Liberalism, Islam, Power, and Religious Violence

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Two recent discussions on the relevance of liberal thinking to the politics of the Muslim world can be related to the alternative research agenda of 'Applied Islamology' and the subsequent, more expansive, 'Emerging Reason' Project developed by the leading French-Algerian scholar of Islam, the late Mohammed Arkoun. His meta-critique of all forms of thinking provides a suitable framework for the normative concerns of the philosopher and religious studies specialist Richard Miller. Miller's assessment of the relations between violence, religion, and liberal thought fits well into Arkoun's anthropological and theological-philosophical analytical triads of 'Violence, Sacred, Truth' and 'Faith, Reason, Truth.' Likewise, Arkoun's empirical triad 'Mind, Society, Power' bears a relevance to Fevzi Bilgin's examination of the appropriation of political liberalism in Muslim societies.

In order to establish a liberal-theoretical normativity for the use of violence, Miller explores the philosophical and moral limits of tolerance for religious differences when these differences derail into atrocities against innocents. His heuristics reflect an abiding interest in the ethics of war and killing, religion and civic virtue, and a seemingly unshakable confidence in the resilience of classical liberalism. While engaging in conversation with present-day thinkers (such as John Rawls, Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer), John Stuart Mill, and other heirs of the Enlightenment era loom large in the background of Miller's work. Looking at the roster of intellectuals with whom Miller disagrees and the arguments he uses to justify his dissent, it is difficult to resist the impression that Miller's insistence on finding a theoretical foundation for his ethics takes him to a level of abstraction reminiscent of Kant's autonomy of the individual.

Perhaps this desire to maintain consistency at all costs also explains the glaring blind spot that undermines Miller's argumentation: the failure to acknowledge that the kind of liberal theory he advocates does not provide the neutral fixed point from which to develop a universally valid moral philosophy. Although at one point, he notes that any encounter with others cannot be value-neutral because any encounter necessarily involves a negotiation between 'romantic' valorization and dismissive chauvinism, for the most part there is a lack of appreciation for the fact that his own account, too, belongs to a discursive formation shaped by the historicity and cultural particularities of Western thinking.

Miller raises high expectations with his admirable ambition "to think normatively about religious violence" (p. 2). In order to determine the moral quality of a society, he aims to offer "reasons for speaking confidently in defense of liberal principles and practices in response to religiously authorized calumny and terroristic activities" (p. 4). The motivating force driving this intellectual project is the conviction that ideas can make a tangible contribution to politics by providing "enduring normative matters surrounding human dignity, religion and terrorism" (p. 5). Finding the required standards of assessment for such ethical issues imlies a need for a way of thinking at the limits of toleration—a central tenet of

liberal political doctrine, according to Miller—by articulating the tensions this creates with the concepts of resentment and indignation."

Presenting his attempt as an exercise in "liberal social criticism," the way Miller contrasts his approach with other varieties of social criticism considerably dampens the hope for a universal normativity, as his reification of liberal theorizing retains a distinctly Anglo-Saxon slant. His excellent engagement with historical social criticism through an examination of Islamic 'Just War' theory opened up an opportunity for a constructive engagement with the Islamic tradition. Unfortunately, this chance is insufficiently exploited in the remainder of the book. Miller rightly signals the propensity of classical Islamic legal reasoning to tolerate pluralism, an attitude that was largely lost in late thinking. He could have made more of the need to find suitable Muslim interlocutors and consolidate their position in the highly contentious intellectual milieus of the modern Muslim world. Unfortunately, he loses himself in a discussion of Islamic *jus in bello* (rules of engagement during conflict) rather than the meta-narrative of the highly contested Jihad doctrine. Complaining that "Islamic teachings about war congeals around this problem of vagueness," Miller's own narrative also hedges all its bets on presenting a counter theory, rather than a more pragmatic approach in tandem with effective legal instruments.

It is for this reason that the argumentation of one of the exponents of relativist social criticism challenged by Miller actually strikes me as more convincing: I subscribe to the same "skepticism about liberal political theory and Enlightenment philosophy more generally" as Stanley Fish does (34). Miller, by contrast, disagrees with what he calls the multiculturalists' suspicion of conceptual neutrality and insistence that "purportedly impartial perspectives mask ideological interests." He also has a problem with their claim—supported by historical and economic social criticisms that Miller also does not like— "that our thought forms and ideals are contingent the product of social, economic, and political forces, not an outgrowth of reason operating in some pristine, contemplative sanctuary" (33-34). Although he dismisses Fish's criticism of the "abstract vocabulary of fairness, mutual respect, toleration, and so on" as polemical, Miller does "grant some merit" to Fish's "pre-chosen partisan vision," which challenges Americans' quick condemnation of Muslim extremism and simultaneous naiveté "regarding their own moral and political faults" (35). In a similar vein, he also turns against internalist social critiques by such figures as Susan Sontag, who has addressed exactly those kinds of inconsistencies and contradictions.

While Miller, in turn, has a point in criticizing Fish's confusion of universal with absolute standards, I remain in agreement with the latter's rejection of the kind of "strong liberalism" advocated by Miller. I believe Fish is right when he observes that "[strong liberalism] abstracts from substantive matters in everyday life, leaving such theory powerless to guide real politics and action" (37). As shall become clear later on, to avoid this discrepancy between theorizing and application, Fevzi Bilgin proposes a political liberalism with a much narrower scope as an alternative for what Miller has termed the "comprehensive liberalism" of the classical theorists.

It is Miller's premise to ground his proposed moral outlook in the liberal tradition without accounting for its historicity that turns an otherwise well-formulated and thoughtful argument for a consistent ethics seeking to preserve every individual's right to life and security into the purely academic and abstract exercise against which Fish cautions. Miller is certainly right that certain forms of aggression are "so transparently wrong that any moral theory seeking to justify [these forms of aggression disqualifies itself as implausible" (47), but at the same time, his proposed "second-order inquiry" becomes sometimes so regressive that it undermines its relevance to practice. Here, we could draw a parallel with the pragmatic theory of non-violence as espoused by the political scientist Chaiwat Satha-Anand because the moral imperative of the Gandhian alternative is simply not attainable for most people.

How firmly Miller remains grounded in classical liberalism becomes clear from the way he transposes the commonsense understanding of human rights derived from Locke's analogy to property right into the kind of autonomous morality based on the Kantian imperative that "persons as moral subjects deserve respect as ends in themselves." At the same time, he rightly notes how precarious such an ethics is because "each of us depends on social, political, and cultural conditions that others put at risk." If such situations occur, then, according to Miller, communities are allowed to resort to violence. He also adds the caveat that any metaphysical individualism remains incomplete because we "do not develop our lives in isolation but in dialogue with others." However, Miller makes more of the "intergenerational dialogue that both creates and presupposes social customs, political institutions, and cultural traditions" than the fact that civil society is not "reducible to ethnic or cultural solidarity" (58-9). As a result, the significance of intercultural exchanges remains underamplified.

I stress this point because it is central to the contrast between Miller's liberal theory and the ideas of two of his interlocutors: Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor. In the chapter on "toleration, equality, and the burden of judgment," Miller criticizes Rorty's pragmatist theory for its acceptance of toleration as a seemingly "Western and parochial norm." I am not so sure that this qualification exposes the latter to the charge of overlooking the value of universal human rights standards for "regulating how people from different traditions and cultures deal with each other in cross-cultural situations." Miller's allegation that "Rorty's postmodern bourgeois liberalism risks sacrificing one's entitlement to (receiving) respect from others" strikes me as exaggeratedly alarmist (71).

I have the same questions regarding Miller's reservations towards Charles Taylor, a thinker who has done more for the philosophical contemplation of inter-cultural encounters and its implications than anyone else. Taylor's hermeneutical criticism (89ff.) strikes me as a more plausible procedure for avoiding both the dangers of ethnocentrism and "recognition on demand" (93) than Miller's return to Kant and Mill as "standard-bearers for the politics of dignity." Instead, Miller should have engaged in more detail with "spokespersons for the politics of difference" such as Rousseau, Herder, and Fanon (91). Taylor's solution for avoiding both ethnocentrism and undue admiration of exoticism rests on two claims: Proposing a leap of faith, there is what he calls (1) the "weaker claim" that "all cultures that have animated whole societies over some considerable stretch of time have something important to say to all human beings" (93) and (2) the "stronger claim," which draws on the "fusion of horizons" proposed in Gadamer's hermeneutics. While willing to subscribe to the weaker claim, Miller finds the stronger one unnecessary; the required "new vocabularies of comparison" and the resultant "transformation of standards" are simply too much to ask, according to Miller (94-95). This last objection only makes sense if indeed the suggested transformation does not lead to "a mutual transformation of norms" (97). Miller is absolutely right in rejecting "patriarchy, racial supremacism, religious discrimination and zealotry, ecologically doubtful customs and other illiberal sentiments." I am just not so sure that the professed humility instilled by the weaker claim is reflected in Miller's liberal theory.

Instead, a philosophical anthropology undergirding mutual respect for dignity and human rights can be found in the earlier-mentioned fusion of horizons, involving a "wider array of moderate and moderating voices" from the Muslim world than Miller is entertaining in his book (102). His subsequent focus on the works of Maududi and Sachedina (instead of some other names he mentions such as Abdullahi an-Na'im, Khalid Abou El Fadl, Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohamed Talbi, Amina Wadud and Abdurrahman Wahid), as well as his reticence towards giving up the theory of comprehensive liberalism, does not put us on the right track for the required meeting of the minds. In fact, I think that an "intellectual holist" like Michael Walzer has a point when casting doubt on the possibility of "detaching

thin from thick morality," insisting that both "are products of social history, thick being prior to thin" (122).

It is this troublesome dependency that also lies at the core of Fevzi Bilgin's attempt to "offer a normative framework for the proper place of religion in public life" in a world that has not just seen horrific atrocities supposedly in the name of religion, but also a more sustained and not always violent "resurgence of religious—especially Islamic—claims in public life" (1). Heavily relying on John Rawls' more recent *Political Liberalism* (1996) rather than his seminal *A Theory of Justice* (1971), in which religion is almost entirely absent, Bilgin wants to examine the appeal of political liberalism to Muslim societies for "the accommodation of diverse religious and nonreligious views in a just and stable public order." At the same time, he wants to determine the limitations of political liberalism given the fact that "only the United States could possibly satisfy Rawls's sociological requirement" (3). The challenges that religious demands pose to the foundations of liberalism led Rawls to elaborate a *"political conception of justice and overlapping consensus"* (5). Whereas Miller did not push far enough in exploring the latter as the *desideratum of cosmopolitan legitimacy* (102), Bilgin puts such an exploration at the core of his investigation and is more optimistic about its potential, saying:

> . . .political liberalism introduces novel approaches to the issues of political morality, social consensus, and legitimacy, and presents a promising outlook with regard to religious and secular confrontations in democratic societies. . . . In fact, Muslim societies have always had strong religious traditions that are active and prevalent in public life. (5)

Whereas it is true that most Muslim societies have not experienced the kind of wars of religion that ripped apart early modern Europe before Europe embarked on the prolonged periods of secularization that many parts of the Islamic world have by now also begun experiencing, the fact that most Muslim states have very little experience with democracy is a serious challenge for Bilgin's argument in favor of the effectiveness of Rawls's political liberalism. Bilgin intends to make a case for the deployment of political liberalism in Muslim societies by reconstructing the relationship between its sociological assumptions and its normative principles.

In comparison to Miller's "strong liberalism," the "liberalism *light*" promoted by Bilgin depends on two prerequisites, while his argument hinges further on two key concepts. First of all, not dissimilar to Miller's isolation of reason from its historical, economic, and cultural conditions, Bilgin insists that a society's so-called "background culture" must be left out of the equation (18). Following Habermas, he drops the metaphysical grounding of social consent, creating instead new normative parameters in tune with the "post-metaphysical condition" (11). This also means restricting Kant and Mill's key values of autonomy and individualism, propagated by comprehensive liberalism to the political dimensions of public life (19).Thus, the notion of "overlapping consensus," which remains insufficiently unpacked in Miller's theory, becomes the lynchpin for Bilgin's narrowly-scoped political liberalism. This core concept is in turn sociologically conditioned by what Rawls called "the fact of reasonable pluralism" (15).

While central to the argument, reasonable pluralism is also the argument's Achilles heel, and Bilgin admits as much later on in the book. While the theoretical structure of political liberalism is based on the possibility of reasonable pluralism, without which "Rawls's idea fails," Bilgin faces a serious challenge in articulating what, exactly, this reasonable pluralism consists of, because—"paradoxically, . . . this is the area where Rawls is

least explicit" (66). More problematically, even in view of the alleged post-metaphysical condition in which political liberalism operates, critics of Rawls "ascribe a metaphysical flavor to the notion of reasonableness" (115).

The two core chapters relating political liberalism to Islam and introducing political Islam in Muslim societies "argue that political liberalism presents an account of political morality that should be agreeable to most citizens of faith" in that part of the world (32). Bilgin suggest that political liberalism is inclusivist enough to involve religious believers in the formation of a political morality, which, in contrast to comprehensive liberalism, "presents a neutral rather than a secular normative outlook" (32). Rejecting the superiority of the secular over the religious—as well as the reverse—the regulation of justice by political liberalism is limited to the domain of basic political, social, and economic structures and thus "provides a large space for the exercise of religion" (37). A more comprehensive liberal normativity can only accommodate religion in two ways: via a fragile *modus vivendi* or via an oppressive use of state power, which is immoral and illegitimate.

Formulating a convincing argument that the mere acknowledgment of a 'reasonable pluralism' by religiously informed views and doctrines is insufficient, but requires – as Rawls insists – a 'wholehearted' embrace of pluralism, takes even greater effort. In the end, Bilgin can only point at those instances of moderation of initially radical discourses by 'numerous Islamist parties' (41). The question that remains to be answered is 'to what extent we can expect religious believers – including Muslims – around the world to possess the characteristics described by Rawls?' (46). This has become an all the more pressing issue in the face of the diminishing "robustness and explanatory power of secularization theory" and the need to reconcile liberal theory with the "de-privatization of religion" described by José Casanova (47-8). Examining the various arenas in which this plays out, Bilgin privileges civil society over the state and over political society as the site where comprehensive liberalism is to be replaced by the narrow scope of his political liberalism, instilling a sense of reasonable pluralism. Turkey is presented as a showcase for this process in the Muslim world. There, we have seen a shift away from an unabashedly secularist regime with policies allegedly introduced to defend the rule of law and stimulate modernization, but which effectively repressed religiously-oriented political parties, by a political party which has managed to combine a religiously inspired social conservatism with the advocacy of democratization and civil

What sets Bilgin apart from Miller is his explicit acknowledgement of the Western roots of liberal thinking. His solution for transcending the historicity of liberalism is to focus on the socio-political analysis of reasonable pluralism and to make this "the empirical core on which political liberalism is built." Putting it even more strongly, the latter's "normative component is absolutely based upon the existence and support of the sociological component" (62). Somewhat over-optimistically, Bilgin even surmises that even if this socio-political conditioning "falls short of pluralism, the normative ideal of political liberalism may still inform democratic pursuits and promote reasonable deliberations among individuals in settling their difference on constitutional issues" (64).

Like Miller, Bilgin, too, wants to find a firm normative grounding for the required toleration of religion. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of religious tolerance and, as noted earlier, aware of Rawls's silence on how to instill reasonable pluralism in societies in which no such grounding has yet been established, Bilgin returns to John Locke's early essay (1667) and later letter (1689) on toleration, both of which were developed on the back of Europe's history of "religious wars, regime changes, prolonged group conflicts, and a brutal phase of negotiation and bargaining between political and religious institutions" (71). Bilgin credits Locke for his ability to combine political philosophy with a "well-illustrated sociology and psychology of religion" (73), which recognize the "subjectivity of orthodoxy in faith" (74).

This combination informed Locke's insight into "the inwardness of belief and outwardness of force, and the contradiction between them." Political power being everywhere the same and claiming authority over religion will invite conflict. Therefore, "the burden of [religious] toleration mostly falls on the political authority" (80). The classical liberal solution of separating state and religion and the "paradoxical nature of secularist policies" have actually led to "a more politicized religion" (85). To escape from this dilemma, Bilgin also looks at classical liberal thinking, in this case, Adam Smith's advocacy of the impartiality of the state. What is also insufficiently unpacked in Bilgin's elaborations of classical liberal thought is how exactly Rawls' political liberalism will ensure that the state's recognition of the freedom of its citizens is reciprocated by the consent and affirmation of politically liberal principles on the part of religion. The question that remains unanswered, in other words, is "What convinces adherents of religions that affirming such principlesl is the reasonable thing to do?"

Miller and Bilgin's confidence in the ability of liberal political systems to ensure a reciprocal respect for human dignity and associated rights in pluralist societies and a globalizing world is vindicated by the absence of more convincing alternatives. However, their attempts to establish a universally valid normative basis are less successful. Extremist ideologies underlying totalitarianism on the left and right were rightly discredited and rejected on moral grounds. Perhaps the post-metaphysical condition of the present also requires the dismissal of both comprehensive and narrowly-scoped political liberalism on practical grounds. If "the center cannot hold," then the skeptical, pragmatic, and hermeneutical approaches of Fish, Rorty, and Taylor are possibly more in tune with the emergent post-ideological epoch and would be better able to fashion something workable out of the "crooked timber of humanity."