

Yes, we can talk about this

Posted: Tue, 3rd Sep 2013 by [Meg Wallace](#)

London's National Theatre recently hosted a debate about freedom of speech, multiculturalism and Islam called *Can we talk about this?* The opening line was a question to the audience, "Are you morally superior to the Taliban?"

Anne Marie Waters, who was present, [wrote in a blog](#) that "very few people in the audience raised their hand to say they were."

This response, demonstrates a misconceived attempt to be seen as tolerant and 'multiculturalist'. People could not bring themselves to say their views are morally preferable to a group that, Waters points out, "denies women medical treatment, imprisons them in their homes, allows domestic violence, and executes people by stoning for having a private life or the audacity to not believe in God."

They fear being labelled, racist, 'Islamophobic', or discriminating against religion. Rather, they adopt a stance that treats all moral views generated by culture or religion as equally valid ('cultural relativism'). They confuse the distinction between the right to *think* as you want, and the right to *act* as you want.

It is generally disregarded that a global code of moral values has been established, and accepted by almost every nation in the world ? the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR). By acceding to this Declaration, over 190 nations have agreed to honour the principles of individual autonomy, equality, security, freedom of thought, belief, expression and association, subject to the norms of democratic government. In its statement of rights that apply, regardless of nationality, race, gender and social standing, the Declaration sets a morally accepted standard of behaviour for all individuals.

It has no place for cultural relativism, which leads to tolerance of cruel and inhumane practice in the name of 'culture', as if *culture* is the single source of moral acceptability.

Over 170 nations have signed the *International Convention on Human Rights* (ICCPR), turning the political rights set out in the UDHR into a binding agreement.

While individuals may practice their internal, illiberal beliefs in private, governments have undertaken to ensure their recognition of the political rights of everyone else, even within the same family, church or any other organisation. The trouble is, not one of these nations fully accedes to their promise.

Why were the UDHR and ICCPR adopted? Because it was globally agreed that the principles they enshrine are the most effective (albeit imperfect) means of promoting the well-being of humankind. They were considered superior to other moral and political principles, and therefore superior to cultural mores that did not work for the same ends.

At the very least, this is what has been formally decreed by the nations of the world. So holding that moral and political practices that promote this end are superior to others is neither unduly discriminatory or racist, but invokes a globally accepted 'superior' standard of living.

There is now a global inter-connectedness to the extent that indigenous people themselves often resort to the language of human rights to protect their culture from further unwanted encroachment.

Cultural relativism is a flawed basis for acceptance of others' values, as acceptance is based solely on the expression of those values by others, rather than on the *worth* of the values themselves. If, for example, [clerics justify](#) (or condone) certain action, say, female 'circumcision' (which is in effect genital mutilation) because it is tradition, or simply decreed by some 'authority' as mandated or acceptable, this reasoning is not sufficient to establish a general moral value that cannot be criticised.

However, if their reason is to prevent some harm to society in general, regardless of its religious beliefs, the argument goes to the content of the value espoused. We must be able to "address whatever reservations, doubts, and objections there are about our positions *out there, in the real world*, no matter what society or culture or religious tradition they come from". It is the *effect* of a value on society, not its source, that is the relevant consideration.

Evidence is coming to light of many instances in Western countries (including Australia) that women and girls are subjected to abuse, through restrictions, demands and physical attacks including honour killing, female genital mutilation (FGM) and childhood or forced marriage. Authorities are aware of this, but are not forthright in criticising and dealing with this. Approaches range from 'sensitive treatment' to acceptance.

FGM, for example is carried out on millions of women worldwide for cultural or religious reasons. Although it is proscribed in many countries, including developed nations, few prosecutions take place. FGM results in increased maternal and infant mortality and infection, extreme pain and psychological harm. It does not enhance the woman's childbearing capacity, her physical or mental well-being, or the communal good. All it does is satisfy patriarchal notions involving sexual repression, harming, rather than promoting human well-being overall, and blatantly breaching the victim's human rights. The practice can be legitimately questioned on the basis that its rejection is based on superior moral and political values.

Recent publicity over FGM in Australia has resulted in a [Government crackdown](#), despite awareness of the practice and its prohibition in the early 1990s. But, like other cultural practices that result in harm to women through denial of their moral and political rights, authorities are habitually loathe to confront the practices head-on, despite their illegality, very often because of 'cultural sensitivity' (i.e. the fear of being labelled not 'politically correct').

[Compare the UK and France](#): "The laws which made FGM illegal were introduced in France and England at about the same time, in the mid-1980s. But whereas some 100 parents and practitioners of FGM have been convicted in France, there has never been a single prosecution in the UK". The French explain that their priority is the welfare of children.

Humanists have a moral compass. It is enshrined in a globally accepted Declaration that, globally, governments have said they will follow. It is not arrogance or cultural imperialism to consider its ethical principles superior to other cultural beliefs, as the nations of the world have declared them as such. We must talk about this, pressure society to accept these principles, and demand that governments deliver on their promise.

Meg Wallace is a writer and Human Rights activist based in Australia. This blog was originally published [here](#), and was reproduced with the permission of the author. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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