Engaging Europe’s Muslims

Recent events in Europe, such as the Danish cartoon affair, have offended many Muslims and agitated liberal angst about the precise balance between free speech and civility towards non-liberal religious groups. While the question of how liberal democracies might engage non-liberal ideas is not, of course, solely about Muslims or Islam, in practical terms some of the most pressing questions of European domestic and international politics are about Muslims. In order to maintain liberal values in European democracies it is necessary to de-link the notion of liberal democracy from that of the liberal consensus. A more complex notion, encompassed in the relation of agonistic respect, allows for liberal values such as free speech and gender equality to be maintained while including those groups who may reject the liberal consensus.

In the past, “extremist” challenges were often from anti-system parties who were potentially a viable political threat to European democracies. Today, it is unlikely that those Muslim groups who challenge the liberal democratic consensus — and who are usually limited to fringe elements within small minority communities — will ever command the wide-spread political support to achieve electoral success. The key issue is not that certain groups may grasp political power by “playing the democratic game,” but how to maintain liberal values while engaging potentially non-liberal Muslim groups.

The traditional approach of liberal political theory presents liberal democracy as a “rational consensus” in which all participants agree on the key values governing political life. The challenge posed by the presence of Muslims in Europe is to find a way to respond to those individuals and groups whose values are radically different from, and often incompatible with, liberalism. Such groups frustrate the possibility for rational consensus on liberal grounds. Thus, we need a strategy that allows liberal principles to be applied to intractable and incomprehensible religious and political differences. This may introduce the risk of uncertainty about the outcome of the process, but this destabilization of existing political identities can also be an advantage. It can yield more complex forms of democratic politics that are more appropriate where citizens have widely different sets of beliefs, whilst at the same time retaining a core set of liberal commitments, such as to freedom of speech and gender equality.

There are a number of routes into this more complex form of politics. William E. Connolly has introduced the concept of “agonistic respect” into a definition of liberal democracy which has three important implications. First, “agonistic respect” emphasizes that its goal is not to seek a rational liberal consensus but to allow discussion and development of a complex political identity amongst all citizens. For example, it is more important for individuals to have a full debate about the Danish cartoon affair and free speech than reaching an agreement about whether it was correct for the cartoons to have been published. Second, “agonistic respect” welcomes the introduction of “difference” into the public sphere rather than relegating it to the private sphere. Therefore, rather than treating the commitment of some Muslims to ideas such as the “Caliphate” or “Islamic state” as a problem, agonistic respect encourages Muslims to debate these ideas in public along with all other citizens.

The first two features of agonistic respect open up political space to disagreements rather than enforcing consensus, and use politics to express private identity in the public sphere. Accordingly, agonistic respect generates a more appropriate paradigm for analyzing the place of radically “different” groups — such as some Muslims — in liberal politics. This analysis treats “difference” in the realm of ideas as an advantage rather than a problem, and prevents democratic politics becoming a sphere within which liberalism is entrenched as the received dogma. Agonistic respect enables established concepts, such as what is meant by “gender equality,” to be problematized and debated in ways that are similar to the “free market place of ideas” envisaged by classical liberals such as J.S. Mill. Agonistic respect’s implication of non-territorial democratization explicitly de-links liberal democracy from geographical limits, thereby providing an ideal paradigm for analyzing the global context of Muslim politics, as seen, for example, in the Danish cartoon affair.

A model of agonistic respect is valuable not only because it is more inclusive than a liberal-consensus model, but also because it strengthens liberal values as it defends them. One recent example of this is the “veil debate” which has led to a substantial debate about the status of women. This heated debate has, in turn, led to Muslims explaining their distinct ideas about women’s rights, as well as non-Muslims articulating and defending their central political commitment to gender equality. In this way, in addition to providing a model in which liberal democracies can engage with non-liberal ideas, agonistic respect treats the constant problematization of freedom of speech or gender equality as a means of strengthening these core values and liberal politics.

Despite its arguable value, a model of liberal democracy based on agonistic respect is not a panacea. It raises questions about the implications of adopting this strategy for liberal politics. For instance, does this process of engagement undermine the critical edge of discourse in the public sphere? How does a liberal democracy ensure that non-liberal groups are themselves willing to engage in a relationship of “agonistic respect”? Furthermore, does the model collapse into uncritical acceptance of difference? Does liberal politics have to accommodate all illiberal practices in the name of tolerance and “respect”? Such difficult questions must be addressed to move successfully from a discourse about the potential of “agonistic respect” towards its practical implementation.

Crucially, this political process of engagement with non-liberals does not require an uncritical acceptance of all their ideas. In fact, an automatic grant of approval can sometimes collapse into condescension rather than a genuine engagement with new ideas. Instead, the challenge for those offering a critique of non-liberal ideas and groups generally, and Muslims and Islam in particular, is to strike a balance between two goals: first, including and understanding new ideas in the European public sphere; and second, maintaining an authentic critical perspective towards non-liberal ideas. A form of European liberal politics based on ideas of “agonistic respect” may provide some of the resources to meet this challenge.

Notes

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