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Suspension of Conscience

Amnesty International has lost sight of its original purpose.

BY CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

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It's an old story, but it bears retelling. One day at the dawn of the 1960s, a lawyer named Peter Benenson was reading the newspaper on the London subway. He came across a small item reporting that two students from Portugal—then still a fascist dictatorship running a filthy empire in Africa—had been sentenced to seven years imprisonment for raising a toast to liberty in a public place in Lisbon. After a short cogitation, he decided to take action, and his open letter concerning “prisoners of conscience” was published on the front page of the London *Observer*. You may never have heard or read about this micro-event or its macro consequences, but I am willing to wager that you have heard of Amnesty International, which was the great tree that sprouted from this acorn. Its “branches”—the innumerable local groups that sprang into existence—have been responsible for the release of many political prisoners and the public shaming of many of the regimes that hold them.

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In common with all great ideas, the Amnesty concept was marvelously simple. Each local branch was asked to sponsor a minimum of three prisoners of conscience: one from a NATO country, one from a Warsaw Pact country, and one from the Third—or neutralist—World. In time, the organization also evolved policies that opposed the use of capital punishment or torture in all cases, but the definition of “prisoner of conscience” remained central. And it included a requirement that the prisoner in question be exactly that: a person jailed for the expression of an opinion. Amnesty did not adopt people who either used or advocated violence.

This organization is precious to me and to millions of other people, including many thousands of men and women who were and are incarcerated and maltreated because of their courage as dissidents and who regained their liberty as a consequence of Amnesty International’s unsleeping work. So to learn of its degeneration and politicization is to be reading about a moral crisis that has global implications.

Amnesty International has just suspended one of its senior officers, a woman named Gita Sahgal who until recently headed the organization’s “gender unit.” It’s fairly easy to summarize her concern in her own words. “To be appearing on platforms with Britain’s most famous supporter of the Taliban, whom we treat as a human rights defender,” she wrote, “is a gross error of judgment.” One might think that to be an uncontroversial statement, but it led to her immediate suspension.

The background is also distressingly easy to summarize. Moazzem Begg, a British citizen, was arrested in Pakistan after fleeing Afghanistan in the aftermath of the intervention in 2001. He was imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay and then released. He has since become the moving spirit in a separate organization calling itself Cageprisoners. Begg does not deny his past as an Islamist activist, which took him to Afghanistan in the first place. He does not withdraw from his statement that the Taliban was the best government available to Afghanistan. Cageprisoners has another senior member named Asim Qureshi, who speaks in defense of jihad at rallies sponsored by the extremist group Hizb-ut Tahrir (banned in many Muslim countries). Cageprisoners also defends men like Abu Hamza, leader of the mosque that sheltered Richard “Shoe Bomber” Reid among many other violent and criminal characters who have been convicted in open court of heinous offenses that have nothing at all to do with freedom of expression. Yet Amnesty International includes Begg in delegations that petition the British government about human rights. For Sahgal to say that Cageprisoners has a program that goes “way beyond what the organization” is to say the very least of it. But that’s why she’s been suspended from her job. As I write this, she is expecting a British lawyer to represent her. Such is—so far—the prestige of Amnesty that it is said that we must defend everybody no matter what.

appears that if you're a secular, atheist, Asian British woman, you don't deserve a defense from our civil rights firms."

That may well change, and I hope it does. But Sahgal has it slightly wrong. Amnesty International was not set up to defend everybody, no matter what they did. No organization in the world could hope to do that. IRA bombers and Khmer Rouge killers and Gens. Pinochet and Videla were not Amnesty prisoners when they eventually faced the bar of the court. The entire *raison d'être* of the noble foundation was to defend and protect those who were made to suffer for their views. In theory, I suppose, this could include the view that women should be chattel, homosexuals and Jews and Hindus marked for slaughter, and all the rest of the lovely jihadist canon. But—see above—Cageprisoners defends those who have gone slightly further than merely advocating such things. It's well-nigh incredible that Amnesty should give a platform to people who are shady on this question and absolutely disgraceful that it should suspend a renowned employee who gave voice to her deep and sincere misgivings.

The other great thing about the early days of Amnesty International was its voluntary principle. It was all a matter of free individuals giving their time and money in the cause of the rights of others. Some estimates say that there are currently more than 2 million subscribers worldwide. It's now incumbent on any member who takes the original charter seriously to withdraw funding until Begg is cut loose to run his own beautiful organization and until Sahgal has been reinstated.

Update Feb. 15: Gita Sahgal's supporters now have a Web site, which contains further material about Amnesty's betrayal of its founding principles. I urge you to visit it.

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