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## “Political Liberalism” By John Rawls- A Review

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### Abstract

This article is a review of an important book “Political Liberalism” by John Rawls. He is a famous philosopher of 20th century. This book is a modified edition of Rawls previous book “A Theory of Justice”. The aim of political Liberalism is to achieve a political notion that religious and non-religious, liberal and non-liberal may live freely.

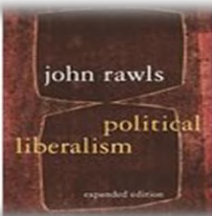
**Keywords:** Political Liberalism, John Rawls, justice, philosophy, freedom

### *Author’s Introduction*



John Rawls’s name was included in the list of twentieth century eminent political philosophers, he wrote a number of books on political philosophy, and his main focus was to clarify “justice as fairness.” His first book, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), modernized the social agreement, notion of Thomas Hobbes, John Lock, and particularly Immanuel Kant, in order to formulate and justify a detailed idea of “egalitarian liberalism”, Which Rawls developed and supported as the concepts of “Justice as fairness.” In *Political Liberalism* (1993), he modified the role of political philosophy, suggesting the forcible and significant concept of public reason that attempted to accept the paradoxical variance of religious, philosophical, and moral ideas that symbolize modern societies. In his last book, “*The Law of Peoples* (2001), Rawls continued the “ideas of justice as fairness” and “public reason” to the international level, with the ambition of expending the standards that should mentor solidarity among liberal and non-liberal societies.<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction to the Book*



“Political Liberalism” by John Rawls<sup>2</sup> is amended edition of his previous book “A Theory of Justice,” it includes 525 pages, it is divided into four

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sections, and each section has different lectures. It goes on and amends the idea of *justice as fairness* that is offered by Rawls in *A theory of Justice*, he, then, modifies its theoretical explanation in crucial ways.

His earlier research surmised that a well- balanced state is corresponding with its fundamental virtuous ideas, and the ethical life of such a state is represented by a wide accord. But the problem is that a multiplicity of contradictory moral, theoretical and religious doctrines exists side by side in the present democratic culture. Accepting this reality as a constant *state of democracy*, Rawls raises a question as to how be it practicable in a sound and well organized society of liberal citizens to live according to a fix pact and agreement though the state is classified into diverse *doctrines*? Rawls gives the solution of the above mentioned issue in his Political Liberalism in the form of *overlapping consensus*. The present edition of Political Liberalism consists of an essay “The Idea of Public Revisited.” Rawls’s intention is to re-examine this edition of Political Liberalism but unfortunately, it was broken off by his death.

### *Summary of the Book*

John Rawls’ liberalism has molded modern political Philosophy. Liberalism is developed to the modern standards of liberty and uniformity. Rawls’s theory of liberalism was already included in the theory of justice, where it was established as a broad and widespread theory. The main question of Political Liberalism is, “How is it possible for people holding different contradictory comprehensive doctrines to live under one political system which all of them regard legitimate?” Rawls’ contended that citizens possess diverse political notions of *justice* that direct their social and political life. However, no agreement is obligatory on how to lead a good life. Rawls visualizes a consensus that is exactly political and thus covers “constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice.” Rawls divides his book into four sections. A brief summary and Rawls’s ideas about political liberalism are described as below:

In the introduction of Political Liberalism, Rawls presents a brief sketch of his book. He also defines the term *political liberalism* in the introduction of his books. He says that Political Liberalism is quite different from *Enlightenment Liberalism*. It was an inclusive liberal based upon secular ideas; it was popular among the modern Christian community. Contrary to the *Enlightenment Liberalism*, the main focus of Political Liberalism is to highlight justifiable pluralism of *comprehensive doctrines*, where there are some doctrines considered to be nonreligious. The aim of Political Liberalism is to achieve a political notion that is elaborated as follows:

*“A plurality of reasonable doctrines, religious and nonreligious, liberal and nonliberal may freely endorse and so freely live by and come to understand its virtues. It does not aim to replace comprehensive doctrines, religious and nonreligious, but intends to be equally distinct from both and it hopes, acceptable to both”<sup>3</sup>*

In the first part of political liberalism Rawls explains that in a liberal society citizens have diverse viewpoints. They hold different religions; they possess different ideas of good and evil; they esteem different pursuits and forms of mutual relations. He

discusses the idea of a well-balanced state in part 1 of Political Liberalism in detail, according to him, this balanced state is possible through *Justice*. *Justice as fairness* is practicable and can be materialized. The society might be stable as the human nature leads people to get an understanding of justice. This understanding of justice will sustain their social and political foundations over the ages. Rawls redeveloped his theory of justice, i.e. *justice as fairness* into the political theory of justice which demands redeveloping of integrating political ideas. These notions, frame the comprehensive doctrine of justice as fairness. The transformation and development of these notions can be examined in the part 1 of Political Liberalism.

Another important issue discussed by Rawls in his Political Liberalism is the idea of *Reasonable Citizens*. Rawls mentions in Political Liberalism: “*citizens are reasonable when viewing one another as free and equal in a system of social cooperation over generations, they are prepared to offer one another fair terms of social cooperation and they agree to act in these terms, even at the cost of their own interests in particular situations, provided that other also accepts these terms. For these terms to be fair terms, citizens offering them must reasonably think that those citizens offered them might also reasonably accept them. And they must be able to do this as free and equal, and not as dominated or under the pressure of an inferior political or social position*”<sup>4</sup>

Rawls’s previous book “Theory of Justice” lacks two main ideas, i.e. “overlapping consensus” and “public reason.” Rawls discusses these ideas in the part 2 of his Political Liberalism in detail. Rawls states about *overlapping consensus*:

“*Such a consensus consists of all the reasonable opposing religious, philosophical and moral doctrines likely to persist over generations and to gain a sizable body of adherents in a more and less just constitutional regime, a regime in which the criterion of justice is that political conception itself.*”<sup>5</sup>

Rawls discusses two points related to overlapping consensus in the Political Liberalism. The first point is that it is a reality of *Reasonable Pluralism* that leads to him to the notion of “*Political conception of justice*,” and at least the theory of Political Liberalism. The reason is that, instead of opposing religious and nonliberal “doctrines” with the “comprehensive liberal Philosophical doctrines” the notion is to develop a liberal political idea so that the nonliberal and religious “doctrines” could be able to advocate. The need is to develop an independent political idea; it should have its own *constitutional political ideal* demonstrated by the *criterion of reciprocity*. The other point that Rawls discusses about overlapping consensus is that political liberalism has no aim to demonstrate that the consensus would establish around a justifiable *political theory of justice*. It just has an aim to present an independent political idea which could not contradict to the *comprehensive doctrines*.

Rawls further elaborates *The Idea of Public Reason*. He says that citizens are to conduct their public political discussions of constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice within the framework of what each sincerely regards as a *reasonable political conception of justice*, a conception that expresses political values that others as free and equal also might reasonably be expected reasonably to endorse.<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that any one political idea of justice can not specify *public reason*.

Another important issue discussed by Rawls in Political Liberalism is *Priority of rights over good*. Rawls notes:

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*“The priority of right means that the principles of political justice foist limits on lawful ways of life, and hence, the assertions citizens make to follow ends that violate those boundaries have no weight.”<sup>7</sup>*

It means that, on the one hand, some inclusive doctrines or some specific actions specified by comprehensive doctrine will be considered as inadmissible (unreasonable) and thus be disallowed. Sure, the political idea is meant to control our political life. However, since the political idea has priority over the different ideas of good included in the comprehensive doctrines, it has the potential to eliminate particular *comprehensive doctrines* even if citizens obey them only in the non-political domain. On the other hand, *the priority of the right over the good* specifies that *the political concept of justice* reveals the values that outweigh whatever other values are probably to contradict with them. It is worth noted that according to the conception of “*priority of the right over the good*” political liberalism does not presume any idea of the good. Rawls says “*this must be wrong, since the exact and the goods are reciprocal: no idea of justice can draw absolutely upon one or the other, but must unite both in a definite way.*”<sup>8</sup>

At the end Rawls concludes that the battles of this century with their drastic cruelty and increasing violence, crowning in the demonic wicked of the Holocaust, elevate in an acute way the question whether political terms must be ruled by supremacy, force and enforcement alone? He answers that we must start with the supposition that a logically fair political society is possible, and for it to be possible, humans must have a good and virtuous nature, not of course an absolute such nature, yet one that can make out, follow, and be adequately moved by an acceptable political system of right and justice to help a society guided by its notions and rules. Political liberalism tries to map out what the more rational ideas of justice for a democratic system are and to present a candidate more rational. It also shows how citizens want to be conceived to establish those more reasonable notions, and what their ethical and moral psychology has to be to help a reasonably fair political society over time.

### *Critical Analysis*

Political liberalism gives a persuasive view of how it is possible, in modern pluralistic communities, to establish an overlapping consensus on basic political affairs, notably endorsed for anyone looking for a sound ideological infrastructure for a politically free worldview. Although Rawls has done a great work of political philosophy in the form of his famous book “Political liberalism” in which he has tried his best to remove the contradiction between liberal and nonliberal, religious and nonreligious communities. But in spite of its positive aspects, there are many crucial issues too that can be that will be discussed as below:

- ✚ One of the issues that Rawls must answer is that of presenting a pivotal justification. But calling justice as fairness a political notion Rawls has left the attempt to give such a crucial justification. But in doing so, one has to

think what causes one would have to finally accept the political idea, other than merely logical ones.<sup>9</sup>

- ✚ Another issue that Rawls's concept reveals is that it is not explicit that justice as fairness would be able to gain an overlapping consensus of logical inclusive ideas. For instance, it is perplexing that utilitarian could ever receive Rawls's primacy of the first principle over second.<sup>10</sup> In the end Rawls's new Idea has not brought us any closer to a decision on the issue that he has promoted over the past 25 years.
- ✚ The interpretation of the notion of morality remains absolutely unclear in John Rawls' political liberalism. It starts with a Rawls' statement that the political notion of justice is also a moral idea, which is confusing when taking into deliberation Rawls' clear avoidance of comprehensive moral doctrines in formulating the political idea of justice. Notwithstanding his obligation to eliminate moral doctrines, he makes it sure that the political idea of justice is nonetheless a moral notion. By sermonizing two crucial questions regarding the necessity and the power of a reasonable idea of morality, the public notion of morality is revealed to be an applicable concept capable of resolve the tension within Rawls' theory of morality and justice. In addition, the public theory of morality is also indicated to both explain and justify the political idea of justice, which eventually advocates the case for political liberalism.
- ✚ Political liberalism encounters a tension between tolerating between acceptable nonliberal comprehensive thoughts encouraging individual liberal urges. This tension is most distinctly revealed and left absolutely uncorrected in the globalized version of the conception because of the particular conditions of the international condition. In expanding his domestically formulated conception to protect international relations Rawls mistakenly and very absurdly has presented perceptible this fundamental with political liberalism. The emphasis of political liberalism on toleration contradicts with its other liberal resolutions, which in the domestic situation fortuitously alleviated. But a reasonable political conception cannot wait to be retained from internal tension contingent situations—there is no surety that these situations will always be obtained, as they have not the global rank.
- ✚ Rawls description of reasonableness is complicated, as it is randomly developing liberal results in the deliberation process—for what is to be committed to the freedom and liberty of one's fellow citizens if not to be a free? It is perplex because there is no argument within Rawls's concept justifying why we may place absolutely those limitations on public reason. In other words, either it is not obvious why only accept to liberal institutes and strategies produces legitimacy, or “free consent” is built in such a way

as to result liberal only when indicated in favor of liberal institutes and policies, thus becoming rather useless.

✚ Political liberalism puts religious and secular doctrines on an equal level in the development of political morality. This is a chief principle as, since the Enlightenment, it has not been the issue. There have always been some sort of secular laws under which various religious opinions and concepts would tranquilly live without opposing one another’s freedom. The comprehensive aspect of political liberalism in gaining and maintaining the political consensus encourages the citizens of faith. Political liberal interpretation of liberal democracy intends to be comprehensive and fair. Subsequently, this gives a sufficient and broad justification to approach political liberalism as a standardizing resource in dealing with existing controversies among secular and religious citizens and between state and religion, which plagues politics in different societies. Hence, Rawls played an important part in the secularization approach of modern western liberty. There is no place of God’s commands in Ralsian’s society. On the other hand, traditional Islam, with its own metaphysical thought, persuades reform, performs as an anti-thesis to modernity and the post- enlightenment politics. This is the base of contemporary political Islam, which is based on a global methodology and gives an alternative to Rawls’s political conception. The methodology of political Islam consists of liberal ideas and formulates them by the metaphysical reality of the Holy Quran and Sunnah. This is signified through the analysis of everyday practice and cooperation with Western liberal states. The contemporary Arab springs are a component of this procedure. It is a wrong notion that Islam was the subject of Rawls’s political theory. The shortcomings of Rawls’s political concept rendering its forceful, without justification, for Muslim citizens.

Contrary to the Rawls’s concept of human and political Liberty, Islam gives a very reasonable and sound concept of political liberty. In surah Nisa verse no 59 Allah subhan Wa Ta’la says: *“O Believers obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those entrusted with authority from among you. Then, if there arises any dispute about anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you truly believe in Allah and the last day Day. This is the only right way and will be best in regard to the end.”*<sup>11</sup>

The above mentioned verse is the best specimen of elaborating the entire Islamic political, legislative, spiritual and religious system. This verse enacts eternally basic principles. Syyed Maududi elaborates these principles as follows:

“The first principle is that in the Islamic system, Allah Subhan Wa T’ala is the absolute Sovereignty who must be obeyed. Muslims are basically the servants of Allah subhan Wa T’ala; all of their potential comes after this.

Fidelity and obedience to anyone else shall be accepted only if these are not against the fidelity and obedience of Allah but are subordinate to Allah. The second basic principle of the Islamic political state is allegiance to the Holy Prophet (SAW). The Prophet (SAW) is to be obeyed as he is the authentic source by which one may get the orders and commandments from Allah Subhan Wa T'ala. After the first and second fidelity, and subordinate to these, the Muslims owe fidelity to those charged with authority from among them. All those, who are charged with authority from among the Muslims, are to be respected, obeyed and followed, and it is not fair to disturb the order the order of the Muslim state. But the two essential conditions are pre-requisite to obey them, the first condition is that they should be among from among the Muslims, and the second is that they should be loyal to Allah and the Prophet (SAW).<sup>12</sup> In support of this a hadith of the Holy Prophet (SAW) is mentioned. *“It is obligatory on a Muslim to listen and to obey orders of those invested with authority, whether he likes it or dislikes it, provided that it is not sinful. However, if he is ordered to do a sinful thing, he should neither listen to the rulers not, obey their orders.”*<sup>13</sup>

So the Rawls's political theory absolutely contradicts to the Islamic political system as it promotes secular ideas in a political state.

### *Conclusion*

In sum, in the light of the above considerations, it can be concluded that in the pluralistic democratic states, some religious and polytheist thinker consider that the political thought offers a religious and moral perplexity. The reason is that most of their creeds contradict to the constitutional laws given by the state. Such thinkers try to try to make political debates in respect of their moral beliefs. These religious minded people feel that their religious requirements contradict to the requirements of burghers living in a pluralistic democracy. *“Political Liberalism”* by John Rawls is an effort to present findings to this perplex situation. Rawls's plan makes citizens enforce their political notions according to their religious doctrines, but also asserts that moral motives are unreasonable for the liberal and nonreligious concepts. He concludes that religion is a justification for an individual *political doctrine*, yet it should be barred from the *public political forum*. Rawls ideas have been criticized in recent times. His solution to the problem indicates that religion must be separated from political thoughts. Such separability is incompatible with religious doctrines. Allah Subhan Wa T'ala is the absolute Sovereignty who must be obeyed in the political system of Islam. This is absolutely wrong to assume that a person's life can be divided at one aspect detached from the other. We cannot divide political, economic, social and entirely religious work into watertight compartments. There is a religion, far from human activities. It provides a moral framework for all actions which they would otherwise lack reducing life to astound of sound and fury signifying nothing. Iqbal has rightly said:

“Statecraft divorced from Faith to reign of terror leads  
Though it is a monarch's rule or Commoners' Show.”<sup>14</sup>

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(“Jalal-e-Padshahe ho K Jamhoori Tamasha Ho      Juda Ho Deen Siasat Se To Reh  
Jati Hai Changazi”)

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