

Hypocrisy of animal rights campaigners

TONY ALLWRIGHT

Who could fail to be horrified by the slaughter described in the recent Sunday Times badger-baiting exposé? Yet, humans can be a lot crueller than terriers. They cut animals' necks, arteries and oesophaguses without bothering with pain relief, and allow their hearts to continue pumping until all the blood has drained out.

That's both the kosher and halal method of slaughter which Jews and Muslims claim is painless. The infidel method is to knock the animal out before killing it. According to Hassan Malik of Oxford University's Islamic society, "halal is the best method of slaughter for animals and humans alike (because) the killing takes less time". Humans, too? One hopes that Daniel Pearl and Ken Bigley would agree, though judging from the despairing shouts followed by gurgles during the one ritual beheading I watched with horror on the internet, halal/kosher does not seem as painless as its adherents claim.

A couple of years ago, Oxford University students were furious to find out that they were being fed halal meat. They were outraged not just by the deceit, but because they didn't like the animals having to suffer more than was necessary. For them it was an animal-rights issue, a matter of ethics.

This came to mind when novelist John Banville recently excoriated animal testing in Trinity College Dublin. Animal lovers everywhere are aghast at what they regard as the cruelty inflicted on animals in the laboratory. Animal-rights defenders certainly know how to get into the news, especially the activists. Recently they dug up the corpse of an old lady whose grandchildren were involved in animal testing. They were responsible for assaults, arson and threats to prevent the building of an animal-testing laboratory at Oxford

University (unsuccessfully, because it opened last November). They engaged in terrorist actions and intimidation against staff, suppliers, customers and shareholders of Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS). Brian Cass, the managing director, was beaten with pickaxe handles. All because HLS conducted tests on 75,000 animals a year.

In the UK some 3.2m creatures a year, mostly rodents, fish and fowl, are used in animal testing. By comparison, 31m mammals plus 724m fowl are killed for food. I have no idea how many of these die by kosher or halal methods, but since Jews and Muslims number around 3.2% of the UK's population, it's reasonable to assume a similar ratio of animals suffer this barbaric form of death, so about 1m mammals plus 24m fowl. In Ireland, which has 35,000 Jews and Muslims, the numbers would be about 19,000 mammals and 440,000 fowl.

The percentage of creatures who suffer during testing is a moot point, since many tests are benign. But the prolonged death by knife and bleeding of large, sentient farm animals is unmistakable. They feel, and they know what's happening as their lives ebb away through open, stinging veins. Perhaps chickens and turkeys do too. So you have to wonder why peaceful anti-vivisectionists such as Banville remain silent on what's clearly a crueller assault on animals than testing, or indeed badger-baiting. Don't they care about the suffering caused by kosher and halal slaughter?

Well, here's the (convenient) thing. Animal testing is confined almost exclusively to western countries — those familiar old white-fascist imperialists of America, Europe, and Australia — which have an inordinate respect for human rights. You can be as bad as you like in these countries knowing there will never be a concerted effort, by either the military or the populace, to summarily exterminate you.

You can upset, at will, the natives of western democracies without any fear of personally suffering a bullet-and-halal-style murder with a five-page note knifed into your chest, as Theo van Gogh experienced in Amsterdam, or riots and burnings in cities with people screaming "death to the animal-rights activists" — and meaning it. On the other hand, halal killing of animals takes place throughout the Islamic world. About one billion Muslims, or one fifth of the world's population, depend on halal meat for their food. Ditto the Jews, though there are only 15m of them. The animals suffering death by halal and kosher methods far exceed those in western animal laboratories.

So, it can be argued that Jews, Muslims, their livestock farmers and abattoirs constitute a logical target for animal-rights campaigners. Yet they do nothing. Is this out of respect for Jewish and Islamic cultures? Or is it possible the activists are the teeniest bit nervous about criticising a key practice of two mighty Abrahamic religions in case it brings retribution down upon their heads? Can those old-lady disinterrers really be so craven that they fear a fight-back? Or do they believe that tolerating the suffering of animals is preferable to actually experiencing it yourself? But then, isn't that the whole purpose of animal-testing in the first place?

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