

Human rights are of universal

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The debate about whether human rights are "universal" or "culturally relative" rages on. Earlier this spring, Sarmad F. Hussain published an excellent article in *The News* entitled "The universality of human rights", which summarised the major arguments against universalism. Mr Hussain made three particularly powerful points. First, he argued that "since hunger is the greatest curse that can visit a man, it is more important that his bodily needs are filled first. His political desires can wait." Second, Mr Hussain claimed that the universality of human rights "can only be achieved by circumscribing sovereignty". And third, he contended that the West's "selective approach" to applying human rights norms "is the bane of efforts to win universal support for those norms".

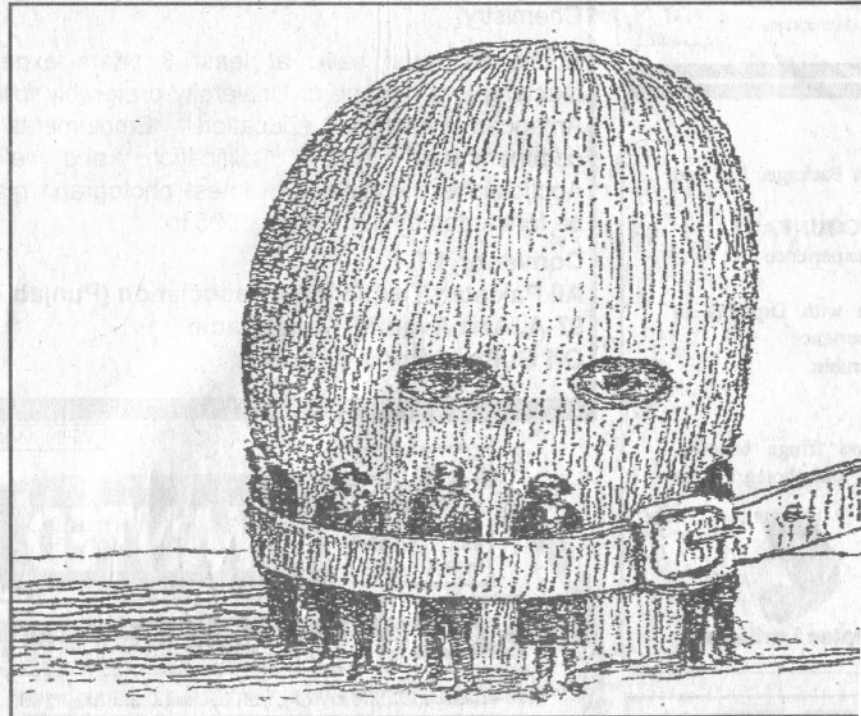
Mr Hussain rightly noted that the community of nations forming the United Nations and its auxiliary organisations has drawn a sharp distinction between political and civil rights, on the one hand, and social and economic rights on the other. "The white nations," according to Mr Hussain, prioritise the former kind of rights, including the right to political participation. In "underdeveloped" nations, however, the "real issue is...to have enough to eat."

Here, Mr Hussain errs in at least two ways. First, poor people are not unsophisticated people; they are not fixated only on animal needs. Poor people seek to live with dignity and respect as much as any Western philosopher of human rights. Interviewers in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, report that impoverished people

identify their most fundamental human desires as a broad group of needs contributing to human dignity: food, yes, but also freedom from rape and other forms of torture, the ability to express themselves and contribute to the governance of their daily existence. Rhonda Howard, in her oft-cited article on that region, "The Full-belly Thesis," concludes that economic rights must develop simultaneously with civil and political rights. Otherwise neither group of rights matures or bears real fruit.

Second, Mr Hussain misled his readers when he suggested that only civil and political rights are relevant to the West. Indeed, many socialist Western-European nations contributed to the formulation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (commonly called Ecosoc) that enshrines exactly the basic-needs approach of which Mr Hussain wrote. It is true that the United States, Mr Hussain's real target perhaps, has not ratified the Ecosoc. But that country only ratified the equivalent International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in the summer of 1992 — and with several important reservations. Moreover, the Western delegates to the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights affirmed a "right to development" and a "right" to debt relief. In any case, the "universalism of human rights is meant to embrace both sets of internationally recognised rights.

Next, Mr Hussain argued that the West's preoccupation with the universality of human rights conflicts with its insistence on the value of national sovereignty. A Western nation-state "has no business" imposing its values on other nations (like China) because this imposition is a breach of the integrity of the latter nation's sovereignty. Instead, according to Mr Hus-



sain, each nation should be free to decide "what freedoms its people should get and how much liberty and of what kind they should get". Values depend on national culture, and rights are also "culturally relative".

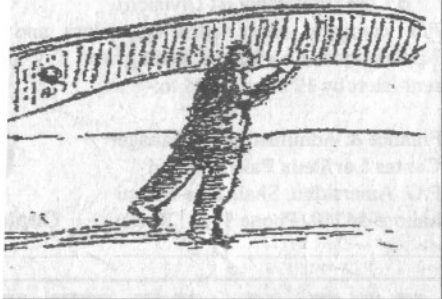
The first problem with this argument about sovereignty and cultural relativism is that nations are both sovereign and subject to the agreements they enter into with the family of other nations. This principle is similar to the idea that within one country a person is both

individually free and subject to the rule of law; persons are "independent and sovereign", but insofar as they have agreed to live in a society with a social contract, they must follow certain rules. Likewise, nations are sovereign, but when they join the community of nations — and when they specifically sign and ratify international covenants like ICCPR and Ecosoc — then they place limits upon themselves. Countries like China, a United Nations Security Council member, have agreed to certain standards of behaviour.

This brings us to the second mistake of

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ful people everywhere, not just in the West, have emphasised the indigenous origins of many of the same "human norms in their various cultures. We are alike much more than we are different. In any case, if cultural relativism rejects, as George Weigel has written in *Catholic* *Magazine*, "there can be no serious international discussion about the shape of the world's future." This would be a sorry state of affairs.

Mr Hussain's last contention was on much firmer ground. He accused the Western powers of hypocrisy in their uneven application of human rights norms, whether political or economic. Without question, this criticism is justified. Western nations, like all states, seek to act in their own interest, which often leads them to conflicting foreign policies. In particular, the United States' blind devotion to "democracy" and vilification of "communism" during the cold war led to unconscionable support for violent, non-communist regimes, while comparatively peaceful Soviet-supported nations were intentionally destabilised by (sometimes illegal) covert or overt American policy. Since the cold war, the record of some Western nations on this score has hardly improved. Indeed, Western states do not always evenly apply "universal" human rights norms on their own shores.

For the sake of the dignity of human beings everywhere, let us hope that Mr Hussain's prediction is wrong that until the West's hypocrisy stops "the world will remain a divided house on this issue." The failures of Western nations should provide not an excuse for more failure, but an opportunity for developing nations to take the moral high ground, and show us all the way.

cultural relativism. Nations have not joined the international community by accident or force; nor have they signed legally binding documents under coercion. Nations have bound themselves to human rights norms by their past actions over time (called "common law") or out of conscious commitment to certain fundamental principles — like the right to be free from torture — to which most human beings readily agree. Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and most ideologies share many of the ideals articulated in international covenants. Thought-