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Defending Liberal Values: a sketch of an argument

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The recent terrorist attacks in the UK in London and Manchester has led to quite a lot of talk about the terrorist mounting an assault on our values and that western states have to be prepared as part of an antiterrorism strategy to provide a defence of such values and to show their superiority. So in the UK for example the Government is proposing to set up a Commission to challenge extremism whether from the Left or the Right, or from religious and secular ideological positions. What this implies in practise is to use Will Kymlich's useful phrase "the liberalisation of faith communities". Such an approach raises quite a few questions:

What is it that gives this special authority to liberalism to attempt to reshape the values and ideals of faith communities so that they can only legitimately be held to and practised in this liberalised form?

An answer to this question would imply an argument or arguments to demonstrate the superiority of liberal values to others held within conservative and or fundamentalist faith groups. Are such arguments available to liberals?

One reason for the difficulty that such arguments would pose for liberals is the centrality of the idea of pluralism within modern liberalism. The modern liberal typically holds that in a modern society with no overarching but rather different and competing conceptions of the good. To take the view that liberal values can legitimately shape the values of those who hold different conceptions of the good is to imply that liberalism has a higher moral authority than these other conceptions of the good and that pluralism, the recognition of which is central to liberalism is itself a moralised concept. That is to say it has to provide some kind of standard which conceptions of the good and the communities which adhere to them can be shaped, indeed coercively shaped by these liberal values.

There is also the point that liberalism has usually stood for an autonomous civil society in which people are free to join or not and within which religious practices are free to be pursued. I shall not say any more about this last point since it follows clearly from the earlier ones which will be my focus.

In claiming some kind of greater moral authority than other world views and associated conceptions of the good the liberal has to be very careful about what sorts of arguments to use. Remember that the adherents of other world views and typically the religious ones will hold to the view that their outlook is in fact true and the liberal position that faith communities should be liberalised are basically challenging this claim to truth. So such arguments from the liberal have to be powerful if they are to overcome such claims to truth. This is what makes the argument that liberalism is a way of legitimating institutions and practises which can challenge what are seen as problematic beliefs difficult. If liberalism's starting point is the recognition and pervasiveness of pluralism, including pluralism in religion, then amongst the plurality of beliefs what is it that gives liberalism moral authority and how can it ground an argument to that effect and one which can be used to liberalise faith communities if values and fundamental differences are all part of a plurality of world views

Of course it might be argued that to go down this road is very dangerous for the coherence of liberalism as a justified moral standpoint because it cannot provide such arguments for its authority given the recognition of moral diversity. On this view it might be better to avoid deep arguments about priorities about values or hierarchies about values and just assert that liberal values are the ones we value around here and that we shall just enforce them whether by law and prison in respect of terrorism or involvement in school curricula so that schools promote liberal values. However this does cut across liberal sensibilities a good deal because it has been a staunch view of liberalism that it governs with consent which in turn can be elicited by arguments and principles which can be recognised and assented to by all whatever their first order conceptions of the good may be. So just to impose a set of values on faith communities is self evidently a very illiberal thing to do and would have to depart a long way from some of the basic tenets of liberalism and western values more generally.

One issue which has to be addressed in asserting the fundamental values of liberalism is that it has to confront claims to truth within faith communities with principles which are rarely claimed to be true. Indeed some Islamic critics of liberalism have picked up on this point in that they argue the liberalism is itself a form of fundamentalism but is a fundamentalism of doubt. The argument here is that the whole liberal strategy of putting the right before the good as Rawls put it is flawed. Such an approach assumes that there is no truth to be found in conceptions of the good which the liberal argues compete with one another and these are competitions which cannot be resolved on rational grounds. Whereas non liberalised members of faith communities believe that they do know what the truth is in relation to the goods of human life and that these differ fundamentally from those characteristic of liberalism. If the liberal cannot find a rational basis for liberalism then presumably liberal standpoints depend on faith and not on reason just as much as religious persons' beliefs do. This view is also associated with Carl Schmitt's critique of liberalism.

If both religion and liberalism depend on faith rather than reason then what is it that gives liberalism its authority over other conceptions of the good in a diverse society.

It might be argued that if we see liberalism through a pragmatic lens we can see that it is a relatively peaceful way of dealing with diversity and that this is all we need. There is a lot that could be said here about western liberalism being a coping mechanism in the face of diversity. The major thing to point out is that liberalism is not the only way of coping with diversity the other way is to diminish and ideally get rid of diversity. States which have been relatively homogeneous in ethnic and religious terms may want to protect themselves from importing diversity through immigration. If liberals want to argue against this view there has to be a lot more to the argument for Western liberalism than it is just a coping mechanism without a strong moral centre of its own which philosophers call perfectionist forms of liberalism. The problem then is that there have to be arguments for this moral core which can withstand the counterclaims from non liberalised faith communities that they know the truth whereas all that liberals seem to know is that there is no way of grounding moral positions in truth rather than faith in a liberal form of politics.

If there is any sort of answer to these problems then I think that it has to be the Rawlsian one which he sets out in Political Liberalism which will probably not work for all particularly with religions such as Islam with strong authority structures. What Rawls is getting at is an account of reasonableness in a society marked by political, moral and religious pluralism. and he thinks that reasonableness consists in recognising the following:

That the empirical evidence aspect of claims about human flourishing and the human good is complex and hard to evaluate

Even if empirical evidence is clear we may differ over the weight given to different items of evidence

Since all concepts including moral and political ones are vague and subject to hard cases, we have to rely on judgement and interpretation over which reasonable people may differ

The way in which we approach evidence and interpretation may well reflect our overall experience of life and this will always differ from person to person and different normative considerations may apply to the issue in question which makes a resolution difficult to agree on

There may be a limited number of values that can in fact be admitted within any set of social and political institutions and we may have to make hard and controversial choices about these.

These for Rawls are the burdens of judgement but they seem to be a very long way from the mind set of many in western societies who would not recognise the claims made in this claims about the nature of reasonable ness. If so a great deal will come down to his last claim which certainly does not rule out the coercive liberalisation of faith communities. This leaves us with the stark question of whether there is a liberal way of defending the values of the west?