Protestants, Gays and Cognitive Minorities

There was recently controversy in Scotland, because a visiting American evangelical Christian preacher was barred from hiring a large hall, owned by a local government authority, to hold a meeting. The reason why he was barred, was because he was on record as being critical of homosexuality, and the council received objections to him, made on that basis. He was not going to be speaking specifically about homosexuality. And his reported opinions, while highly critical, were not expressed in a way that was designed to stir up hatred, but to convey that, in his judgement, the practise of homosexuality was condemned by God. This is not an isolated case. The same things have happened to other conservative evangelical preachers, including the son of Billy Graham.

Billy Graham himself was a well-known figure. He held 'crusades' all over the world, preaching – it has been estimated – to live audiences of in total 210 million people. He also became an advisor to several American Presidents. His own religious views were very conservative – although as he got increasingly famous, he tended to soft-peddle how they were expressed. But he had been critical, in public, of homosexuality, writing in 1973: [1]'We traffic in homosexuality at the peril of our spiritual welfare. Your affection for another of your own sex is misdirected and will be judged by God's holy standards'. This was not a matter just of Graham's personal preferences, as he was able to refer, for example, to St Paul's *1 Corinthians*:[2] 'Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God.' It was of this material of which he offered his own views as an interpretation.

Now why should this whole issue be of any interest to those of us who would not take what is written in the Bible – let alone the interpretation of it offered by American conservative evangelical preachers – as having more than curiosity value? It is because this case raises several wider questions.

The first concerns the freedom of speech and spaces (actual or virtual) in which it is exercised. This is a slightly complicated matter. No-one would expect, say, that the Catholic Church should have to hire a hall that they own for a meeting of militant atheists, or to people who want to stir up trouble for the Church. However, spaces that are owned by the government – at one or another administrative level – would seem to be a different matter. They could not be expected to hire space to people who wish to champion things that it is against the law to champion – such as, say, holocaust revisionism if it is illegal, as in Germany. (It would be another thing if the meeting were concerned simply to argue against the idea that there should be such a law.) But in more general terms, there would seem to be a strong

[1] *Lakeland Ledger* Nov 23, 1973 'Homosexual Perversion: A Sin that's Never Right'. Available at https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1346&dat=19731120&id=AxNNAAAAIBAJ&sjid=evoDAAAAIBAJ&pg=7075,6381161

[2] I have cited the very readable 'New Living Translation', available at: https://biblehub.com/nlt/1_corinthians/6.htm

case for a policy of neutrality, in the sense of not barring people from speaking just on the grounds that other people dislike what they are saying.

At the same time, there seems to me an argument for imposing certain restrictions on how and where things are said. The classic arguments for freedom of speech (as opposed, say, to what people might say within their own house or a private gathering), relate to arguments about human fallibility and the role that a well-conducted discussion can play in getting us towards the truth. Ideas about freedom of speech in the U.S. have, in my view, been developed in a silly way, so as to allow people to give offence to others by conducting noisy and obviously offensive protests at military funerals and at the funerals of homosexuals who had been murdered in hate crimes.[3] Similarly, the American Civil Liberties Union took legal action to defend the freedom of a group of Neo-Nazis to stage a march through Skokie, Illinois, where a number of holocaust survivors lived. More generally, it is not clear why we should think that people have a right to express views in a manner that in the judgement of the average citizen would be liable to give grave offense to others. However, this is quite a different matter from their being able to express the views that underlie that opinion in another way; say, as an argument in a journal or other publication, or on the internet.

There are, of course, issues about whether or not people will be able to get their views published at all. It is perfectly reasonable for the editorial board of a particular academic journal to refuse to publish an article by a holocaust denier, because they simply don't address the objections that have been raised by other scholars to the kind of case that they are making when it has been published before. There might also be cases in which a group – say, of atheists in a highly religious country – might claim that there was no space available in which they could speak, or journal in which they could publish, because the relevant outlets were all owned by people who disagreed with them, and public space was barred because of political pressure from their opponents. But there would seem to me that there should be an obligation on governmental authorities to furnish space to them for such a purpose, while in the ordinary course of events, it is not clear that people who wish to make an argument in countries of a broadly liberal character would actually find that they are barred from doing so. In principle it would seem possible for them to produce a cheap publication of their own – these days, in one or another electronic form. In an era in which social media become almost all-important, it seems to me that we should consider placing an obligation those who run these media to take postings provided that the *manner* in which they are expressed is not offensive. However, in the light of the problems that have emerged in this field, it would seem sensible to institute moderated discussions, to which people with any sense would sign up, in which (as in the case of academic journals, referred to above), material could either be excluded if it did not meet the group's standards of taking into account, and responding cogently to, contrasting views, or that it would appear only subject to an annotation that it did not comply with those standards.

A second point, is that it was urged by the opponents of the American preachers that the rights of homosexuals were being infringed simply by what they were saying. It was not clear, however, that it was being suggested that what the preachers were doing was anything *illegal*. The issue, rather, is that people felt that the claims that the preachers were making were against the rights of homosexuals in

[3] The group conducting the demonstrations was the tiny Westboro Baptist Church, based in Topeka, Kansas.

some broader sense. The problem here, however, is that what we are dealing with is claims about rights that are – today, frequently – being made, the rationale for which (in a sense that I will describe) is not clear. It *is* clear enough that these claims reflect how the group in question would wish to be treated. But what is not clear, is why others should think that anyone is *obliged* to treat them in this way. In particular, conservative Christians (and, indeed, conservative Jews and Muslims) may argue that on their understanding, homosexual sexual activity has been condemned by God.[4] In the face of this, there would seem to be no grounds for people to argue cogently that they have a moral right that such statements should not be made (and thus the basis for a law that it should be illegal to make such statements).

To this, it is often objected: but why do traditional religious believers think that objections of this kind are telling[5] , i.e. objections which refer to what is written in the Bible, or to the teachings of the Church? Those who criticize the religious people would say: we just don't accept the religious authority that you are claiming should influence our conduct here. But the problem is that the religious people could say exactly the same about the rights that their critics are claiming to exist (e.g. a moral right for gay people to be able to marry), and which are being invoked against them. This is not to say that there cannot be fruitful discussion about such matters. But given that the correctness of the views on either side cannot be demonstrated, there would seem to me a strong case for policies which could be called libertarian. These would recognise that these are issues on which there are strong differences, and which would recognise the rights of both groups to practise the conduct that they favour, and to argue for it, but not to force their view about it onto anyone else.

Another kind of argument that might be raised against those with conservative religious views, is: your ideas are old-fashioned and are out of step with the times in which we are living. This may, sociologically, be the case. But the conservative religious people may retort: we are standing up for what we take to be the truth, and truth is not affected by changes in social fashion.[6] To this it could be responded: but lots of theological liberals take the same view of, say, homosexuality as does the rest of society. This is true enough. But the conservatives could respond: it is not clear that the theological liberals can offer a cogent rationale for doing so. It is perfectly correct, the conservatives might say, that there have been arguments offered which if correct might lead us to change our views about the authorship of particular pieces of scripture, the integrity of particular texts, or how certain statements in scriptures or in creeds should be understood. These have been made, and need to be discussed on their merits. But it is not clear that *these* discussions have any bearing on the kinds of issues which are under discussion here – i.e. that *theological* liberalism has any necessary connection to *social* liberalism. It is also certainly the case that theological liberals have made accommodations to the socially liberal spirit of the age. But a problem, here, is the intellectual integrity with which they have done so, given the history of the tradition out of which they are coming. What, exactly, is their theory of

[4] It is, typically, the activity which is condemned: there is a body of writing by conservative Christians who themselves experience same-sex sexual attraction, who argue that, on theological grounds, the appropriate course of action for them is celibacy. See, for example, Ed Shaw, *The Plausibility Problem* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015)

[5] Another course of action, is to argue that the basis of the religious judgement incorrect, in what the religious people should accept as their own terms. (I.e. that even if one accepts, say, the authority of the Bible, it is a mistake to take its condemnations of homosexuality as telling, today.) Andrew Sullivan, for example, attempts this argument in the first part of his *Virtually Normal* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1995)

[6] There is a well-known Protestant song which starts: 'Yesterday, today, forever, Jesus is the same'.

how changes in views, and in the interpretation of their tradition, should take place? And if the lead on moral issues is to come from changes in secular sensibilities, what is the *point* of their own tradition? Religious views, historically, typically claimed to tell us what in broad terms the universe is like. They gradually retreated from this, and talked about their ability to give a lead to the rest of us, morally. But if this also is ditched, and the lead is given by changes in secular social mores, to which the religious are supposed, then, somehow to try to accommodate themselves, liberal religion seems to be left without any sensible function. While to be in this position of intellectual retreat without facing up to the character of what one has been doing, would normally be taken to be the mark of the charlatan.

Let me now return to the wider political argument. The underlying issue here is that the way in which these things are all too often looked at, is as an argument between conservative social authoritarians on the one side, who want to impose their views on others, and social liberals on the other, who also wish to impose their views on everyone. The liberals champion the rights of minority groups, and to make sure that they are accorded in all respects the same status as is enjoyed by other citizens, even by people who, have religious objections to doing so. (Indeed, social liberals seem oddly blind to the rights of these minorities.) In Britain, in recent times, the Conservative Party contained prominent figures who represented each of these views. During the period when David Cameron was Prime Minister, a decision was made by the Conservatives for social liberalism.[7] While, personally, I am sympathetic to a socially liberal view in terms of what our personal attitudes should be,[8] it has led to problems when adopted as government policy.

This may be seen from another long-running issue in Britain: protests by conservative predominantly Muslim parents, against teaching in state schools of liberal ideas about sex education and gender. One regularly saw – until they were recently made illegal – protests being made by conservative Muslims outside primary schools, about the sex and gender education lessons which were being introduced. These were compulsory – and not just in state schools, but also in, say, independently financed religious schools. From what one can tell, there was a fair bit of misinformation conveyed to the parents as to just what was going to be taught, and there were problems for young children about protests being conducted in front of their schools. But the underlying issue here, is that what is taught seeks simply to present gay and lesbian relationships, and 'modern' ideas about gender and families, as part of normal life. At one level this is fair enough, and it is important that children are taught about the existence of social diversity, and that these relationships are legally recognised, and that it is inappropriate to behave in a discriminatory manner towards the individuals involved and their families. But at another level, there is a problem. For what, the parents who were protesting might reasonably say of their belief that these relationships are not judged to be acceptable by God, and their wish to bring up their children in their own religious views?

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[7] This becomes clear from Oliver Letwin, *Hearts and Minds* (London: Biteback, 2017).

[8] Although some interesting issues are raised by Friedrich Hayek in his *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (London: Routledge, 1973-9), about the way in which we need to look at the overall consequences of social rules and mores, rather than thinking that it is always wise to change anything that does not appeal to us. It is worth noting, for example, the argument that has been developed in Australia by Barry Maley, that the liberalization of attitudes towards marriage (e.g. making divorce easier, and the social normality of unmarried people with children living together), and the use of drugs, has had bad consequences for poorer people with fewer resources – financial and otherwise – to cope with the problems that may arise. See, for example, his *Family on the Edge* (St Leonards, NSW: CIS, 2009).

It would seem to me that the British Conservative Party made a wrong move. Rather than endorsing social liberalism – which runs straight into this problem of religious minorities – it should have adopted what might be called a socially libertarian perspective. This would recognise that there are social differences in this field which cannot be resolved through argument (although there is everything to be said for encouraging people to talk together, in a friendly manner). On some of these matters, an appropriate law would seem to be that we should recognise that there are these differences, and respect the fact that people do take different views, and behave in different ways, and accept that they should bring up their children (and that their children should be taught in schools), to understand that this is the case. But this kind of toleration of difference, is a very different matter from the idea that everyone has to embrace everything as completely on a par.

There may be things that people are legally allowed to do – and where we can and should respect their legal right to do so – but where we may also perfectly legitimately take the view that we consider these things to be immoral, or condemned by God. There may be other things – e.g. issues about the age of consent, or about the legal recognition of polygamy – where we may recognise that there are differences of opinion, but simply insist on the legal enforcement of particular requirements, even against people who would mutually consent to other arrangements. (Clearly, infringements can be treated compassionately, depending on the circumstances.)

It is striking that, in Britain, the shift from the conservative churches' being in a position of power, and of their members using their political power to force their views onto those who dissented, to their being in a position of a minority, with other people's views being forced onto them, has been dramatic. It has taken place over a relatively short time. There is an interesting parallel here to the way in which, in the United States, universities and colleges were often historically not just set up by Protestant Christians, and had an explicitly Christian character, but that this was – quite quickly – eroded over time.[9] There is a risk, however, that we are moving into a kind of intolerance that looks particularly problematic: that towards people who are in what is sometimes referred to as a cognitive minority. This is a minority group the identity of which is constituted by views about what the world is like,[10] typically of a kind that are not simple matters of empirical fact, which are not shared by the majority. The most obvious such examples, are ideas about God and his teachings, and also theories about the character of the world which are not empirically testable. But as I have indicated above, they can also include moral views – e.g. about who (or what) should enjoy what kinds of rights. One might add here – although this may be a bit more surprising – the kind of metaphysical or philosophical theories which can play an important role in the development of science, and ideas about whether, say, in the end evolutionary theory will be able to explain all the phenomena that it seeks to address.[11]

[9] See George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[10] It is worth noting – but I can't explore this here – that these matters are typically inter-related to issues of social organization.

[11] Compare, on this, Karl Popper's discussion of 'metaphysical research programmes' in his *Unended Quest* (London: Fontana, 1976).

Issues of this kind are complex. They are typically matters in which discussion and argument are possible, and it may even be possible to come to tentative conclusions about how the argument has run, to date. At the same time, it is a field in which there is seldom conclusive argument – so that it can't reasonably be said that the views, say, of a cognitive minority are demonstrably false. (Although even if they are, there is still the question of whether parents should or should not be allowed to try to bring their children up in such views: consider the degree to which children are brought up by their parents believing all kinds of historical falsehoods about the history of their own nation.[12]) A complication might be, that while in some sense the views of a cognitive minority might be defensible, the way in which they are actually holding their views, and arguing for them, quite often isn't.[13] But if people hold such views, they may quite reasonably feel that they are not being treated fairly by the majority, and that the 'liberal' institutions set up by government are, emphatically, not neutral in relation to their beliefs. This may be significant if the institutions in question – e.g. the provision of schooling – are provided by the government by means of general taxation, including of themselves.

It is striking that an issue of this kind arose in The Netherlands, during the course of the Nineteenth Century. Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) was a Dutch theologian, who was educated as a liberal Calvinist. He was a brilliant man, and a polymath. For a variety of reasons, not least because of his encounter with the simple faith of some of his parishioners, he converted to a hard-line conservative Calvinism. From such a perspective, he came to the conclusion that the government and its institutions were far from neutral, and wrote academic work – but also journalism, and founded a political party – to address the issue. He organized the somewhat marginalized conservative Calvinists, and pressed for arrangements which would see them nurtured through their own institutions, including the provision of government services for their community, in a form specifically targeted towards themselves. He allied, politically, with the Catholics, to take on the older liberal establishment, and is seen as being a key figure in the development of what is sometimes called the 'silo' system in the Netherlands, within which different organized social groups had their own forms of often religious-based provision. Kuyper, in fact, was for a period Prime Minister of The Netherlands. He was also the founder of the 'Free University of Amsterdam' which, when it was set up, was funded by donations from predominantly poor conservative Calvinists, to be their university, and to develop their distinctive world-view concerning all aspects of human knowledge.

Despite Kuyper's considerable political success (and despite the fact that he is currently enjoying influence again in conservative Protestant religious circles in the United States), his move wasn't in the end successful. The Free University limped along as an institution operating in his image for a number of years. The problem was that while worthy people were recruited to its faculty who were sympathetic to developing a Calvinist perspective of higher knowledge, their vision of what this should consist of hardly cohered with Kuyper's very distinctive ideas. (The Free University is now a distinguished institution, but it is a secular institution just like all other universities, with interest in Kuyper's ideas

[12] The reliance of nationalism on bogus history has often been noted.

[13] I have offered such an argument in respect of the views of those in the United States who have championed 'intelligent design'. See Jeremy Shearmur, 'Why the "Hopeless War'?: Approaching Intelligent Design", Sophia 49 (4), 2010, pp. :475-88.

typically to be found only in its department of theology) Further, the 'silo' or 'pillarisation' system in the Netherlands gradually broke down in the aftermath of the Second World War.[14]

It is not clear that this is an experiment that one would advise people to repeat,[15] whether in the Netherlands model (with pillarised state provision), or by way of those in cognitive minorities making their own private provision for themselves. The kind of separation – e.g. in the Netherlands, between conservative Protestants, Catholics and Social Democrats – made a lot of people uneasy. While the version of limited pillarisation which has operated in Northern Ireland, is often claimed to be a factor in perpetuating the very damaging divisions between the different communities there. There is a chance, however, that it might be found attractive by conservative Muslims in European countries, and also these days by conservative Christians, each of whom could surely – and justly – share Kuyper's judgement that the established ways of doing things are not even-handed or neutral.

Typically, members of liberal majorities can't see the problem, and cannot understand that the ideas that they find so compelling can perfectly reasonably be questioned. Indeed, they tend simply to see their own views as obviously correct, and take those who disagree with them to be ignorant bigots. I think that the liberal-minded need to think hard about what appropriate policies here should be, not least because the simple dismissing of the concerns of cognitive minorities seems to me problematic in itself for anyone who is concerned with tolerance and also recognises that their own ideas are fallible. While any shift towards pillarisation would be liable to have problematic consequences, both in terms of creating social divisions behind which prejudicial views of others may develop, but also because it risks putting the fate of members of cognitive minorities into the hands of what are likely to be their most doctrinaire members.

[14] There is a useful brief survey on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pillarisation

[15] There are also issues about what is often referred to as 'consociational democracy' (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consociationalism for a useful survey). But there is not the space to go into them here.