1. Should We Keep Kosher?

Last year, the two main regions of Belgium passed laws prohibiting the slaughter of unstunned animals, joining several other countries such as Denmark, Switzerland, and New Zealand that already ban the practice. The laws will go into effect in 2019. These laws effectively prohibit slaughtering animals in accordance with Jewish kosher as well as Islamic halal standards, which require an animal to be fully conscious at the time it is quickly killed with a single cut to the throat so that its blood can be completely drained. These practices are an essential aspect of the Muslim and Jewish religions. Once the laws go into effect, Belgian Muslims and Jews who want meat produced in accordance with their religious beliefs will have to have it imported.

Belgium’s population is predominantly Catholic, and the laws enjoy wide support. As Ben Weyts, regional minister of animal welfare, puts it: “Unstunned slaughter is outdated…In a civilized society, it is our damn duty to avoid animal suffering where possible.” An interesting variety of figures and groups support banning unstunned slaughter, from defeated far-right French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen to the British Veterinary Association. The campaign director for the National Secular Society has said that “in 21st-century Europe, there is no good reason why animal welfare should be subservient to religious dietary rules.” And, predictably, animal rights activist groups like PETA are staunchly against unstunned slaughter. Muslim and Jewish groups have filed lawsuits challenging the Belgian laws. They claim that the laws target religious minorities and violate their right to freedom of religion guaranteed under the European Union’s Charter of Fundamental Rights. Yohan Benizri, the president of one of the organizations that filed suit, argues that “[a] ban on kosher meat production sends a message to Belgian Jews that they can choose between living in Belgium and practicing their religion, but they cannot do both. It sends a clear message to Belgium’s Jewish and Muslim communities that they are not welcome here.”

Moshe Kantor, the president of the European Jewish Congress, feels similarly. He says “[t]his decision, in the heart of Western Europe and the centre of the European Union, sends a terrible message to Jewish communities throughout our continent that Jews are unwanted…It attacks the very core of our culture and religious practice and our status as equal citizens with equal rights in a democratic society. It gives succor to anti-Semites and to those intolerant of other communities and faiths.” Calling for the laws to be repealed, Kantor went so far as to say that they were “the greatest assault on Jewish religious rights in Belgium since the Nazi occupation of the country in World War II.”

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On the other hand, the writer and Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer, a Jewish vegetarian, has said that: “As long as human beings go on shedding the blood of animals, there will never be any peace. There is only one little step from killing animals to creating gas chambers.” And at least one Muslim organization, the Halal Food Authority, insists on animal welfare grounds that animals be stunned before slaughter. As the organization’s president explains, “[t]he Koran says use your brain, ponder about things and that's what we are doing. . . . It's a question of animal welfare.”

Animal welfare advocates believe that kosher and halal slaughtering practices are cruel because without stunning, animals suffer more pain and distress. For example, according to the Farm Animal Welfare Council, evidence suggests that slaughtered chickens and turkeys were likely conscious for about 20 seconds while their blood drained. But opponents of the bans point out that kosher and halal slaughtering practices were developed in part to cause animals the least amount of pain possible and have been serving that purpose for centuries. They suggest that it is unclear whether modern methods of stunning animals is an improvement in terms of the animals’ welfare.

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