Value Pluralism and Monotheism

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Abstract: How far can monotheism be reconciled with the pluralism characteristic of modern societies? In this article, I focus on the "value pluralism" of Isaiah Berlin, which I suggest captures a deeper level of plurality than Rawls's more familiar version of pluralism. However, some critics have objected that Berlinian pluralism is too controversial an idea in which to ground liberalism because it is profoundly at odds with the monotheism professed by so many citizens of a modern society. I argue that monotheists can be value pluralists as long as they do not insist that their faith is superior to all others. This pluralist position is exemplified by elements of the interfaith movement, according to which many religions are recognized as having roughly equal value. I also argue that a value-pluralist approach to religious accommodation, if it can be achieved, may be more stable than the uneasy combination of disapproval and restraint involved in the more orthodox solution to conflict among religions, toleration.

INTRODUCTION

As I write, Israel is bombarding Gaza and Hamas rockets are falling on Israeli cities. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has complex sources that cannot be reduced wholly to differences of religion, but few would doubt that religion plays an important part in it. The monotheism of the religions in question may appear to be part of the problem. Indeed, the Abrahamic monotheisms — including Christianity along with Judaism and Islam — seem often to contribute to violent conflicts all around the world. One might be forgiven for wondering whether there is any prospect of reconciling these beliefs with the modern ideal

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of pluralism, at its most general the notion of multiple ways of life coexisting.

In this article, I examine the relation between monotheist religion and the particular species of pluralism, "value pluralism," associated with the name of Isaiah Berlin. I focus on pluralism in this sense, in contrast with the more familiar model presented by John Rawls, because, as I shall argue, it is Berlin's idea that is philosophically deeper. Indeed, Rawls's position depends upon it in part. Berlin's view is not just that in modern societies we happen to disagree about fundamental questions of the good, including religious ideals, but that such disagreements are almost guaranteed by the deep structure of human values, which are irreducibly plural and incommensurable.

I begin by briefly outlining the basics of Berlin's idea, distinguishing it from Rawls's and briefly indicating its interest and importance. The two succeeding sections examine the relation between Berlinian pluralism and monotheist religion by reviewing the debate on this question between Henry Hardy and William Galston. Hardy, writing from a pluralist and militantly secular point of view, claims that pluralism and monotheism are incompatible, and consequently that pluralists ought to reject monotheism as false and dangerous. Galston, another pluralist but more sympathetic to religious believers, denies that pluralism and monotheism are necessarily at odds, because existing monotheisms are in practice internally pluralistic. My response is that while both of these views make important points, neither is entirely satisfactory. Against Hardy, I argue that monotheism is not necessarily intolerant. In response to Galston, I suggest that no monotheist doctrine is capacious enough to count as genuinely pluralist in its content.

However, I also suggest that there may be a way in which monotheism is compatible with pluralism — less as a matter of doctrine than of the way a doctrine is held. It is possible to be a monotheist without insisting that one's monotheism is superior to all others. This position is exemplified by the interfaith movement according to which many religions are recognized as having legitimacy and value. Some forms of interfaith are less likely than others to fit the pluralist bill — in particular the more conservative kinds where one's own faith is conceived as capable of learning from others yet still superior to them overall. But the more egalitarian forms of interfaith that accept most religions as having complementary strengths and weaknesses are closer to the mark. In particular, I draw attention to that form of interfaith that sees different religions as not only equal in status but also deeply distinct in character and ethical thrust — not just different paths up the same mountain but expeditions to different mountains

altogether. In that stream of interfaith, I shall argue, monotheism can indeed be combined with a value-pluralist sensibility.

In the final section, I consider some possible objections to my argument. I resist the idea that the possibility of pluralist monotheism lets in the notion that pluralism is compatible with non-liberal politics. I also suggest that value pluralism, although embraced by few monotheists at present, is no more demanding on them than toleration and, if it can be achieved, a more reliable basis for religious accommodation.

BERLIN'S VALUE PLURALISM

It is a commonplace of contemporary political theory that any legitimate political settlement must accommodate pluralism. In its best-known form this is John Rawls's "fact of reasonable pluralism": modern societies are characterized by widespread and enduring disagreement about how people should live their lives best (Rawls 1993). Disagreement about the content of the good life, including religious conceptions of the good, is enduring because it is reasonable: no single account of the good life can be rationally demonstrated to be superior to its rivals. The Rawlsian response is to accept such disagreement as permanent but to prevent it from becoming damaging by containing it within a framework of liberal rules that reasonable citizens can agree to, at least for political purposes.

An alternative account of moral pluralism is presented by Isaiah Berlin. For Berlin, moral pluralism is a matter not merely of the historical divergence of beliefs in the wake of the Reformation but of the nature of human values. Berlin's is thus the philosophically deeper position. While Rawls appears (at least at first sight) to rest content with the evident fact of modern disagreement about the good, Berlin attempts to explain that fact, penetrating to the nature of the human values that underlie it. Fundamental human goods — such as liberty, equality, justice, loyalty — are irreducibly multiple and incommensurable.[1] Each possesses its own unique "voice"; none is intrinsically more important than another. Consequently, there is no common scale on which such values can be decisively ranked in the abstract, or for all cases. So, for example, a conception of the good that ranks justice above loyalty in general is, prima facie, no more authoritative than a conception that takes the opposite view.[2]

The political implications of value pluralism are widely disputed, but on one influential view they are thought to be broadly liberal. There is, on this

view, a multiplicity of legitimate conceptions of the good — that is, many such conceptions will be no less legitimate than their rivals. These will include religious as well as secular conceptions, since from a value-pluralist perspective a given religion represents one particular ranking of values, at best one legitimate conception of the good, among others. As a crude approximation, Judaism might be thought to emphasize the authority of Mosaic law, Christianity to privilege a certain conception of universal love, and Islam to stress a combination of submission and struggle. These value rankings all appear, on this pluralist view, to be legitimate alternatives, each no less reasonable than the others. To this reasonable disagreement a widespread response among value-pluralist writers is, somewhat like Rawls's, an argument for accommodation of diverse conceptions of the good within a liberal framework.[3]

One problem for this liberal interpretation of Berlinian pluralism, some writers object, is that its premises are at odds with some of the conceptions of the good it is trying to accommodate. Thus, Charles Larmore has argued that, compared with the Rawlsian fact of reasonable pluralism, the intrinsic pluralism of Berlin is more controversial, hence less likely to be acceptable to the heterogeneous public of a modern society (Larmore 1996). That public will typically include monotheists — Jews, Muslims, and Christians, for example — who might be willing to accept the more empirical Rawlsian case but who would bridle at the Berlinian claim that the very structure of value is pluralistic. To put it crudely, if there is one God, then there will be one law — that is, only one true way of ordering goods. Consequently, the argument goes, monotheists cannot accept Berlinian pluralism. If that is true then Berlinian pluralism cannot be the basis for a modern political society.

If there were such a conflict between monotheism and Berlinian pluralism, why would it matter? For political purposes, could we not simply fall back on the Rawlsian version of pluralism that apparently avoids the philosophical controversy attracted by Berlin? I say "apparently" because there is reason to believe that the Rawlsian approach does not entirely avoid that controversy. Rawls's account begins not just with the bare "fact" of disagreement about the good but with the judgment that much of that disagreement is "reasonable" — it cannot be resolved rationally. A salient reason for this is that "often there are different kinds of normative considerations of different force on both sides of an issue and it is difficult to make an overall assessment" (Rawls 1993, 57). This is basically a formulation of value pluralism. In other words, the Rawlsian notion of reasonable disagreement is partly dependent on the Berlinian idea. Indeed,

Rawls immediately goes on to refer explicitly to Berlin in connection with the associated idea that "any system of institutions is limited in the values it can admit so that some selection must be made from the full range of moral and political values that might be realised." It may not be so easy to account for the permanence of moral disagreement without referring to Berlinian value pluralism at some point.

Independently of the political implications, the possibility of conflict between value pluralism and monotheism matters because each of these outlooks is attractive to many people. If value pluralists cannot accommodate monotheism in any form, then they may appear to lack an understanding of values and concerns that are central to the lives of millions of people. On the other hand, there is good reason to believe that value pluralism is a true description of the nature of human values. I know of no argument that can demonstrate the truth of value pluralism to the satisfaction of all comers. Nevertheless, Berlin is persuasive to many people when he writes, "The world we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realisation of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others" (Berlin 2002, 213–214). Value pluralism is a cogent idea that should be taken seriously. Since monotheism is also a powerful view, it is worth asking how the two relate to one another. In order to pursue this question, I turn now to the debate between Hardy and Galston.

PLURALISM VS. MONOTHEISM?

Henry Hardy is best known as Isaiah Berlin's editor and literary executor, but he is also a strong proponent of value pluralism in his own right. He believes that pluralists cannot consistently support or accommodate monist views, which include the claims of monotheists. For Hardy, pluralism commits us to the view that "ultimate values are incomparably distinct and incommensurable," from which it follows "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" (Hardy 2007, 285). Under pluralism, "there may be more than one 'correct' decision, more than one way forward, more than one way of living life." Monists, by contrast, hold that there is just one right or best way to live. Monotheists are religious monists who align this notion of a universally superior and obligatory way of life with a particular

conception of God and of the relation between God and humanity. Hardy sums up this view with a quote from Stuart Hampshire: "Obviously, if only one God, only one morality — His law and the falsity of moral pluralism therefore" (Hardy 2007, 280, note 4).

Given this contrast, Hardy argues that pluralists must regard monotheism as both false and dangerous. It is false because it denies the deep plurality of values. Monotheists claim to be in possession of "a uniquely true vision of God and man's proper relation to him," which implies a detailed blueprint setting out how all human beings ought to live (Hardy 2007, 290). Such a blueprint involves a general ranking of basic values. For pluralists, each of these can be no more than one legitimate value ranking among others. To insist that only one of them is universally obligatory or optimal is narrow-minded, arrogant, and mistaken.

This is not to say that any such ranking at all is legitimate. Most pluralists place limits on the range of legitimate rankings, usually appealing, for example, to some notion of a "minimal universal morality" that any such ranking must satisfy — Hardy refers to "the basic ground-rules of interpersonal behaviour" (Hardy 2007, 286). But subject to those limits, which are typically capacious, a wide multiplicity of value rankings, and consequently ways of life, is generally regarded by pluralists as valid and acceptable. So, a view that narrows this range to a single, universally privileged outlook appears to be one that pluralists would have to reject. Monotheism appears to be such a view.

Moreover, Hardy argues, monotheism is not only erroneous but also dangerous. In part, the evidence for this is simply the historical record: "Wars have been fought over differing conceptions of the truth about man's relation to a (supposed) deity" (Hardy 2007, 287). Further, there is no good reason to suppose that such wars will not continue in the future, as long as people hold the kind of monistic beliefs that provoke them.

To this it might be replied that such links are merely contingent rather than conceptual. History has given us, and continues to give us, intolerant Christians and fanatical Muslims, but also tolerant Christians and moderate Muslims. The historical and contemporary connections between different versions of these faiths and intolerance seem to depend on two main variables: first, the precise content of the version in question, which may emphasize tolerance or its opposite; second, the manner in which the faith is expressed by particular adherents, which may be fanatical or moderate. So, monotheism is not dangerous in itself; it depends on what kind of monotheism we are dealing with and the way it is promoted.

Hardy sees this point but produces two arguments to the effect that there is something about the very concept of religious monism that tends to push people in the direction of intolerance. First, there is what could be called the "high stakes" argument. Monotheism, in Hardy's view, is characterized by a "conviction of its rectitude about ultimate matters, especially our fate in the eternal hereafter. If you know how to save people's souls, what may you not do to achieve this outcome?" (Hardy 2007, 281).

A critic might point out that monotheism is not alone in this: high-stakes logic seems just as great a danger in non-religious, political forms of monism. Hardy himself acknowledges that wars have been fought "over rival views of the best political order for mankind" (Hardy 2007, 287). The Soviet Communists, for example, were completely convinced of the rectitude of their version of the political hereafter, and consequently of their moral authority to do whatever it might take to achieve that outcome. Indeed, it was this secular form of monism, rather than the religious kind, that was the greater concern for Berlin. But that reply would not deflect Hardy's argument, since he has to show only that monotheism is inherently dangerous in this way, not that it is uniquely so. It is true that political utopians also play for high stakes, but that does not alter the fact that monotheists do too. Whether the goals in question are religious or political, there is a danger that major sacrifices will be made in order to achieve them.

Hardy's second argument for a conceptual link between monotheism and intolerance goes back to the basic point that monotheism appears to involve a commitment to a single "true" way of life that for a pluralist can be only one among many. Given the natural variation of human experience and preferences, we should expect a corresponding variation in the way people in fact rank their values. It follows that we should not expect people to agree on anything but the most general or "thin" frameworks for how they ought to live; more specific or "thick" visions will inevitably be subject to reasonable disagreement. "Religions are more likely to be objectionable," Hardy writes, "to the extent that their monist commitments are thicker" (Hardy 2007, 282). If someone nevertheless insists that her particular religious vision is right and that others must conform (no doubt for their own good), then she is likely either to be disappointed or to have to use force to get what she wants.

This alignment of thicker religious conceptions with more monist understandings of the good seems correct. The more thickly described way of life is likely to leave less room for alternative paths, hence less space for variation of value rankings according to circumstances. A defender

of religious belief might argue that some religions involve a thicker list of commitments than others. Still, Hardy's "instinct is to say that religious belief has a permanent inbuilt tendency to sponsor thick certitude beyond its proper boundaries," and with this a corresponding danger of intolerance (Hardy 2007, 282). Monotheistic religions tend to prescribe particular ways of life universally. But these are subject to reasonable disagreement that is likely to be overcome only by the use of force.

For Hardy, then, the proper pluralist attitude to monotheism, along with other forms of monism, must be one of opposition. This does not mean that pluralists must themselves become intolerant, in the sense of forcibly suppressing or silencing the expression of monist beliefs. Nor does it mean, however, that pluralists can regard the world's monisms as simply contributing to life's rich tapestry. Rather, pluralists must oppose monism in argument and debate, giving it "no intellectual quarter" (Hardy 2007, 289). Even the apparently more benign forms of monism should be unmasked as narrow and mistaken accounts of the human good, and as potentially pernicious. Hardy does not shy away from including in the category of monisms that must be fought in this way the monotheistic world religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

PLURALISM WITHIN MONOTHEISM?

From a pluralist point of view, Hardy presents monotheists with a case to answer. Can they answer it? William Galston attempts to do so, his goal being to show that "value pluralism is consistent after all with the principal thrust of monotheism in its most familiar forms, and with the self-understanding of many communities that orient themselves monotheistically" (Galston 2007, 262).

First, what about Hardy's charge that monotheism is dangerous because it leads, for reasons illuminated by pluralism, to intolerance? Galston's answer is, not necessarily. While this is true of some forms of monotheism, it is not true of all. Monotheism is not necessarily intolerant.

Recall that Hardy gives us two reasons to link monotheism and intolerance conceptually: the relative thickness of the good life advocated by monotheist religions, and the "high stakes" implicit in those conceptions of the good. Galston argues in effect that we can assume that both of these conditions hold for a particular form of monotheism and still find it to be tolerant of its rivals. For example, it is possible to believe that a proper relation with God (high stakes) requires the careful observance of

a detailed set of rules and rituals (a thick conception of the good), but also to regard this as binding only on the members of one's own religion, not on others — Galston gives the example of Judaism as binding only on Jews (Galston 2007, 256). Alternatively one might believe that a particular thickly described, high-stakes conception of the good is optimal or even obligatory for all human beings, but still consistently stop short of allowing that such a message may legitimately be spread by force. Quakers, for example, hold that kind of view.

The general point is that Hardy's conceptual linkage between monotheism (as such) and intolerance continues to depend on a slippery-slope argument. The connections he sets up are not logical but contingent. As Hardy puts it, they are "psychological," meaning that they depend on the psychological disposition of the particular believer rather than on the notion of belief in a single God in itself (Hardy 2007, 281). Only the monotheist who is psychologically disposed to see her faith as universally enforceable takes all the necessary steps to arrive at intolerance. That tells us more about the psychology of that individual than about the idea of monotheism. None of the necessary steps is logically, or even psychologically, required by monotheism itself. The most that could be said is that a monist outlook enables those steps to be taken more easily than they might be otherwise. This remains something of a conceptual link, but a weak one.

The second point at which Galston challenges Hardy is on the latter's claim that pluralists must regard monotheism as false. Hardy's argument was that monotheists necessarily advocate a relatively thick conception of the good as optimal for all human beings, which contradicts the pluralist view that no such conception can have that status. Here Galston asks whether monotheists must hold the view that Hardy ascribes to them. Do they necessarily advocate a thick conception of the good as optimal for all human beings?

Galston immediately gives the example of "deism" as an instance of monotheism which "is compatible with a wide range of moral views" (Galston 2007, 255). But when it comes to the great Abrahamic triumvirate of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are we not clearly dealing with claims that there is just one God, one set of laws, hence one approved, thickly describable way of life?

Again, Galston's answer is, not necessarily. The God conceived by the Abrahamic tradition is both "inexhaustibly infinite" and "substantially hidden" from human comprehension (Galston 2007, 259). Such a God is open to multiple interpretations, backed by a sense that he "transcends the limits of culture" — in line with the standard pluralist intuition that no

single culture or society can capture the full range of human values and their possible combinations. The result is that "as the Abrahamic faiths have developed over time, each has undergone a process of internal pluralization," issuing in "an endless variety of orientations." Christianity has split between Catholic and Protestant denominations, Islam between Sunni and Shia, Judaism between Orthodox and Reform, and so on. "My point," writes Galston, is that the internal plurality of the Abrahamic faiths

> recapitulates, at the level of theology, the diversity that value pluralists observe on the plane of the mundane, and also the pluralist view that no single culture or conception of the good can encompass all worthy goods and values. So, to endorse the concept of right relation to God as the highest good is to leave room for much the same variation. (Galston 2007, 259)

The internal plurality of the great monotheisms reflects the plurality of human goods. This is hardly surprising, since the interpretation of these beliefs is the work of human mediators, with their natural tendency to diverge from one another in understanding and judgment.

In short, the great monotheistic faiths are, for Galston, not internally monistic but pluralistic. "Judaism," "Christianity," and "Islam" are thin frameworks for a multitude of beliefs rather than thickly describable ways of life that strongly exclude the alternatives. While it is true that some religious traditions are genuinely monistic, "most faith communities … are not of this type" (Galston 2007, 261). Monotheism is not necessarily incompatible with pluralism; indeed, most forms of monotheism are themselves pluralistic in outlook, embracing many goods and ways of life.

Perhaps, though, Galston's argument merely reframes the problem rather than solving it. It may be true that monotheist faiths are capacious frameworks at the abstract level of "Judaism," "Christianity," and "Islam," but what about the particular denominations that these contain? These are likely to be thicker, hence more demanding, and exclusive. The often deadly rivalry between Sunni and Shia Muslims is a case in point. Moreover, Galston concedes that it is at this level of greater particularity that we are more likely to find "the lived experience of individuals encountering real-world faiths" (Galston 2007, 261). Most believers think of themselves not just as Jews or Christians or Muslims, but as particular kinds of Jew, Christian, or Muslim, with an allegiance to a more specific conception of the good.

Indeed, even at the abstract level one can ask how far these faiths can really be described as inclusive containers for plural goods and ways of life rather than comprehensive doctrines in their own right. Does Christianity, for example, stand for nothing more specific than a commitment to a "right relation with God"? There seems to be something of a dilemma here. On the one hand, Christians can emphasize the more distinctive features of their faith, but at the cost of denying value pluralism. On the other hand, they can move toward greater universality, with the consequence that the idea of Christianity may become vacuous.

Anticipating these objections, Galston replies that, while he has "no knock-down response," he can adduce some considerations "to blunt their force" (Galston 2007, 261). First, he questions whether "the familiar gross differences among traditions" may not "often amount to stereotypes." The contrast between Jewish law and Christian love, for example, is too simple, since the injunction to "love they neighbour" is part of the Torah, and Canon Law is central to Catholicism. Second, denominational plurality leads in time to coexistence, which "takes the edges off their differences and promotes awareness of underlying commonalities" (Galston 2007, 261)

These considerations, while pertinent and important, open up further issues. Their general effect is to push toward a more abstract understanding of the monotheistic faiths, eliding the traditional differences among them at the generic level in order to accommodate greater plurality at the more particular level. This move will simply reproduce the problem at the more particular level — unless the denominations in question are in turn defined relatively thinly in order to contain further plurality.

Moreover, although the move toward thinner or more abstract conceptions of monotheism may be desirable from a pluralist point of view, it will probably be less so from the perspective of traditional religious identities. Yet the accommodation of such identities was the concern that motivated Galston's argument in the first place. The lesson here may be that Galston's task is really less one of accommodation than reform; that the kind of monotheism that can be reconciled with pluralism must depart from the traditional claim to exclusive possession of the religious truth.

Short of such reform, the tension between monotheism and pluralism appears, in the light of the debate between Hardy and Galston, to remain very much in place. Hardy's charge that, from a pluralist point of view, monotheism as such is dangerous relies too much on a slippery-slope argument to be entirely persuasive. His further argument that pluralists cannot accept what seems to be the monotheist prescription of

a single good life for all human beings is more powerful, but needs to be supplemented by greater attention to the nuances of what exactly the different genera and species of monotheism stand for — in particular, how thick or thin are their claims. Galston provides that attention to a degree, but his argument that pluralism and most forms of monotheism are compatible goes only so far. It would take more detailed work to explain how particular monotheisms can be sufficiently inclusive for pluralism while at the same time retaining their identities. Alternatively, Galston would need to give a fuller account of the ways in which those identities would have to change in order to accommodate pluralism.

PLURALISM AMONG MONOTHEISMS

At this point the possibility of some area of reconciliation between pluralism and monotheism is still an open question. Might we make progress by turning away from the issue of the internal character (the relative thickness) of the monotheistic faiths and toward the "external" relations among them? That is, even if the internal content of any monotheism is always monistic to a degree, might that problem be overridden or outflanked by paying attention to the way that view is held? My religion may demand a certain, specific way of life, but it is conceivable that, while I see this as valuable and as the way of life to which I myself am committed, I am also willing to allow that other religions are also valuable, perhaps equally so. In such a case, it is arguable that my value ranking is not absolute and is thus compatible with pluralism. Even if value pluralism cannot be sufficiently respected *within* monotheisms, as Galston hopes, it may still be acknowledged in relations *among* monotheisms.

   Note that it is not enough for such a view simply to hold that one's own monotheism is not binding on others. Galston, it is recalled, gives the example of Judaism as a form of monotheism that is tolerant because it does not demand, or even encourage, adherence by non-Jews. But although this may be enough for toleration, it is not sufficient for pluralism. Pluralism requires not merely that we leave others to their beliefs but that we acknowledge the genuine value that may be present in their way of life. Simply to leave non-believers alone is consistent with holding that one's own conception of the religious good is absolutely superior to the alternatives, which have no value whatever. That remains a strongly monist position, although a tolerant one.

Are there any forms of monotheism that might better fit the pluralist bill? A likely place to look, I suggest, is the contemporary "interfaith" movement.[4] The basic idea of interfaith has developed in opposition to traditional religious "absolutism" or "exclusivism," according to which one particular religion (usually one's own) has a monopoly of truth and holiness. According to the exclusivist approach, other faiths are benighted and possibly the work of the Devil. Along with this usually goes a strong sense of "mission," or a right and duty to convey the truth to those lacking it, thus saving or enlightening them.

The interfaith movement rejects this exclusivism and asserts that many religions have at least some share of the truth and some degree of valuable spirituality. No one religion has an absolute monopoly of these. Consequently, a common feature of interfaith is the belief that different religions may have something to learn from one another. The practical result is a shared commitment to "dialogue" among religions.

Within the broad tent of interfaith there are several different versions. The most conservative of these holds that although many religions have *some* share of truth and value, it is still the case that *one* religion (one's own) has more truth and value than the others. Along these lines a Christian, for example, should listen to people of other faiths and learn from them where appropriate, but that is consistent with maintaining the overall superiority of Christianity, and thus with continuing its missionary role (see, e.g., Anderson and Brunner in Cohn-Sherbok 2001, 30–31, 49–50).

An alternative version of interfaith is more egalitarian and radical. On this view, many religions not only have some share of the truth, they are all more or less equal in the claims they can make in this regard. No one religion (or group of religions) can claim overall superiority. As a result, one no longer places one's own faith at the center of the religious world; rather, the center becomes a more generic sense of "the Divine, the Transcendent, the Ultimate, the Real," of which one's own religion is one partial reflection among others (Hick in Cohn-Sherbok 2001, 108).

Again, this egalitarian camp subdivides further. In perhaps the strongest or most radical version, each religion is seen as one particular "face" of a single ultimate reality. The idea is found in Hinduism, as explained by Huston Smith: "It is possible to climb life's mountain from any side, but when the top is reached the trails converge" (Smith 1991, 73). Of course, "in the foothills of theology, ritual, and organisational structure, the religions are distinct. Differences in culture, history, geography, and collective temperament all make for diverse starting points … But beyond those differences, the same goal beckons."

A variant of this holds that although there is a single mountain and the different paths "intersect" and "complement" one another, the paths remain distinct in practical terms because the top is never reached: "the divine Reality they all pursue is in the end unattainable by these faith quests. As the infinite, it is unknowable and incomprehensible" (Cohn-Sherbok 2001, 62).

Finally, there is a view that sees the world's religions as equal but distinct, not only in practice but also in principle. "They are on very different mountains, climbing very different peaks, and using very different tools and techniques in their ascents" (Prothero 2010, 12). On this view there is no single essence of religion; rather, each religion offers a unique response to a distinct set of questions.

Which of these views is the most responsive to value pluralism? The most problematic in this regard is clearly the conservative or hierarchical version of interfaith, since this is closest to exclusivism. A general difficulty with this position is well expressed by Dan Cohn-Sherbok, who sees it as caught in a contradiction. On the one hand, conservative interfaith insists that all religions have some share of the truth, implying (in theistic terms) that God is concerned for the well-being of all peoples. Yet on the other hand, "if God is truly concerned with the fate of all humanity, he would not have disclosed himself fully and finally to a particular people allowing the rest to wallow in darkness and ignorance" (Cohn-Sherbok 2001, 61). The same reasoning would seem to apply to any form of interfaith that holds some faiths to be superior to others.

A more specifically value-pluralist approach leads to a similar skepticism toward conservative interfaith, although with qualifications. If there is no single ranking of basic human values that applies absolutely, then so far as each religion represents a general ranking of intrinsic values any such ranking will, prima facie, be no more than one possibility among others. Several, perhaps many, such rankings will be permissible and legitimate, and each will have its strengths and weaknesses. So, for example, "if you want to help the homeless, you will likely find the Christian Social Gospel more useful than Hindu notions of caste. If you want to find techniques for quieting the mind through bodily exercises, you will likely find Hindu yogis more useful than Christian saints" (Prothero 2010, 20).

Is it possible to argue that, in these pluralist terms, one religion is nevertheless superior to its rivals overall? This is possible in principle but unlikely in practice. In principle, it could be that one belief system does better than all others across so many dimensions that it would be fair to

say that it respects and promotes a greater range of values, or a better balance of values, than all those alternatives. Clearly, however, someone who wanted to make such a case would have a lot of work to do, reviewing a myriad of considerations and recognizing the possibility that generic human goods can be variously interpreted in different cultural contexts. In particular, it would be hard to take account of all the trade-offs involved, both within and among religions, where one value is emphasized at the expense of another. To take the example above, where precisely does the balance lie within Hinduism between helping others and care for the self, and how should we evaluate that balance in relation to the alternative proposed by Christianity?

Such considerations would seem to push value pluralists away from the more conservative and toward the more egalitarian versions of interfaith. On this general view, many faiths are valuable, and all of these have their strengths and weaknesses in terms of the various values they promote or neglect. No single position is superior overall: all valuable faiths are likely to have a more or less equal share of the truth — or if they do not, that would have to be shown in the particular case.

The question now is, which egalitarian model fits better with the pluralist outlook: that which sees the religions as different paths up the same mountain or that which identifies them with different mountains altogether? Just formulating the question in this way invites the answer.

The more unitary or "syncretic" form of egalitarian interfaith pictures world religion as possessing an essential unity, of which particular religions are partial or imperfect reflections. This kind of view draws on a considerable literature that includes the popular works of Huston Smith, Joseph Campbell, and Aldous Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy* (Campbell 1949; Huxley 1946; Smith 1991). But as Stephen Prothero argues, "this perennialism may seem to be quite pluralistic, but only at first glance" (Prothero 2010, 6). The motivation behind religious syncretism is typically a laudable desire to get beyond the disastrous conflicts that have marred religion's history. Syncretism tries to do this by rejecting the missionary mentality that fits so well with traditional exclusivism and that survives in the conservative forms of interfaith. How better to achieve this progress than by asserting the essential unity of all religion?

However well-meaning these sentiments may be, Prothero argues that they nevertheless amount to a kind of "wishful thinking" that is not only false but also dangerous and disrespectful (Prothero 2010, 3). The truth is that, as he succinctly puts it, "God is not one." The world religions do share some very general starting points. All address "the human

condition," broadly conceived (Prothero 2010, 24). All can be analyzed as possessing a common basic structure that includes the articulation of a problem, a solution, a technique by which the solution is achieved, and an exemplar (or exemplars) of that technique in action (Prothero 2010, 14). But beyond these bare categories divergence takes over. Christians and Buddhists give very different accounts of the problem, solution, and so forth. While for Christians the problem is sin and the solution salvation through faith and works as exemplified by Christ, for Buddhists the problem is suffering and the solution is nirvana, which is to be reached by way of classic techniques such as meditation and chanting as exemplified by the Buddha.

On this view religions do not possess any single essence but are related more by a kind of "family resemblance," with some features repeated among some members of the family but not others (Prothero 2010, 12–13). Even the concept of "God," for instance, is not a constant, since it is rejected by Buddhists. Another image Prothero employs is that of sports. No one would sensibly criticize basketball players for failing to score runs as baseball players do. Games do not all have one essential object — beyond, perhaps, winning, but even that is interpreted in some many different ways that it is almost an empty set.

This suggests perhaps the most fundamental point of divergence among the religions: they do not even ask the same questions. As Prothero writes, "Only religions that see God as all good ask how a good God can allow millions to die in tsunamis. Only religions that believe in souls ask whether your soul exists before you are born and what happens to it after you die" (Prothero 2010, 24). In pluralist terms what this implies is that different religions address different sets of values. They emphasize different considerations as the most pressing or profound. In other words, they propose different general rankings of human goods.

Such a view seems fully in keeping with a value-pluralist outlook. It rejects the monist belief that there is a single correct ranking of values that applies absolutely. Rather, it accepts that any particular religious affiliation, including one's own, represents at best only one possible value-ranking among others, claiming no more than roughly equal status with that of alternative faiths. At the same time it asserts itself as distinct from them, bearing its own unique character and ethical force. To align oneself with a single faith is to commit oneself to prioritizing one set of values or concerns over others, yet that need not blind one to the merits of other ways of seeing things. Significantly, Prothero chooses as the epigraph for his book a line from Isaiah Berlin: "Human goals are many, not

all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another" (Berlin 2002, 216). Pluralist and religious sensibilities are not necessarily at odds.

EXCLUSIVISM AND TOLERATION

It might be objected that I have not shown anything very surprising or consequential. That value pluralism can be embraced by those at the more radical end of the interfaith movement may seem a less than startling conclusion. The proposition might be broadened a little to include in the pluralist tent not just explicit followers of egalitarian interfaith but also any monotheist who repudiates exclusivism — that is, who does not insist on the truth and value of her faith to the complete exclusion of others. Still, it has to be conceded that the vast majority of current monotheists are exclusivists. Those non-exclusivist monotheists who overlap with value pluralists are a tiny minority as things now stand.

However, I believe that my argument, even if it does not reconcile pluralists and monotheists in larger numbers, raises interesting questions in at least two respects. First, might the argument tell us something useful about the range of *political* positions that are consistent with pluralism? Indeed, could it be that the argument undermines the supposed link between value pluralism and liberalism? If it is possible for a monotheist to be a pluralist by taking a non-exclusive stance, then might it not be possible for a political authoritarian or traditionalist — whether religious or secular — to take the same kind of view? Perhaps value pluralism, rather than tied to liberalism, is compatible with non-liberal politics too. This possibility has been defended by John Gray, who argues that pluralism and authoritarianism are consistent in the case of societies that are "particularist" rather than universalist in their claims: "Authoritarian regimes sustained by Hindu, Shinto or Orthodox Jewish doctrine, or which seek simply to preserve a local way of life, make none of the universal claims that value-pluralism subverts" (Gray 1995, 151).

Gray's argument is conceptually interesting but unrealistic. While it is conceivable that political authoritarians and traditionalists might hold their views in a non-exclusive way in relation to the beliefs of other societies, few of them have in fact done so. Typically, such regimes make universal, not merely particularist claims for the way of life they uphold, even if they do not always try to enforce that way of life abroad. As noted earlier, merely refraining from imposing one's way of life on other

societies is consistent with believing in its absolute superiority. A clear example is imperial China. I believe the cases mentioned by Gray fall into the same category, although I do not have space to show that here.[5]

Moreover, even if we accepted the dubious claim that non-enforcement of one's beliefs abroad demonstrates a non-exclusive attitude, what about the authoritarian society's treatment of its own people? Gray makes it seem as though such societies speak with one voice, gamely defending their uniformly preferred way of life *contra mundum*. More realistically, they always contain individuals and groups who do not accept the dominant line but whose voices are suppressed, often violently. What kind of pluralism is that? If we ought to accept that basic values are plural and incommensurable, and consequently that people may reasonably disagree (within some broad limits) about how to combine and rank those values, then that imperative ought to apply within societies as well as among them. In that case, value pluralism directs us towards domestic political accommodation rather than authoritarianism.

A second question raised by my argument concerns the relation between value pluralism and toleration. The basic opposition between value pluralism and religious exclusivism suggests that, from the pluralist perspective, toleration, the more familiar principle for regulating competing religions within liberal democracies, is not enough. As noted already, toleration is compatible with exclusivism. One can believe that religions that rival one's own are worthless but still tolerate them — refrain from interfering with them. One might do this for various reasons — for example, because the costs of intervention are too great or the balance of power is unfavorable to one's cause at present. The value-pluralist view asks us not merely to leave other religions alone but also to recognize at least some of them as having positive value, as making a genuine contribution to human well-being. To say this is not to deny that religious toleration, where it exists, is an admirable and even exceptional achievement. Nor does it require the value pluralist to believe that every religion is valuable, or that valuable religions are equally valuable in every respect. On the pluralist view, all valuable religions are likely to have strengths and weaknesses in terms of fundamental human goods promoted or forgone. It does mean that pluralism takes us beyond mere non-interference to positive affirmation where affirmation is due.[6]

Of course, the position just described is a demanding one. Is it too demanding? We have to return to the reality, noted above, that although a non-exclusive, pluralist monotheism is a real possibility (shown to be real by interfaith), few monotheists currently embrace that possibility.

Why should we not take the view that pluralism is simply too demanding to ground liberal democracy at present?

Another way of putting this question is: why is toleration not enough? Here are two responses. First, toleration is demanding too. Obviously there is the practical difficulty of building toleration in situations of mutual hostility — which are, in fact, the only situations where toleration is called for. Bernard Williams has argued that toleration seems to have a paradoxical quality such that it may appear "impossible" (Williams 1996, 18). Toleration is not required when we are merely skeptical of, or indifferent to, the beliefs and practices of other people. In the sphere of religion, toleration is typically called for when we regard the beliefs and practices of others as "blasphemously, disastrously, obscenely wrong," and when we believe that others need consequently to be "helped toward the truth." Yet these are the very circumstances when toleration "may well seem impossible."

Williams does not argue that toleration is strictly self-contradictory, because it may be that the good that we wish to pursue, but restrain ourselves from pursuing in the lives of other people, is overridden by some other good. The leading candidate for such an overriding good in liberal thought is the individual autonomy of those people we might be inclined to interfere with. The trouble with this move is that it depends on the acceptance of a particular, liberal conception of the good; consequently, it is hard to recommend toleration on these lines to non-liberals. "The people whom the liberal is especially required to tolerate are precisely those who are unlikely to share the liberal's view of the good of autonomy, which is the basis of the toleration, to the extent that this expresses a value" (Williams 1996, 25). Toleration appears to be no less demanding a basis for liberal democracy than pluralism.

Second, toleration, even if achieved, is fragile — arguably more fragile and less reliable than pluralism. This is most obvious when the practice of toleration is based on a balance of power, which of course may change. But any form of toleration presents a problem in this way. The point is well made by George P. Fletcher, who begins by highlighting, much like Williams, the tension in the concept of toleration between the "impulse to intervene and regulate the lives of others" and "the imperative … to restrain that impulse" (Fletcher 1996, 158). As Fletcher puts it, with deliberate ambiguity, toleration involves one party "suffering" the conduct of another (Fletcher 1996, 159). On neither side is this wholly satisfying: "those who suffer understandably prefer an easier way," and those who are suffered would rather their beliefs were affirmed or respected. Consequently,

toleration can very easily turn into either acceptance or intolerance. "Toleration is unstable, because no one wishes either to tolerate when intervention is possible or to be tolerated when there is an option for something better."

The "something better" is pluralism, the positive affirmation of value in multiple alternative ways of life or conceptions of the good. Pluralism is arguably more stable than toleration because, once achieved, it is more reliable. It depends on relatively straightforward (although not necessarily unqualified) endorsements of the good in others' ways of life rather than the complicated and delicate balance between disapproval and restraint required by toleration.

But can religious pluralism be achieved, at any rate on a scale sufficient to change current patterns of hostility and violence? Some scholars would regard a rapprochement between pluralism and monotheism as a conceptual impossibility. On one view, the Abrahamic monotheisms are informed by a "discursive structure" in which exclusivism and agonism toward the other is inherent (Jaffee 2001; Erlewine 2010). On this view all such monotheisms are constituted by the idea that a particular community has been entrusted by God, through revelation, with a world-historical mission that excludes the claims (similar in structure) of its rivals. If that is so, then to ask the followers of these religions to become pluralists is to ask them to abandon their faith and become different people, or to transform the religion into something it is not.

But must the Abrahamic monotheisms maintain this rigid structure? One of the defenders of the model has conceded that it is "ahistorical and essentialist" (Erlewine 2010, 10).[7] Surely, it is possible that the monotheisms in question will evolve into different forms from those that are typical at present. Once again, the emergence of the interfaith movement is evidence of that very possibility.

Proponents of a pluralist approach might also gain support from the historical record. As David Cannadine has pointed out, there is an important distinction to be made between the religious doctrines upheld by elites and the lived experience of ordinary individuals and groups who are supposedly committed to one doctrine or another. Even at the height of the European wars of religion, "most ordinary people, left to their own devices and decisions, were eager to continue living with their neighbours, whatever their unresolved religious differences" (Cannadine 2013, 45–46). It might be objected that this was mere indifference rather than positive endorsement, but there is evidence also of people taking that further step. Spain at the time of the Inquisition might seem to be an

unlikely context for pluralist attitudes, but even there Stuart Schwartz has uncovered a steady minority counterpoint in the views of those "who thought that all religions might have some truth" (Schwartz 2008, 11).

At the level of doctrine, too, supposed differences have often been far from clear-cut, qualified by overlaps and shared commitments crossing allegedly impervious boundaries, and complicated by fragmentation within putatively monolithic systems. Where doctrines have differed, it is not always clear that they have been in contradiction rather than talking past one another, expressing revelations addressed to different groups for different purposes (Margalit 1996, 153). Recall Prothero's idea that we may be dealing not just with different paths but with different mountains. In general, encounters between monotheistic groups have been, as Cannadine puts it, "more complex, nuanced and open-ended" than they are in the Manichean pictures so often painted (Cannadine 2013, 23).

While it cannot be denied that monotheistic groups have often viewed one another exclusively and confronted each other violently in the past, and while many such groups continue to believe and act in this way at present, there is enough evidence from both logic and history to give cause for hope that these patterns need not continue endlessly into the future. Berlin's notion of value pluralism helps us to see how that can be so.

NOTES

1. Berlin's main observations on value pluralism are contained in Berlin 1990; 2000; 2002. For other accounts of value pluralism see Chang 1997; Crowder 2002; Galston 2002; Kekes 1993; Raz 1986; Stocker 1990.

2. I say "prima facie" because I want to leave room for the possibility that particular incommensurable values may be ranked, for good reason, within a particular context: see, e.g., Berlin 1990, 18; 2002, 47; Gray 1995, 154. Whether whole conceptions of the good can be ranked in this way is a matter I discuss later.

3. Liberal interpretations of value pluralism along these lines are found, for example, in Galston 2002; 2005; and Crowder 2002; 2004. But note that the liberalism defended by liberal pluralists tends to be "comprehensive" rather than the "political" liberalism of Rawls. Moreover, the liberal reading of value pluralism is contested by pluralists such as Kekes 1993; 1997; 1998; and Gray 1995; 2000, who argue that value pluralism entails or is consistent with conservative or other non-liberal political conclusions.

4. See, for example, Hick 1974; Küng et al. 1986; Cohn-Sherbok 1992; 2001; Coward 2000; Smock 2002; Smith 2007; Brown 2012.

5. It might be thought that my response to Gray is symmetrical with the main objection to my own argument — that is, if Gray's notion of the pluralist authoritarian is logically possible but empirically unrealistic, then the same can be said of my idea of the pluralist monotheist. The difference is that I have given, in egalitarian interfaith, an example of monotheism that I have shown to be genuinely pluralist. Gray merely asserts that his examples support his case without demonstrating how they do so. For further commentary on Gray's value pluralism see Crowder 2007.

6. Hence the close links between value pluralism and multiculturalism: Raz 1995; Crowder 2013, chps 7 and 9.

7. It also seems to be caught in the contradiction noted by Cohn-Sherbrok earlier: why would a universal mission be revealed to one people only?

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