Taking Pluralism Seriously

Henry Hardy

Obviously, if one God, only one morality – His law and the falsity of moral pluralism therefore.
Stuart Hampshire, *Justice is Conflict* (London, 1999), p. 47

Introduction 2003

This article was written in the mid-1990s, and first published in <u>Dutch</u>. It still seems to me, nearly a decade later, to make a point that is, oddly, not addressed in the literature – perhaps because of understandable religious sensibilities. My purpose in writing it was to draw out from Isaiah Berlin's pluralist ideas a consequence that seemed to me clearly to follow from them, though he had not made this consequence explicit in his own published writings. As will be seen, he largely endorsed what I said, which seems to me to make this a useful addition to the material available for the interpretation of his thought, quite apart from whatever intrinsic plausibility my observations may possess.

Although I might not write exactly the same piece if I were to start again from scratch, I have deliberately left it substantially unaltered, partly because it entered Frege's 'third realm' (Popper's 'World 3') in 1995, and I wanted the original English text to be available as it was written; and partly because I find to my slight surprise that there is nothing of importance that I wish to withdraw. My efforts to publish it in English in the conventional manner have so far been unsuccessful, though a greatly condensed version has appeared in *Insights*. I particularly relished the judgement of one referee for a leading UK politics journal: 'The paper is not […] scholarly, since it makes no reference to any writer in the field except Berlin […]'. (Not true, but no matter.) So much for Aristotle and Wittgenstein, among others, *si parva licet componere magnis*.

One series of events took place thereafter which it is relevant to record. In 1996 I showed the piece to a philosopher who asked me if I had written anything in this area, and received a somewhat negative response. This came to Berlin's notice, and he asked to see what I had written. I sent him the piece, and he wrote me a letter, dated 21 January 1997, which I reproduce below. It would be entirely characteristic of him if this letter is more generous than just, but I do not believe that he would have written as he did if he had seriously disagreed with me.

I have read your piece on Taking Pluralism Seriously with great interest, and indeed admiration. I think it is a splendid piece, you need not be too modest about it – I am glad it was published, even if only in Dutch – and I think I agree with almost every word you say. There are points where I might deviate from you, or think you hadn't got it quite right, but they are so minor that I am not going to list them; if you really want me to do that, I'll read it again and then we can go through them when we next meet – but honestly, they are so small that it's not worth doing. The only point that struck me at all was that you give the impression (without positively saying so – you deny it to begin with, but then give the opposite impression) that all ultimate values collide: as you know, they do not: there is nothing wrong with happiness and liberty, knowledge and equality, etc. That is the only place where I think

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What a loathsome malady it is to believe that you are so right that you convince yourself that nobody can think the opposite.

<div align="right">Montaigne [1]</div>

Not only are the varieties of morality innumerable, but some of them are conflicting with each other.

<div align="right">James Fitzjames Stephen [2]</div>

[…] the ultimately possible attitudes towards life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion.

<div align="right">Max Weber [3]</div>

I

The word 'pluralist' appears increasingly in the Press in a weak sense that underuses its capacity to describe a distinctive ethical viewpoint. Journalists who write of a 'pluralist society' usually appear to mean little more than a tolerant, liberal society which respects different interests and accepts its cultural heterogeneity – as opposed, presumably, to a culturally homogeneous society which can be regarded as pulling together in the same direction. In this usage no particular view is implied about the comparative status of the diverse components of this social plurality. Noel Annan puts the point well:

Pluralism is a dingy word. Most people accept that there are many groups and interests in society and a good society arranges for them to tolerate each other's existence: indeed the most powerful of all institutions in society, the State, should make a special effort to give these minority interests as much scope as possible. Most people think pluralism is a pragmatic compromise. It does not compel us to abandon our belief in socialism, or in the beneficence of the inequality produced by the market economy, or our belief that there is a rule, could we but act upon it, that should govern all our lives. [4]

In the tougher sense in which it is used today by moral philosophers – largely, perhaps, as a result of the work of Isaiah Berlin, who has done more than anyone to bring the notion into the limelight, to enrich it, and thus enable others to enrich it further – 'pluralism' means the 'more disturbing' view, as Annan calls it, [5] that ultimate human values are irreducibly many; that they cannot be translated into a single super-value; and that they are sometimes (or often) incommensurable, that is, cannot be measured against one another in such a way that rationally compelling preferences between them can always be arrived at. Liberty and equality, for instance, or truth and mercy, or knowledge and happiness, or efficiency and spontaneity, are all distinct values whose requirements sometimes conflict; and when they do conflict, there is no superior criterion to which reference can be made in order to discover a resolution that ought to be accepted by every reasonable person. Sometimes a decision must be made, for life must go on; and there can be reasons for such a decision, but it must not be

represented as a uniquely rational solution of the problem when it is not. A different decision might have been no less rational.

If values are plural in this way, so are the more complex structures in which they are constituents: conceptions of life, cultures, ethical traditions, moral codes. Indeed, the plurality of the systems of values exhibited by these structures is one of the most striking ways in which the plurality of individual values is displayed. Both pluralities are made possible by the hospitable flexibility of human nature, which not only allows us to pursue a multiplicity of goals, but also enables us to order our lives in terms of a multiplicity of traditions. If by nature men had as comparatively invariant a way of life as non-human animals, then anthropological plurality, at any rate on the scale on which it has actually existed, could not have developed. As things are, though, both anthropological variety, and thus the role it plays in displaying ethical pluralism, reflect a central fact about human beings: that although there is a shared core of common humanity across people and times and places (and it is this which provides the common ground that enables us to avoid complete social and moral anarchy), nevertheless human nature is also essentially flexible and self-transforming, and can accommodate a large variety of substantively distinct approaches to life without suffering violation. Indeed, it is a central characteristic of human nature, on this view, that it is open-ended, able to develop in unpredictable directions, and not confinable, without arbitrarily restricting its essential indeterminacy, within any single detailed specification of how life is to be lived.

It is because of this indeterminacy, then, that there exist, through time and across the world of today, a large variety of markedly different cultural traditions. These differ not merely in matters of convention, or custom, or 'lifestyle' (in the usual modern sense, in which this is principally a matter of externals); these matters, it may be thought, being to some degree arbitrary and superficial, do not touch the question of the variability of human nature at the level of life-forming values. Cultures also differ, more importantly, in their deeper conceptions of how life should be lived, what human goals should be, what is worth pursuing, how different values should be ranked, how society should be structured, what an individual's rights and responsibilities are, and so forth. The values of the world of Odysseus are not those of the Victorian age; coming of age in Samoa is not a differently costumed version of Tom Brown's schooldays. The contrast with the case of non-human animals is obvious.

If values could be arranged in a fixed hierarchy, so that no two reasonable people ever disagreed about how to reconcile the inconsistent requirements of two values, the scope for variation in human life would be far more restricted than it actually is. It would not be eliminated, because there are many other dimensions of cultural variation besides the ethical; but that part of human variation that stems from the plurality of values, and the pluralism of their relations to one another, is central.

To recapitulate: if ultimate values are incomparably distinct and incommensurable, then it follows – not only in the case of divergences between cultures, but also in disagreements between members of a shared culture, as well as when values clash for an individual – that no unique resolution of conflicts of values, no single preference as between different traditions, can necessarily be arrived at and justified at the expense of all alternatives. Pluralism is the untidy view that there may be more than one 'correct' decision, more than one way forward, more than one way of living life, and that to view this as a matter of regret or as a reflection of human infirmity or ignorance is mistaken. We should not misrepresent our predicament in

spuriously simple terms. (As J. L. Austin once wrote: 'Why, if there are nineteen of anything, is it not philosophy?') [6]

It is worth stressing at this point that we may be unhesitatingly devoted to our own cultural tradition, prepared to defend it perhaps to the death, and yet recognise that it is not mandatory for all members of the human race – not necessarily even the best option, in any useful sense. It is sometimes thought that unless a way of life is sanctioned by some supernatural authority, or underpinned by some invariant and immutable aspect of reality, so that it is enjoined on everyone, it cannot be pursued with conviction. But this, although it satisfies an understandable and deep-seated wish for security, is not the only route to a firmly grounded sense of direction. This point has been memorably expressed in these words, used for a somewhat different purpose by Joseph Schumpeter: 'To realise the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian.' [7]

If individuals and groups, cultures and peoples, while all drawing on a basic common humanity, are seen as properly manifesting a wide range of more fully developed notions of what they are, or ought to be, or would wish to be, then the question arises, naturally, of how people or groups with differing visions of life should relate to each other. This is not the problem of balancing the claims of different interest-groups (though this is a not unrelated issue) – of classes, generations, or competitors for any kind of limited resource. It is the deeper problem of multiculturalism, both inter- and intra-national (the latter being sometimes posed with special force when immigration has occurred): that is, the problem of the proper attitude towards those from whom we differ – even within our own culture and age-group – in our overall approach to the living of life.

At a practical level this can be an extremely difficult problem, requiring complex accommodations that may be hard to negotiate and implement. [8] But at a theoretical level the natural basis for its solution is, prima facie, entirely straightforward. It is simply this: differences in conduct that do not flout the basic general ground-rules of interpersonal human behaviour should not be suppressed or discriminated against, and should as far as possible be treated equitably. Let a hundred flowers bloom. This is why pluralism is often taken to provide support for liberalism. Though it would be possible, instead, to advocate a fight for supremacy between competing outlooks, this does not seem a sensible option. Who would prefer strife, followed by a dominance based on strength, to peaceable coexistence, where this is possible? Nevertheless, perhaps it cannot be claimed that pluralism strictly *entails* a liberal attitude to rival outlooks. (What extra ingredient would be required to yield *that* conclusion?)

Two qualifications should immediately be entered. First, it is certainly a very difficult matter to establish exactly what the basic rules I refer to are, at any rate at the edges. No final agreement on this can reasonably be expected. But we can still make use of the notion that there are such rules, without being able to draw up a complete, definitive list; just as we use the notions of night and day without being able to specify non-arbitrarily exactly when one succeeds the other.

The second qualification is that it is not sensible, despite the stipulations of political correctness, to regard all bona fide cultures (whatever the qualifications may be for membership of that class) as automatically of equal merit, simply in virtue of their status as cultures. One can dispense equitable treatment without implying that there can be no respects in which one culture is preferable to another, however unrealistic it may be to hope to secure

agreement to any such inter-cultural preferences, let alone to expect many changes to occur as a consequence. (An analogous point might be made about the equitable treatment of individuals.) This is an important qualification, because it is sometimes maintained that different cultures, like ultimate values, are inevitably and in all respects incommensurable. In many of their manifestations they may well be, [9] but not perhaps in all.

However this may be, there is one kind of candidate for equitable treatment under this rubric which differs from all the others: the kind which believes in its own unique claim to truth.

II

It often seems to be assumed that there can, or should, be an unqualified welcome in a mature, civilised world order for monistic, universalistic ideologies: for creeds, whether or not they are explicitly religious, part of whose essence is that they are held by their adherents to be uniquely true, for all men, everywhere; whereas all rival creeds, at least to the extent that they conflict with the favoured one, are held to be false. The clash between such creeds has of course been loud and bloody through history. Wars have been fought over differing conceptions of the truth about man's relation to a (supposed) deity, and more recently over rival views of the best political order for mankind. Remarkably, though, despite this historical background, and despite the obvious potential for intolerance [10] in such creeds, there seems to exist an unspoken consensus that conflict of this kind need not be reproduced in future, or can at least be expected gradually to diminish, presumably because the different ideologies in question, while retaining their central characteristics, can learn to live together peaceably, and not to waste their energies in futile combat.

This, though, is surely an unrealistic expectation, which places the blame in the wrong place – not on the beliefs which are of their nature mutually antagonistic, but on the way in which their adherents manage this antagonism. Members of different traditions should agree to differ, it may be urged; they should learn tolerance; they should respect the convictions of others, just as they expect others to respect their own. They should accept the principle of self-determination, and not seek to impose their own beliefs, however deeply held, where they are not welcome.

I do not wish to be misunderstood: injunctions of this kind are of course not necessarily pointless or ineffectual. But if they are thought to be the only proper response to problems caused by conflicting ideologies, this shows that the deeper cause of such problems has not been identified. What I want to suggest is that the whole convention of being acquiescent in the face of excessive claims to exclusive certainty, of any kind, needs to be challenged. This does not, I hasten to add, amount to a plea for intolerance of those who wish to make such claims. I fully accept the principle that tolerance [11] should be extended towards all those who hold views different from one's own, subject to the usual proviso that such tolerance should be withheld from intolerance or the forcible imposition of one's views on others. (The boundaries of this last category, incidentally, are very difficult to define: how, for example, does one distinguish indoctrination from education in the upbringing of children?) My point is rather that it is not consistent for a pluralist to regard as straightforward contributions to the diversity of human value-systems he acknowledges – and perhaps welcomes – approaches to life which are ineradicably non-pluralist in their central thrust. Monisms, in a word, are not suitable long-term components of a plurality, [12] and while we must not suppress them, it is right for pluralists to hope that they will wither away.

III

The idea of the peaceful co-existence of different approaches to life is in one way, by now, commonplace. 'It takes all sorts to make a world' could be said of cultures as well as of individuals, without attracting much disagreement. The history of ideas may show that this acceptance of cultural heterogeneity is comparatively recent: contrast the attitudes that produced the Crusades, or paternalist imperial expansion, or nineteenth-century missionary activity (which all have their modern descendants). Nevertheless, at any rate in the West, the notion that no one culture has automatic pride of place is no longer startling. But there is a corollary of this new broadmindedness that remains to be absorbed: namely, that if the world is to be hospitable to a range of cultural forms, any candidates for such hospitality that do not reciprocate this attitude cannot be regarded as on all fours with candidates that do.

Once again, this is not a plea for selective intolerance. Freedom of belief remains a vital, unrestricted human right, for reasons that are well understood in the liberal tradition. Rather it is to insist that, if part of the basis of a moral and political order is to be the pluralist conception that claims to uniquely valid, privileged access to fully fledged, organised systems of moral, religious or political truth not only go beyond the information available to us, but are inconsistent with an understanding of the open-endedness of human nature, then we cannot look on those who sponsor such closed systems with the same impartial eyes as we look on those who, however different the culture they inhabit, share our own pluralist meta-ethical view.

Here a crude analogy is provided by the nursery rhyme 'Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief': the last one in the list, the thief, is the odd one out, because he is the only one who necessarily trespasses on the private territory of the others. Just as robbery is not regarded as a profession on a par with those that begin the rhyme, so adherents of a monist creed are not on a par with other participants in a multicultural order.

I come to my central contention. However tolerant we may decide to be in social and political terms, no *intellectual* quarter should be given by pluralists to adherents of monist creeds, especially those who maintain that their view can co-exist, without tension, either with the views of pluralists or, even more absurdly, with the incompatible views of other monists. If pluralism is true, all monisms are false, and it is not honest to pretend otherwise. To be consistent, the pluralist must look forward to the time – even though it may very well never come – when the holding of monist beliefs is regarded as just as strange as the belief in the propriety of slavery, or in the divine right of kings.

Why is this an issue of any importance? It is because the potential perniciousness of those who believe they have the only answer is needlessly encouraged by the pretence that they need pose no threat, or by the failure to acknowledge the damage they already do or may do in the future. For example, religious monism has played a role (along with other factors, certainly, especially nationalism) in a number of contemporary political conflicts – in Northern Ireland and Bosnia, to name only two of the most obvious examples. And yet in all the miles and hours of media coverage of such conflicts, it is rarely if ever roundly declared that any blame attaches to the notion that a particular religious tradition can acceptably claim a privileged access to transcendent truth: almost any other factor is blamed sooner than this one. One natural conclusion to draw from this is that politicians and journalists, astonishingly, do not believe that there is anything intrinsically antagonistic or destabilising in belief-systems of this kind. (It may be, rather, that they inwardly know that this problem

exists, but are debarred from expressing it for reasons of political correctness: if so, here is another powerful reason for eschewing the malign influence of this modern intellectual disease, which prefers a spurious equitableness to plain speaking.)

Whether we are concerned with Christianity or Islam, Judaism or any other religion or pseudo-religion which takes monist or fundamentalist forms, anyone convinced of the truth of pluralism must in consistency hold that, unless such creeds can accommodate themselves to pluralism without a denial of their essential natures, they cannot be regarded as full participants in the pluralist enterprise of tolerant co-existence between differing cultural traditions. [13] To my mind such an accommodation is indeed impossible, since it is such a deeply ingrained assumption of the world religions that they offer a definitive answer, a uniquely true vision of God and man's proper relationship to him: indeed, this is a central purpose of the whole exercise. In this context the increasingly frequent attempts by members of these faiths to portray themselves and their rivals as somehow jointly embarked on the same venture can seem somewhat ludicrous. Of course, the claims of one faith can be watered down to the point at which they do become compatible with the similarly watered-down claims of another, but a few minutes spent reading the Bible or the Koran, for example, makes clear that a reconciliation of this kind can only be achieved by effectively abandoning the central tenets of both faiths. [14]

It is not only religions that fail the pluralist test. Authoritarian political systems such as Communism and Fascism are equally culpable. Even democratic systems are not innocent. The way in which rival political parties conduct themselves, at any rate in Britain, has many of the hallmarks of monist narrow-mindedness. The wearisome convention that a political party must always present itself as right on every issue, and its opponents as always wrong, may be explained as a necessary piece of play-acting in an adversarial parliamentary democracy; but it is a small step to taking the play seriously, and even if the consciousness that it is a play remains, this is a mode of political life which militates against the pooling of good ideas, against a co-operative approach to the serious and difficult problems of government. (The same might be said about the relationship between an adversarial system of justice and the search for the truth; and about those individuals, known to all of us, who have a constitutional reluctance ever to admit error or uncertainty, or to seek compromise or consensus, least of all in connection with fundamental moral issues, especially when they themselves are directly implicated.)

In all these cases, and in many others, the same duty falls upon the pluralist who wishes to face up to the consequences of what he believes to be true: the duty to reject, intellectually, any monist philosophy or creed as an acceptable option in the search for an honest understanding of man and his place in the world. This is not to say that he is entitled to pour scorn on such philosophies; nor should he deny that they bring comfort, or make possible great human achievements which may not be accessible by another route, or incorporate profound insights into human nature. He cannot even, perhaps, assert categorically that he knows for certain that they are false, however deep he feels their implausibility to be. But he must not pretend that in the garden of many flowers, the invasive weeds are to be treated as equal partners in the display.

One small example may illustrate the change of attitude that results from acceptance of the thesis I have urged. Consider the visible badges, of membership or office, that are often adopted by monists: dog-collars, crucifixes, yarmulkes, Muslim scarves, monastic habits and hairstyles, uniforms priestly and political. The list could be extended, and individual items on

it could be the subject of dispute. Some of the badges emphasise a role within a larger institution rather than stressing plain membership of it. Nevertheless, part of what many badges of this kind convey, more or less vociferously, is not only 'I am different' or 'I am committed' – which are indeed important aspects of their message – but 'I know and accept the unique truth (and you do not).' In this respect they differ from a vast assemblage of other sources of outfitters' revenues: dinner jackets, school ties, policemen's helmets, naval uniforms, three-piece suits, *et hoc genus omne*. These may still mark difference and commitment, and the differences marked may in some cases be invidious and offensive – but not in the important way I have just specified in connection with the monist badges. A nurse's uniform does not enjoin others to become nurses, or reprove them for not doing so. Nursing is one of many options, and claims no special status. The same cannot be said, from the point of view of the faithful, for the affirmation of a monist creed.

This is where the change of attitude comes in. Conventionally the wearing of such badges is regarded by outsiders with indifference or indulgence – even with approval, because of the strength of the implied commitment. Commitment, like sincerity and integrity, is seen as good in itself, whatever its object. But if we recognise that these symbols are in part a way of rubbing in the existence and claims of belief-systems that are potentially if not actually inimical to a plural society, they take on a more sinister aspect. Why should we endorse the attitude of intellectual ostriches? I have found that, when I mention this viewpoint out of context, it is immediately derided as intolerant and narrow-minded. But I hope I have explained how it is possible to view it in a different light.

If it is true, as it is increasingly suggested, that fundamentalism is today one of the major threats to world stability, it is surely worth being on one's guard against the first signs of a condition that can develop in that direction. Religious monism is to fundamentalism as being HIV-positive is thought to be to AIDS: some do not succumb to the full-blown condition, but there is always the danger. Believing that your truth is the only truth can be the first step (especially if salvation is held to be dependent on its acceptance) on the path to believing that you must impose it on others, by means however barbarous, because nothing can be more important than spreading the truth. No one supposes that benign English country vicars are going to become fire-breathing terrorists enforcing world Christianity, but they are the more acceptable face of an enterprise which in other contexts abets political violence and hatred. Islamic fundamentalism may show as much about the state of the societies in which it flourishes as it does about the intrinsic properties of Islam, but again the religious contribution is real and to be regretted. One cannot pick and choose: benign or otherwise, monism is the enemy of pluralism; which is to say, if pluralism is true, the enemy of truth.

Notes

1. *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. and ed. M. A. Screech (London, 1991), book 1, chapter 56, 'On Prayer', p. 358. [back]

2. James Fitzjames Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (1873): p. 93 in the edition by Stuart D. Warner (Indianapolis, 1993). [back]

3. 'Science as a Vocation' (1918), in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York, 1946), p. 152. [back]

4. Noel Annan, *Our Age* (London, 1990), p. 375. [back]

5. ibid. [back]

6. Reviewing Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1950, Religious Books Section [*sic*], p. xi. The review is reprinted in Oscar P. Wood and George Pitcher (eds), *Ryle* (London etc., 1971), where this remark occurs on p. 48. [back]

7. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London, 1946 and subsequent editions), p. 243: his remark was given currency by Isaiah Berlin, who quotes it, without identifying the author, in his *Four Essays on Liberty* (London, 1969), p. 172. This sentence is the last in a section in which Schumpeter makes the point that support for democracy is context-dependent: one cannot simply give democracy one's universal support in all circumstances; it is the best system only when the conditions are right. It is worth being aware of this setting, since if the remark is taken out of context the reference to 'relative validity' might be taken to connote a relativistic conception of values, whereby values are arbitrary, subjective, impenetrable to those who adopt different ones – a view quite at odds with pluralism. Clearly, though, this thought was not in Schumpeter's mind. When read in isolation, but not understood in this relativist way, the sentence works well as a pluralist slogan. The point is now rather that the convictions in question are not compulsory for all men. They are not subjective, as relativism perhaps implies, but their objectivity is not such as to make them universal. Nevertheless the civilised person will find no difficulty in standing by them.

Taken in isolation, Schumpeter's remark also contains an ambiguity which it is worth making explicit. It can be taken as a general denial of the need for any form of a priori validation of moral principles that are held to be binding on all men (an important denial in other contexts); or, as here, it can be seen as a defence of commitment to 'particularist' values, as they are sometimes called – values acknowledged to be specific to the outlook of an individual or group, and yet defended with complete firmness. [back]

8. A stark recent example is provided by the case of a child of a Christian mother and a Muslim father. The mother organised a baptism, and the father was granted an injunction to prevent it. [back]

9. A *reductio ad absurdum* of the thesis that all ways of life are necessarily of equal value would be that there is nothing to choose between the culture of a caveman and the culture of a modern European (even leaving aside advances in science and technology – especially medicine). To take a less extreme example, is it plausible to say that traditional African tribal music is incommensurable with the music of Mozart? There is room for both, certainly, but is there not a clear sense in which the latter is genuinely richer than the former? [back]

10. The tolerance exhibited by monists is quite different from that required of pluralists towards other pluralists. A monist tolerates, patronisingly, views he regards as mistaken, hoping that one day they will be discarded in favour of the truth. A pluralist tolerates, open-endedly, the pursuit of values whose claims he recognises, at least in some cases, to be no less strong than those of his own values. If one wanted a label, one might call the latter variety of tolerance 'radical tolerance', to mark the fact that it calls on deeper reserves of flexibility, and does not see itself as ideally temporary. [back]

11. The tolerance extended by the pluralist to the monist is not 'radical' in the sense defined in the previous note. Just as the monist hopes that the pluralist will see the light and embrace the unique truth, the pluralist looks for the abandonment by the monist of his overweening and exclusive certainty. There is this much truth – and no more – in the gibe that pluralism is just another form of monist intolerance: as a second-order, meta-ethical view pluralism does not exemplify the same restrictiveness as a monism claiming that all men should subscribe to a particular, definite morality. Indeed it is only if some form of pluralism is true that monisms are bound to be unduly restrictive as such. [back]

12. Because the rejection of variety is not a way of contributing to it. Karl Popper might have called this 'the paradox of pluralism', by analogy with the other paradoxes – for example, of democracy, freedom, tolerance and sovereignty – to which he draws attention in *The Open Society and its Enemies*. [back]

13. The addition of 'tolerant' is significant. Co-existence between cultures which are not aware of one another – or, if aware, not in a position to come into conflict – is hardly pluralist in character, except in the descriptive sense that might be adopted by the observing social anthropologist: if he describes 'primitive' or 'pre-contact' cultures in a spirit that approves their variousness he might be described as having a pluralist attitude to these cultures; but the pluralism is in him, not in the cultures, at any rate as far as their own view of themselves is

concerned. A self-consciously pluralistic attitude to one's own cultural imperatives is a late flower of civilisation (some would regard it, wrongly in my view, as the first intimation of decadence); and since it cannot be entertained by a monist, it is not neutral with regard to the cultures that actually exist today. [back]

14. Cf. my article, 'The Compatibility of Incompatibles', in the *Independent*, 20 February 1993, p. 33, where I go into this point a little more fully. (Of course, some of the claims made by religions are factual rather than ethical, and the problem of adjudicating between different factual claims is not the same as the problem of reconciling different moralities; nor, however, is it entirely different.) [back]

A Dutch translation of this article ('Het ware pluralisme') was published in *Nexus* 1995 No 13, 74–86, a Spanish translation ('Tomándose el pluralismo en serio') in Pablo Badillo O'Farrell and Enrique Bocardo Crespo (eds), *Isaiah Berlin: La mirada despierta de la historia* (Madrid, 1999), 309–23.

Pluralism and Radical Tolerance

Henry Hardy

I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.
Jesus of Nazareth

Religious ethics has often tended to brand as immoral and prompted of the devil all codes different from one absolute code regarded as given for all time.
Sterling P. Lamprecht

Pluralists emphasise that the different values espoused by mankind, not being variations on one super-value, are sometimes incommensurable – cannot be compared so that irresistible preferences between them can be established. When freedom conflicts with equality, truth with mercy, knowledge with happiness, there is no superior criterion to dictate an inevitable resolution. There can be reasons for the decision that has to be made in particular circumstances, but this decision must not be misrepresented as a universal solution of the problem.

Structures of which values are formative constituents are also plural: conceptions of life, cultures, moral codes. There is a core of common humanity shared between them, but this can accommodate a variety of diverse approaches to living. Indeed, it is distinctive of human nature to be open-ended, not confinable within any single detailed ethical recipe.

How should people with differing visions of life treat each other? The basic answer is simple: whoever observes the universal ground-rules of human conduct should be treated equitably. But there is one kind of candidate for such equitable treatment who differs from all the others: the one who claims unique rectitude.

It is widely assumed that a civilised world should include monistic, universalistic ideologies, whether religious or political: creeds part of whose essence is that they alone are held to be right or true – for everyone, everywhere. No matter that wars have been fought over rival conceptions of humanity's relation to an alleged deity, or of the best political order for mankind. No matter that there is permanent potential for intolerance in such creeds. It is argued nevertheless, remarkably, that such conflict need not continue, or can at least diminish, if the different ideologies can only learn to live together tolerantly.

But the tolerance achieved by monists is different from that of pluralists towards other pluralists. A monist tolerates views he regards as mistaken, hoping that one day they will be discarded in favour of the truth. A pluralist tolerates attitudes to life whose validity he recognises to be as great as that of his own approach. One might call the latter 'radical tolerance', since it calls on deeper reserves of flexibility, and does not see itself as ideally temporary.

It is because the tolerance of monists is at best provisional that the expectation of future peace between unreconstructed monisms is unrealistic. Despite this, the conflicts caused by monism are usually blamed not on mutually antagonistic beliefs, but on the way in which this

antagonism is managed. Rival traditions are urged to agree to differ, to respect the convictions of others, just as they expect others to respect their own; not to seek to impose their own beliefs on everyone else.

Those who think such injunctions the only proper response to ideological conflict have not grasped its deeper cause. Acquiescence in the face of excessive claims to exclusive certainty needs to be challenged. This is not a plea for active intolerance of those who make such claims: tolerance is due to all whose views differ from one's own, subject to the usual proviso that tolerance should be withheld from intolerance. But the tolerance extended by the pluralist to the monist is not 'radical'. Just as the monist hopes that the pluralist will eventually embrace the unique truth, the pluralist looks for the abandonment by the monist of his overweening certainty. It is not consistent for a pluralist to acknowledge, as unproblematic contributions to the diversity of human value-systems, ineradicably non-pluralist approaches to life.

However tolerant pluralists may be in practice, they can give no *intellectual* quarter to monist creeds, especially those which maintain that they can co-exist frictionlessly either with pluralism or, more implausibly, with rival monisms. If pluralism is true, all monisms are false, and it is dishonest to pretend otherwise. This may seem an obvious point, but it is often strangely overlooked. The pluralist is bound to look forward to a time when monism seems just as strange as the belief in the propriety of slavery or in the divine right of kings.

Why does this matter? Because the potential perniciousness of those who believe they have the only answer is encouraged by pretence that they pose no special threat, or by failure to acknowledge the damage they already do. Religious monism in particular plays a role in several contemporary political conflicts – Northern Ireland and the al-Qaeda campaign are two obvious examples. Yet the media rarely if ever blame religious traditions for claiming that they enjoy privileged access to transcendent truth: almost any other factor is held responsible sooner than this one. Do politicians and journalists really believe there is nothing intrinsically antagonistic or destabilising in such belief-systems?

Whether we are concerned with Christianity, Islam, Judaism or any other religion or quasi-religion which takes monist or fundamentalist forms, anyone convinced of the truth of pluralism must in consistency hold that, since such creeds cannot accommodate themselves to pluralism without a denial of their essential natures, they cannot be full participants in the pluralist enterprise of radically tolerant co-existence. The major world religions each claim to offer a uniquely true vision of man's proper relationship to 'God': indeed, this is a central purpose of the whole religious exercise, however misguided. Attempts by some members of these faiths to portray themselves and their rivals as somehow jointly embarked on the same venture are somewhat ludicrous: a reconciliation of this kind can be achieved only by abandoning too may central tenets.

Fundamentalism is today one of the major threats to world stability. So it is worth cautioning against a condition that can develop in that direction. Religious monism is to fundamentalism what being HIV-positive is to AIDS: some do not succumb to the full-blown condition, but there is always the danger. Believing that your truth is the only truth can be the first step – especially if 'salvation' is held to be dependent on its acceptance – on the path to believing that you must impose it on others, by means however barbarous, because nothing can be more important than spreading the truth.

No one supposes that English country vicars are going to become terrorists enforcing world Christianity, but they are the more acceptable face of the kind of enterprise that in other contexts abets political violence and hatred. Islamic fundamentalism may show as much about the state of some Moslem societies as about the intrinsic properties of Islam, but the religious contribution is real and regrettable. Benign or otherwise, monism is the enemy of pluralism and its fruits – in other words, if pluralism is true, the enemy of a truthful way of life.

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