
Critical Exchange

Two faces of political liberalism: A response to Valls

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This is a Critical Exchange in response to doi:10.1057/cpt.2011.34, ‘Rawls, Islam, and political constructivism: Some questions for Tampio’ by Andrew Valls.

A famous Kant scholar once distinguished two faces of the critical philosophy, one facing the past and less interesting and the other looking forward to the future and still fruitful (Strawson, 1966). Rawls’ work also has two faces and many of his readers look toward the past, wishing, for instance, that Rawls had been able to provide principles of justice that have the ontological status of categorical imperatives. I thank Andrew Valls for inviting me to clarify points where I diverge from many Rawls scholars. Although this is an academic debate, I believe that the stakes are huge: namely, the future of liberalism in an increasingly interconnected, multicultural world. My response will elaborate how I read Rawls, why I engage Islamic political thought, and how liberals living in Europe or North America may converse with fellow citizens such as Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, who orient themselves politically by the Qur’an rather than, say, the United States Constitution.

The Molten Core of Political Liberalism

In his early work, Rawls often employed Kantian terminology to define his project and its results. Kantian philosophy forms the backdrop to statements such as, ‘in a just society the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or to the calculus of social interests’ (Rawls, 1999b, p. 25). *A Theory of Justice* is a classic statement of deontological liberal principles.

In his 1980 essay ‘Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory’, however, Rawls concedes a crucial point to Kant’s critics, Hegel and Dewey. ‘On the Kantian view that I shall present, conditions for justifying a conception of justice hold only when a basis is established for political reasoning and



understanding within a public culture' (Rawls, 1999a, p. 305). In Rawls' late political theory, culture jostles with reason as the basis of liberal principles. Rawls assembles his ideas of the person and society from the public culture of a democratic society, reworks them in his theory of justice, and then applies the revised ideas to the public culture to help adjudicate its disputes. Rawls still uses the language of practical reason, but practical reason now becomes an earthly ability to reflect upon and intervene in one's time. Rawls drops Kant's conception of a rational being as such and takes up the notion of a flesh-and-blood human being in a liberal democratic polity. Many of Rawls' critics think that this turn away from Kant's practical philosophy was a tragic mistake. I believe it was a brave decision to revise Kantian insights after Darwin demolished the notion of pure mental faculties.

My essay aims to put a spotlight on the molten core of Rawls political theory that may generate new theoretical formations. Political constructivism teaches us how to generate ideas by placing a representative of ourselves on a mental terrain and assigning it the job of choosing concepts and principles for the social compact. Congealed theoretical formations such as justice as fairness serve a valuable function, yet sometimes we need to rebuild our houses when the ground shifts. Political constructivism is an art that teaches political liberals (a provisional category itself) how to combine empirical data and philosophical reflection to build conceptual systems to guide political action.

Why Islamic Political Thought

The 'paradox of difference', according to William E. Connolly (2002, p. 65), is that 'life without the drive to identity is an impossibility, while the claim to a natural or true identity is always an exaggeration'. Human beings, in order to have any sort of meaningful life, must ascribe themselves an identity within a community, and part of this inscription means differentiating oneself and one's community from others, which often translates into denigrating others that are necessary for one's self- and community-identity. One task of politics and political theory is to negotiate the paradox of difference rather than to imagine one can solve it once and for all. As a self-identified liberal born in the United States, I wish to participate in a dialogue with Muslim citizens of European or North American countries (see Ramadan, 1999). In particular, I am curious how political liberals may propose a new conception of the person, more congenial to Muslims such as Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, which may start the process of political constructivism up again. Al-Alwani and I have different religious and ancestral identities: the political task facing both of us as citizens is to find some sort of shared ethical political principles to govern matters of common concern.



Why focus on Muslims? My interest in Islamic political thought is due, partly, to the challenges and rewards it poses to scholars trained in European and American philosophy. 'The secret law of Latinity' once guaranteed 'the universality of the meaning expressed in modern languages' (Foucault, 2008, pp. 97–98). This statement does not hold true once one begins to study Arabic, Persian and Turkish political thought. An intellectual puzzle for democratic theorists is how to adjust conceptual frameworks once the demos contains deep linguistic and conceptual diversity. Furthermore, liberal democrats may achieve concrete benefits by engaging fellow Muslim citizens and their most important theoreticians. Western Muslims, according to Tariq Ramadan, are at the 'heart of the whole system' and may take leadership of the global Muslim community (*Ummah*). The challenge for Western Muslims is to find 'committed partners like themselves who will make a selection from what Western culture produces in order to promote its positive contributions and resist its destructive by-products at both the human and the ecological level' (Ramadan, 2004, p. 76). Even if Muslims constitute a small percentage of European and North American societies, they still may have a large voice within the global Muslim community and can help forge global alliances on matters of economic justice and ecological sustainability. One goal of my research is to think how Euro-American liberals can propose terms that will help make possible interreligious assemblages to address common problems.

There are certainly Muslims who extol constitutionalism, human rights, democratic citizenship and public reason (Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, 2008; Fadel, 2008). Inasmuch as it is in our powers, we should build platforms on which liberal Muslims may spread their message. But we should also consider how to open, cautiously, our political identity to difference.

The Ground of Reason

The concept of the reasonable in *Political Liberalism* originates in Kant's *Groundwork* (2005, p. 49). Taha Jabir Al-Alwani values the powers of the human mind to study nature and its laws but seeks a way to avoid Western terminology and its encompassing worldview. Al-Alwani states:

Muslims ... know that they must meet their opponents in the realm of ideas, for that is where the Ummah's future course will be decided. To be successful, great energy will have to be expended in scholarship and conceptual thinking, in seeking to understand humanity's place in the divine scheme of existence and what is expected of it, and how this knowledge might be applied by Muslims as they struggle to make themselves and their societies conform with the will of Allah. (Al-Alwani, 2005, p. 83)



For Al-Alwani, Muslims should exercise *ijtihad* to ‘incorporate Islamic principles into situations with which they had never had to deal’, but they also need to free themselves ‘from the categorizations and concepts upheld by western scholarship’ (Al-Alwani, 2005, pp. 82, 84). ‘Only through *ijtihad* will Muslims be able to construct a new methodological infrastructure that can replace the current western one’ (Al-Alwani, 2005, p. 85). For Al-Alwani, *ijtihad* compels Muslim scholars to mine the classical Islamic legacy for political guidance and abjure Western concepts such as *logos*, *Vernunft* or reasonable.

Should it matter for political liberals that Al-Alwani disdains the political criterion of the reasonable? Part of Rawls’ conception of the reasonable is a willingness to recognize the burdens of judgment. This skeptical disposition (at least on the political level) ensures a commitment to the constitutional order rather than merely waiting for a change in the balance of forces to overturn the *modus vivendi*. Al-Alwani (2003, p. 24) does not refrain from stating his ambition for Muslims to ‘dominate culturally’ in countries where they currently constitute a minority. Al-Alwani draws the following lesson from the early Muslim emigration to Abyssinia. Muslims, being persecuted in Mecca, appealed to the king of the Negus for shelter. They told the king that the Messenger ‘urged us to be truthful in what we say, keep our trust, nurture our kinsfolk, be kind towards our neighbors and desist from offensive behavior and killing’. The king permitted them to stay and ‘relations between the Muslims and Abyssinia’s Christian monarch flourished to the extent that they would pray for his victory against other contenders for his throne ... The logical consequence of that relationship was that the Negus eventually embraced the religion of Islam’ (2003, p. 32). Al-Alwani walks a tightrope between advising Muslims to accept the current political arrangement whenever they constitute a minority and planning to become the ‘raised nation’ that leads the world.

When should liberals take a stand and when should they open their minds and hearts? A liberal is someone who believes that the political realm should protect certain basic rights and liberties and provide enough all-purpose means for the exercise of those rights to be meaningful (Rawls, 2005, p. 6). The basic rights for many of the great Enlightenment liberals (Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Jefferson and so on) include freedom of speech and liberty of conscience. Many of the great Enlightenment liberals lived in a Christian milieu and interpreted these rights in that light. How, though, can we reinterpret these rights in a public political culture that includes a wider range of religious diversity? Is there a more expansive ground of ethical political principles than reason? What can we do to extend the range of religious practices covered by the ideals of free speech and liberty of conscience? May we find a way to talk about controversial religious-political matters in respectful ways that still



acknowledges persistent differences? The appeal of political constructivism is that it provides an open-ended technique that valorizes the creation of political concepts and principles to help address these questions.

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