

Waldron on moral relativism

Waldron claims that we should treat disagreements over human rights as *real* disagreements. That means we should take those who disagree with us as addressing the “*content* of our human rights claim, and [that] we have to be able to answer it ... if we cannot answer it, and answer it adequately, then we are not entitled to regard our toleration of pornography [for example] as valid *even for us*, let alone as a standard to be inflicted on everyone else”.¹

But is that always the best way to understand our conflicts with a country like Iran (Waldron’s example)?

1 Case 1: fundamental values in conflict

Here is Ayatollah Khomeini on freedom.

Yes, we are reactionaries, and you are enlightened intellectuals: You intellectuals do not want us to go back 1,400 years. ... You, who want freedom, freedom for everything, the freedom of parties, you who want all the freedoms, you intellectuals: freedom that will corrupt our youth, freedom that will pave the way for the oppressor, freedom that will drag our nation to the bottom. ... Islam says: Whatever good there is exists thanks to the sword and in the shadow of the sword! People cannot be made obedient except with the sword! The sword is the key to paradise, which can be opened only for holy warriors!²

2 Case 2: epistemology

Some of our disagreements concern how one can know what is right and wrong. One side to this dispute claims special knowledge that others cannot possess. So how can our disagreements be addressed? Consider the case of Hashem Aghajari.

¹Jeremy Waldron, “How to Argue for a Universal Claim,” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 30 (1999), p. 312

²Quoted in Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (Knopf, 2006) p. 47.

On 20 July 2004, the Iranian judiciary ruled in the case of Dr. Hashem Aghajari, a professor of history and prominent human rights dissident who faced charges of apostasy for a lecture he gave in which he rejected demands to blindly follow clerical rule and called for political and religious reforms in Iran. He was first arrested in 2002 and has already faced two trials and was twice condemned to a death sentence. Each death sentence was overturned. The latest court case resulted in a five-year sentence with two years suspended. As Dr. Aghajari has already spent two years in jail, he is required to serve one more year in jail.

By some accounts, the reduced sentence represents a compromise that allowed Dr. Aghajari to avoid facing the death penalty while allowing the courts to save face in a case that has garnered widespread criticism, both by moderate forces in Iran and the international human rights community. He plans to appeal the sentence.³

³American Association for the Advancement of Science, Science and Human Rights Program, 2 October 2006. http://shr.aaas.org/aaashran/alert.php?a_id=286.