The variations in religious and legal understandings on halal slaughter

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Abstract

Purpose
The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of different understandings regarding the concept of "what constitutes halal" and "who determines this concept?" In practice, this equates to contemporary legal understandings vs religious understandings. The paper further aims to provide an overview of competing Muslim understandings regarding the concept of "What does or does not constitute halal slaughter?" In practice, this equates to evaluating the application of no stunning at all upon an animal (unanimous acceptance) vs the application of reversible stunning upon an animal (contented).

Design/methodology/approach
The study includes a review of prior literature and considers the current scenario of the halal poultry trade and raises important questions regarding Islamic dietary practices, halal food integrity, religious and animal welfare understandings. Three key questions were raised: "To what extent does stunning impact halal slaughter?"; "Who determines what is halal slaughter?"; and "What are the variations and tensions between legal and religious understandings of halal slaughter?".

Findings
The examination of such requirements and concomitant consumer and provider expectations is underpinned by a study of an operational framework, i.e. industry practices with poultry (hand slaughter, stunning, mechanical slaughter, etc.), ethical values and market forces to appraise whether there is a point of convergence for these that can be beneficial for both seller and consumer concerns. This paper has considered different perspectives on the religious slaughter and provided an overview of competing understandings regarding the above concepts.

Originality/value
This study although academic and philosophical in nature, raises questions on route to suggesting future research directions. It provides real value in stimulating more research in the area of halal food production and contributes to the understanding of different slaughter requirements for religious slaughter and the meat industry. It further sheds light on not only the religious and secular legal frameworks on animal slaughter and welfare but also the variations in understanding between them and provides examples of attempts to bridge any gap. The paper highlights the importance of halal food based on religious values and its implications for wider society.

Keywords
Law, Halal, Poultry, Reversible, Slaughter, Stunning, Industry practices

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Halal slaughter in overseas abattoirs often does not include pre-slaughter stunning – this is the key difference between Australia and many other countries. The vast majority of halal slaughter in Australia (including at export abattoirs) complies with standard slaughter practice where all animals are stunned prior to slaughter. The only difference with halal slaughter is that a reversible stunning method is used, while conventional humane slaughter may use an irreversible stunning method. The time to regain consciousness following a reversible stun may vary depending on the intensity of the stun. Halal slaughter is one of the more humane methods available to the meat industry and the only method acceptable for Muslim consumers. The conditions for Halal slaughter can be summarized as follows: The animal to be slaughtered must be from the categories that are permitted for Muslims to eat. The animal must be alive at the time of slaughter. In general, all forms of stunning and unconsciousness of animals are disliked. However, if it is necessary to use these means to calm down or mitigate violence of animals, low voltage shock can be used on the head only for the durations and voltage a in Europe, issues surrounding halal slaughter have been particularly hairy. Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, Sweden and Denmark have all banned no-stun religious slaughter, and in each instance local Jewish and Muslim communities have claimed that the bans are a form of prejudice against them. “It’s as much a political issue as it is a religious issue,” Haider said. In many countries, outrage over halal practices can easily be interpreted as thinly veiled anti-Muslim sentiment. Haider cited the example of France, where a February 2012 television documentary on the French meat indus 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. 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. “Who determines what is halal slaughter?”; and “What are the variations and tensions between legal and religious understandings of halal slaughter?”; The examination of such requirements and concomitant consumer and provider expectations is underpinned by a study of an operational framework, i.e. industry practices with poultry (hand slaughter, stunning, mechanical slaughter, etc.), ethical values and market forces to appraise whether there is a point of convergence for these that can be beneficial for both seller and consumer concerns. It further sheds light on not only the religious and secular legal frameworks on animal slaughter and welfare but also the variations in understanding between them and provides examples of attempts to bridge any gap.