

Vlees eten in de islamitische traditie – Eating meat in Islamic Tradition

Summary (May 2011)

In Islamic writing much attention is given to animals and to aspects of what we would nowadays call 'animal welfare'. Animals that are destined to become food have to be treated well and have to have lived a natural life. As well as this they should be slaughtered with respect and without pain. When these criteria have been met, their meat is halal (clean) and Muslims are allowed to eat it.

Halal has a bad reputation in The Netherlands amongst non-Muslims, because it is almost always associated with ritual slaughter (i.e., without anaesthesia). Not using an anaesthetic is actually not a set rule within Islam, as long as the anaesthesia is reversible and the animal does not suffer stress or pain. Reversibility of the anaesthesia is very important to Muslims, because it is forbidden to slaughter animals that are already dead. Eating meat from an animal that has not died by slaughter is haram (unclean). A number of Muslim organizations share the view that an anaesthetic is allowable under certain circumstances. Meat from animals that were anaesthetized before slaughter labeled Halal is available.

The quality of life the animals lead before they are slaughtered is also highlighted in this report. In the Netherlands this aspect has hitherto received little or no attention. Stewardship and respect for creation are very important in Islam. Man is ranked above animals, but this position brings with it the responsibility for a careful and decent treatment of animals, including cattle. The experts who were consulted on Islam very much doubt that factory farming can be reconciled with this stewardship.

A survey from the 'Stichting Dier en Recht' (Foundation Law and Justice for Animals), filled out by over a hundred Muslims, some of whom were experts, concluded that they find animal welfare important and that they feel responsible for it, but that this view is usually not connected to the buying and consuming of meat. The Muslims questioned are aware that the animals should be slaughtered ritually. Very often however, they do not know exactly what this entails. It is not generally known that slaughter is only part of halal and that life before slaughter should also be taken into account for the meat to qualify as halal.

Mohammed Cheppih, founder and imam of the 'Poldermosque' states that a lot of the meat now sold as halal is in fact unclean (haram), due to the bad conditions the animals lived under. Dr. Ghaly from the department of Islamic Studies at Leiden University calls this meat 'condemnable'. Literature on the subject confirms the view that the cattle industry does not comply with Islamic rules and that industrially processed meat cannot be halal. Meat can actually only be considered halal, also according to interest groups like Groene Moslims (green Muslims) and Halal Correct, when it comes from cattle bred on organic farms. The average Muslim consumer, however, is not aware of this. It is not widely known what organic is or why it would be important.

At the moment, organic halal is only available through a small scale private initiative of the 'Groene Moslims'. There are initiatives to make it more widely available on the open market. To reach the consumer it will be necessary to provide 'top-up education' on this, according to the Muslim experts who were consulted. Muslims should not only be made aware of what their religion prescribes in this matter, but also of how the meat they usually buy is produced in practice.

Dier & Recht would like to contribute to the process of change that has been put into words so beautifully by Halal Correct as 'halal in motion'. To start with, exploratory literature and field research have been done to chart the situation in The Netherlands and shared objectives were discovered.

If the Muslim community - more than one million people – would become more conscious of the origins of the meat they consume, this could mean a large impulse for organic cattle farming.