

Editorial: Political Correctness and Pluralism

By M. Ali Lakhani

Diversification without disintegration is the greatest challenge of our time.¹

(His Highness the Aga Khan)

If there is equality, it is in His Love, not in us. ...the Christian life defends the single personality from the collective, not by isolating him but by giving him the status of an organ in the mystical Body.²

(C. S. Lewis)

The term 'political correctness', coined almost a century ago, gained currency in the '70s in the wake of postmodernism's critiques of Western societies. It has been used both to pillory 'establishment' views and to condemn the reactionary excesses of opposition to them (think of the term's application, for example, to describe both the *ancien régime* in France and the revolutionary reign of terror that followed in its wake). It has been weaponized by both liberals and conservatives in their so-called 'culture wars': by liberals to ridicule what they deem to be conservative ideological rigidity and the pressure to conform, and by conservatives to castigate what they perceive to be liberal identity politics and its tribalisms. It is a weapon used both to puncture the sanctimony of 'orthodoxies' and to expose bigotry. But while it purports to serve as an antidote to homogenizing intolerance and exclusivism, it can also promote antinomian relativism in the name of equal rights, freedom and inclusiveness. Its effects nowadays are evident on college campuses — in debates about free speech, curriculum content, private and public morality, climate change and the environment, and in issues surrounding race, class, sexuality and gender, and also in related movements like the 'LGBT' or 'Me Too' or 'Black Lives Matter'.

¹ H. H. the Aga Khan, 88th Ogden Memorial Lecture, 2014.

² C. S. Lewis, 'Membership', an address to the Society of St. Alban and St. Sergius. *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays*.

The notion of 'correctness', where someone claims the high ground of speaking the truth or of being 'right', presupposes objectivity - that is to say, a commitment to a set of principles that inform moral rectitude. But too often rectitude merely conceals a false righteousness whose 'orthodoxies', whether they be political, religious, philosophical, scientific, or cultural, are justly seen by critics as unprincipled - as reductive, exploitative and exclusivist, giving rise to demands for greater objectivity, fairness and inclusion. (Etymologically, the term 'orthodox' means 'right thinking'. It cannot therefore refer to what is 'incorrect'. Yet, not all that purports to be orthodox or correct is in fact so; hence, the ironic use of the term 'politically correct'.) By the same token, principles, if they are indeed to value objectivity, cannot, in the name of 'correctness' or a disdain of 'elitism', be stripped of their qualitative content, rendered devoid of hierarchic structure and critical values, and be made to simplistically legitimize every group or behavior on the pretext of inclusiveness and tolerance. It is axiomatic that to tolerate everything is to stand for nothing. Such uncritical latitudinarianism would merely serve to relativize values and to destroy moral standards.

'Correctness' therefore demands a critical foundation, an ethical criterion, a principle of measure. Where governments or institutions abandon proportional and principial norms in favor of reductive mind-sets or relativistic perspectives, they can be harmful. 'Establishment' ideals, though they may claim legitimacy, are sometimes unmeasured and unprincipled and, particularly when imposed in a heavy-handed manner on others, can constitute a tyranny of the governing class. History has shown that some of the most oppressive governments have claimed to operate in the common interest while sacrificing human dignity in the pursuit of their goals. Universal ideals cannot simply eclipse the particular but must seek to harmonize with it in ways that value diversity and preserve human dignity. In a similar manner, care must be taken to avoid conflicts among factional or individual interests that oppress and balkanize society. Rights and freedoms are not absolute, but are subject to a principle of measure. When this is disregarded, it leads to the tyranny of factional groups: a typical example is where political pressure denies someone the right to free speech, of simply expressing an opinion or conducting a civil debate about a viewpoint, which, though not illegal, is considered offensive to an objecting minority. Here, the particular

'right' claimed by the political vigilante undermines the universal right of free speech instead of seeking to engage with it through a process of 'conversation' and fair-minded dialogue.

The adjective 'political' in the phrase 'political correctness' highlights the underlying problem: how should political processes be employed to harmonize the universal and the particular, the responsibility to the common good and individual freedoms? It is a problem that philosophers have grappled with through the ages. Truth is not merely a matter of consensus, though consensus is vital for a sustainable political praxis. Truth - the commitment to objectivity - is not subservient to party factions or loyalties or to the mere processes of politics. As C. S. Lewis states, 'The process which, if not checked, will abolish Man goes on apace among Communists and Democrats no less than among Fascists.'³ The 'vox populi' may not always be right, yet, as Plato recognized, societies cannot expect to practically operate through enlightened and incorruptible philosopher kings. Human beings are flawed and fickle. Yet dignity, intelligence and freedom dictate that adults capable of political thought should exercise a large measure of political responsibility and should engage in informed civic discourse and contribute to the public good. Democracy, as Plato noted, though not the soundest of processes for good government, may be the least objectionable of all the available practical alternatives to achieve this end. Yet, here one must recall Lewis' cautionary words, 'Ethical, intellectual, or aesthetic democracy is death. A truly democratic education - one which will preserve democracy - must be, in its own field, ruthlessly aristocratic...'⁴ This is because objective truth cannot be reduced to the simple calculus of majority rule but is a process of sound moral reasoning engaged in by those who dedicate themselves to the ideals of Truth, Goodness and Beauty - invoking the Jeffersonian ideal of 'natural aristocracy'.

What is called for in seeking to accommodate divergent views about public policies - harmonizing freedom and responsibility, and balancing individual interests against the common good - are fair processes that permit respectful and informed engagements through civic dialogue. This requires curating reliable sources and channels of information and moral education (this is vital in an age of disinformation and

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Present Concerns*, essays, HarperCollins 2017.

manufactured consent), safe spaces for civic dialogue, a willingness to learn, a spirit of tolerance and sensitivity to others' points of view, and the goodwill to engage constructively and collaboratively with difference and to compromise fairly and in the common interest. In terms of substance, this means seeing and treating the particular as an aspect of the universal, by valuing diversity and human dignity without derogating from the common good. In short, what is needed is an ethic of pluralism which respects the 'natural' equilibrium that human freedom is circumscribed by certain harmonizing bounds, recognizing that when a putative 'right' exceeds this natural barrier, it becomes transgressive.

There is a metaphysical foundation supporting the pluralist ethic: it is that humanity - indeed, the whole of creation - shares the same ground of being. Our intrinsic oneness forms the basis of our ethical bond. Our spiritual intelligence, located in the discerning heart, intuits this harmonizing principle as a natural barrier. Because '*God is Love*' (*I John*, 4:8) and '*bas prescribed Mercy upon Himself*' (*Surat Al-An'am*, 6:54), the discerning heart knows the harmonizing principle as love, compassion, and mercy, while the intellect recognizes it as the principle of measure. Through integrity (living in truth and love, in conformity to the wholeness that is the ground of being) we can live in harmony and equilibrium. This is implicit in Polonius' advice to Laertes: 'This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.' (*Hamlet*, I: 3, 78-81)

By being true to ourselves - and thereby to others - we are not diminishing our humanity but indeed enhancing it. By being humane, we are indeed expressing our true humanity. As Kwame Anthony Appiah states, 'When it comes to the compass of our concern and compassion, humanity as a whole is not too broad a horizon.'⁵ Stated differently, our shared humanity informs the cosmopolitan ideal that regards individual rights and freedoms as aspects of a broader communitarian framework which does not seek to deny them but rather to harmonize them. This spiritual amplitude is increasingly needed in today's world. As Appiah argues, 'the cosmopolitan impulse that draws on our common humanity is no longer a luxury; it has become a necessity.'⁶

⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity*, Profile Books, 2018.

⁶ Ibid.

The term ‘Tradition’ – in the special way that the term is used in this journal – refers to this harmonizing principle that links humanity intrinsically to the transcendent order. Where laws or customs seek to impose conformity outwardly, evoking the name of conventional ‘tradition’ as a crutch to gain legitimacy without in fact respecting metaphysical norms, they violate the natural order. Thus, to deny a person the opportunity to a better quality of life by, for instance, excluding them from the paid workforce (say, because of their gender) or from the right to vote (say, because of their race), or to treat people inhumanely because they are different (say, because of their sexuality), is simply a betrayal of the intrinsic (truly Traditional) norms of human dignity.

The resulting discrimination leads to the formation of groups coalescing around political identities, seeking redress for their common grievances on the basis of their perceived differences. This is ‘identity politics’. Appiah singles out five groupings of modern political identity – creed, country, class, color and culture – each of which can as readily serve to divide as to connect humanity. He calls them ‘the lies that bind.’ But, although strategic alliances may be needed to practically redress wrongs, there is a fundamental misconception in polarizing identity in this way. Human beings have multiple identities – even within the same political subset. As a feminist, one might be female, straight, and black, while another might be male, gay, and white. They may agree on the politics of gender but not necessarily of race and sexual identity. Where ‘identities’ cannot find a harmonizing principle, they will tend to clash.

Tradition teaches that the individual cannot legitimately clash with the human without violating moral norms. This is because the ‘individual’ is a ‘member’ of humanity. As Lewis puts it, ‘The Christian is called, not to individualism but to membership in the mystical body.’⁷ Lewis explains that he employs the term ‘member’, not to mean merely *units*, but in the way the term was employed by St. Paul: ‘he meant what we should call *organs*, things essentially different from, and complementary to, one another’ – this is the same sense used in the famous *Bani Adam* verse of the Persian Sufi poet, Sa’di, who wrote:

⁷ C. S. Lewis, ‘Membership’ (*supra*).

The progeny of Adam are limbs of each other,
Having been created of one essence.
When the calamity of time affects one limb
The other limbs cannot remain at rest.
If you have no sympathy for the troubles of others,
You are unworthy to be called by the name of 'a Human'.⁸

When 'individuality' opposes its intrinsic humanity encompassed within the membership of our common humanity, it ceases to be human and becomes transgressive or 'individualistic'. Our identities and the spaces we inhabit cannot be at the expense of other identities and their spaces. Our individual identity – the unique set of traits with we are each endowed – is therefore an expression both of our individuality and of our humanity, and is to be harmonized, not used merely to express our outwardly opposing identities, but to serve all of creation and humankind. The following oft-cited passage from the Holy Quran explains the foundations and implications of this ethos:

...For each among you We have appointed a law and a way. And had God willed He would have made you one community. But [He willed otherwise] that He may try you by that which He hath given you. So vie one with another in good deeds. Unto God shall be your return all together, and He will then inform you of that wherein you differ.⁹

The verse explains that our differences are the basis of a deeper connection. They are a form of test, given to 'try' us so that we are impelled to use our individual gifts virtuously, generously, compassionately, humanely. We are therefore exhorted to '*vie with one another in good deeds*', to employ our individual strengths collaboratively, not competitively. It is by seeing our differences as complementary aspects of our shared humanity that we can avoid the individualistic or tribalistic factionalism of identity politics.

The issues that engage us as human beings challenge our conceptions of who we are and what we value. Many problems offer no easy solutions. It is only by transcending our narrow identities and limited points of view while also affirming our individual and collective human dignity that we can strive for principled answers. Thus it is not always

⁸ Sa'di, *Gulistan*.

⁹ *Surat Al-Ma'idah*, 5:48

constructive to denounce ideas as politically incorrect or to engage in identity politics. These methods are often divisive. Rather what is needed is a commitment to creative ways of mediating our identity and our belonging through an ethic of pluralism, to fair processes of informed civic engagement that seek to harmonize our differences in ways that are true to our spiritual kinship, our common humanity, so that we can see in our limitations the humility of a transcendent bond that unites us, and in our differences the complementarity and strength that affirms our individuality as a resource for the common good.