slaughter (who was played by Claire Danes in a 2010 movie), has written that religious slaughter must be done with great attention to detail (and a long, sharp knife) to minimize suffering.

Dr. Armanios added that there was one argument put forth by religious and secular people alike that is often overlooked: that there simply is no truly humane slaughter.

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