

# Pluralism and Radical Tolerance

Henry Hardy

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

Jesus of Nazareth

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**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

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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 many 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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