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Two Concepts of Pluralism:
A Comparative Study of Mahatma Gandhi
and Isaiah Berlin

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Two Concepts of Pluralism: A Comparative Study of Mahatma Gandhi and Isaiah Berlin*

When the definitive history of democratic thought in the 20th century is written, both Mohandas K. Gandhi and Isaiah Berlin will take their places as the two most distinguished theorists of the pluralist tradition. As history goes, Gandhi and Sir Isaiah never met and the latter never wrote any piece on the former. However, Isaiah Berlin visited India in 1961 and met with Jawaharlal Nehru, but he never considered seriously the views of Gandhi as an anticolonial leader. In his talk delivered in New Delhi on 13 November 1961 on 'Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality', Berlin presents himself as a person who is 'shamefully ignorant of Indian civilization, even of what is most valuable and most important in it' (Berlin, 1996: 249). In this relatively forgotten essay on Tagore's thoughts on nationalism, Isaiah Berlin mentions Gandhi only once when he argues that:

There are other paths to power, but Tagore rejects them: Nietzschean amorality and violence are self-defeating, for these breed counter-violence. On this he agreed with Mahatma Gandhi and Tolstoy; but he did not accept Tolstoy's angry simplifications, his self-isolating, anarchist attitude, nor the Mahatma's essentially (on this I am subject to correction) unpolitical, unsecular ends (ibid.: 263).

One might be tempted to describe Berlin's reading of Gandhi as an 'unpolitical' and 'unsecular' historical figure by saying that it is a big mistake. But this would

*Lecture delivered by Ramin Jahanbegloo at the India International Centre on December 15, 2014.

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not account for the 'greatness' that Berlin sees in Gandhi, a view that is developed in the lengthy conversations that I had with him. Nevertheless, one can argue that despite many evident points of difference between Gandhi and Berlin, there are many remarkable similarities between the two and especially with regard to the concept of 'pluralism'. Gandhi and Berlin could be considered to be the most influential protagonists of modern pluralism. However, though the two thinkers share pluralism as a meta-political goal, they have different views about the function of pluralism in politics.

While Isaiah Berlin considered himself principally as a value pluralist, Mahatma Gandhi was described by some as an 'integral pluralist'. Unlike many liberals, Berlin wrestled all through his intellectual life with the tension between pluralism and monism, and also between universalism and particularism. He rejected all monistic approaches to the question of truth, but criticised as well the moral relativism inscribed in the modern tradition of thought. As for Gandhi, his astute understanding of religion, culture and politics was envisaged at each level with an argumentation against monistic views and in favour of value pluralism. Gandhi's doctrine of pluralism—that there are multiple aspects to truth and reality—is usually discussed and elaborated as an adjunct to his philosophy of non-violence. However, one could conceivably understand Gandhi's moral pluralism either as an alternative to cultural relativism which insists on the relative value of all beliefs, or simply as a way of accommodating irreconcilable values in a political setting which would require a minimum level of opportunity for choice. It is worth remarking that both Berlin and Gandhi were distrustful of absolutes in the strict sense of the word. Gandhi's profound reinterpretation of Hindu values in the light of his personal view of pluralism was to build a bridge, principally between the idea of common good and individual spiritual development. That is why Gandhi transformed the world-denying dimension of non-violence into a world-affirming and world-loving political expression. But

Gandhi's understanding of what it means to be a world-loving self is closely related to his strong commitment to truth as a moral praxis. Gandhi based his theory of pluralism on the idea of equal worth of individual conscience and the absence of absolute certainty of the truth. Gandhi considered that all conscience is equally worthy of respect and that is why one could never have such absolute certainty of one's experience of truth. In other words, pluralism was needed to afford the appropriate respect to the sanctity of conscience in others.

As such, Gandhi was a pluralist in matters of conscience, though he was not a relativist. His equal respect for all cultures and religions implied the idea of mutual learning and inter-faith dialogue. When Gandhi affirmed: 'I do not want my house to be walled on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible' (Gandhi, 1921:170), he was essentially talking about a spirit of openness in the quest for the sacred which transcends religiosity and organised form of religion. Thus, Gandhi did not privilege any one religion over another, not even Hinduism. Religion for him was a matter of soft spirituality, rather than hard rituals and hard institutions. Therefore, he proclaimed: 'For me the different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches from the same majestic tree. Therefore, they are equally true, though being received and interpreted through human instruments equally imperfect' (Gandhi, 1937).

Gandhi's pluralist attitude towards God and spirituality developed over time through his study of different religions and his friendships with individuals of faiths other than his own. Already as a young student in London, he believed that every religion can shed light on a seeker's path. Later he realised that self-centredness in religious matters as in political matters created prejudice and misunderstanding. This is the language he used in an article in *Indian Opinion* in 1907: 'If the people of different religions grasp the real significance of their own

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religion they will never hate the people of any religion other than their own...there may be many religions, but the true aim of all is the same' (Gandhi, 1958: 338). Essentially, for Gandhi, the very foundation of religion is ethics. As such, Gandhi's religious pluralism is an application of his approach to ethics. For Gandhi, the only way to find God is to serve all human beings. As he puts it:

Man's ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities, social, political, religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavour, simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can only be done by service of all (Bose, 1957: 25).

As we can see, the nuclear element of Gandhi's pluralistic thought is his idea of an ethical God, who is all-inclusive and develops love and ahimsa in every human conscience. As Gandhi explains:

God is that indefinable something which we all feel but which we do not know. To me God is Truth and Love, God is ethics and morality. God is fearlessness. God is the source of light and life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist... He is the greatest democrat the world knows, for he leaves us unfettered to make our own choice between evil and good... (Gandhi, 1925).

On this basis, we could say that Gandhi's attitude toward the fellowship of all religions is founded on their shared moral values. It means the belief in a common ethical basis that transcends all religions and harmonises them. In other words, Gandhi believed in a universal religion that included all religions and negated the spirit of divisiveness and exclusion, for these could not bring peace either inwardly or in society as a whole. This is why he affirmed: 'Temples or mosques or churches... I make no distinction between these different abodes of God. They are what faith has made them. They are an answer to man's craving somehow to reach the Unseen' (in Kripalani, 1969: 62). For Gandhi, God was not a monopoly of any religion. Already during his time in South Africa, he wrote:

'The time had passed when the followers of one religion could stand and say, "ours is the only true religion and all others are false"' (in Nanda, 1990: 13). As such, there is no trace of proselytising or dogmatism in Gandhi's proclamation of his spirituality. He truly believed in Hinduism as a religion of non-violence and regarded the *Bhagavad Gita* as the philosophical foundation of his non-violence. But his openness to other religious sources and his particular study of the *New Testament* and the *Qur'an* helped him to view Christianity and Islam as partners in his search for Truth.

However, Gandhi's commitment to pluralism was not only spiritual and metaphysical, but also social and political. His desire for economic and political inclusiveness is met in his confrontation with the structural violence implicit in power relationships.

'Possession of power makes men blind and deaf,' says Gandhi. 'They cannot see things which are under their very nose, and cannot hear things which invade their ears' (Gandhi, 1921: 87). Therefore, the entire Gandhian enterprise of politics is to apply non-violence to the Indian public sphere on the basis of the idea of transformative pluralism. As such, what Gandhi is suggesting is a social method of resolving conflicts without resentment and revenge. By doing this, he not only forces the violence into the open, but also seeks to establish civility and reciprocity as the cornerstones of political legitimacy. He constantly insists on enlarging the scope of transformative pluralism by attempting to cultivate one's empathy with one's opponents' fears. But this overcoming of the logic of enmity is not something that Gandhi could accomplish without transforming the political into the ethical. As such, Gandhi's anti-Hobbesian politics of social harmony converts egoistic individualism into a spirit of service. This was, for Gandhi, a universal method of transforming liberal citizenship into a civic friendship. It goes without saying that for Gandhi citizenship cannot accommodate differences, in the sense of alterity. Because of that, Gandhi believes that the principle of pluralism should be complemented by one that acknowledges the absolute singularity of the

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other. In short, the democratic community should do justice, according to Gandhi, to a double demand, that is, the demand of equality and the demand of respect for the difference of the other. These demands, however, can only come into being and flourish by acting in public space in Gandhi's view. Therefore, those who are excluded as pariahs from the plurality of the shared world cannot participate in the Gandhian logic of civic friendship. So, according to Gandhi, this situation destroys the core of what he understands as the political, namely the civic ethos of shared sovereignty. That is why respecting, instead of erasing differences between political visions is for Gandhi an important quality of civic friendship. The acknowledgement of the irreducible plurality of visions on the world that is possible in civic friendship enables the never-ending conversation about the public sphere and maintains the differences between the participants. Rather than fraternity or intimacy, civic friendship is for Gandhi the very condition for an effective exercise of plurality.

However, Gandhi sees this plurality as a horizontal relationship of equality. The demand for equality in the relation between the self and the other transfers the Gandhian idea of pluralism to a transcendent future that is indefinitely pushed forward. But Gandhi's claims about 'equality' were not about giving 'equal respect' to all values. He rejected the two concepts of 'respect' and 'tolerance' because of their connotation of condescension. Rather than 'respecting' or 'tolerating' other opinions, Gandhi incites one to *listen* to each other and to *learn* from each other. Moreover, according to Gandhi, opinions are of 'equal value' in so far as they provide spiritual and moral growth. Consequently, this analysis allows clarification of Gandhi's antagonism to monism as a tradition of thought that does not possess the resources to change and the potential for the moral and spiritual growth of humanity. As a result, for Gandhi, there is no such thing as a fixed nature of human beings: they are in large part self-creators who are attracted by competing forms of valuable life. This is the essence of Berlin's view of value-pluralism.

According to Isaiah Berlin, we are confronted in our lives with constellations of conflicting values. Given, then, such a situation, one must simply choose. Berlin

describes his position as follows: 'If, as I believe, the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict—and of tragedy—can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social' (Berlin, 1969: 169). This is Berlin's idea of value pluralism in a nutshell. The inevitable outcome of this incompatibility of values is dual: a tragic choice that always entails a sacrifice and the absence of a perfect life in the sense of total human fulfilment. As a result, for Berlin, not only is the idea of an ideal community incoherent and utopian, but also no compromise among values can bring us closer to a resolution of conflicts in history. As such, Berlin's value pluralism penetrates all our cultures and sub-cultures, but though 'we can discuss each other's point of view, [and] we can try to reach common ground, in the end what you pursue may not be reconcilable with the ends to which I found that I have dedicated my life' (Berlin, 1990: 12). In other words, for Berlin, unlike Gandhi, there is no such thing as a common vision of the good life. Therefore, 'the way out must lie in some logically untidy, flexible and even unambiguous compromise. Every situation calls for its own specific policy, since "out of the crooked timber of humanity", as Kant once remarked, "no straight thing was ever made"' (Berlin, 1969: 39). Unlike Gandhi, for whom non-violence expresses the best solution to the tensions and conflicts among individuals and traditions, Berlin uses the Lutheran metaphor of 'crooked timber' to express his view of the non-reconciliation of contradictions in human history. However, though Berlin is quite pessimistic about the chance of ever eliminating conflicts among values in human societies, he remains nevertheless optimistic about the possibility of realisation of what he calls a 'decent society'. Thus, Berlin's value pluralism goes hand in hand with a belief in a threshold of human decency, which is not fixed once for all. A decent society is, according to Berlin, a social organisation where there is a basic human morality and respect for the rights, which are in principle mutually harmonious under ordinary conditions. Moreover, Berlin does not see the foundations of this basic human morality in a

transcendent world. A decent society is only possible if we accept that human beings are endowed with a basic morality, though according to Berlin our moral universe is essentially non-harmonious because in it value conflicts are not ultimately resolved. This is why Berlin's philosophical use of the Kantian notion of 'the crooked timber of humanity' is a way for him to point to the tragic nature of human nature which has to deal eternally with the ambiguities and incompatibilities in life. As such, Berlin is aware that the pursuit of a decent society is neither a romantic task, nor a heroic form of citizenship. Also, there is no higher end or purpose in life that can provide us with a faith in a basic morality. Berlin's pluralism, therefore, is in the deepest sense anti-utopian and post-spiritual. With this anti-utopianism in mind, Berlin turns to Alexander Herzen and defines with him the ultimate goal of life as life itself. In a personal letter cited by Michael Ignatieff, Berlin writes:

As for the meaning of life, I do not believe it has any. I do not at all ask what it is, but I suspect it has none and this is a source of great comfort to me. We make of it what we can and that is all there is about it. Those who seek for me deep cosmic all embracing...libretto or God are, believe me, pathetically mistaken (in Ignatieff, 1999: 279).

As we can see, like most post-spiritual and anti-utopian humanists, Berlin regards human history as free from any form of teleology that seeks meaning and with no pre-given goal to which human action is directed. The absence of higher laws and values to which we can refer to justify our political and historical choices gives rise to a much more fragmented view of pluralism combined with a permanent suspicion of the human tendency to violence. The absence of a metaphysical realm to guarantee the ethical content of our actions deeply colours his value pluralism. This simply means that Berlin's alternative to moral monism implies a set of principles which recommend a Kantian inspired epistemology combined with the Herderian capacity for empathic understanding. What Berlin suggests after Herder is that despite the vast differences of values between cultures, it is still possible to grasp an understanding of one another, by 'empathy'. Berlin maintains that all cultures despite value-conflict have a shared core of

common humanity. In other words, historical or national cultures may respond differently to the same finite number of needs and ends, thereby creating different, and often incompatible, 'objective' constellations of values. Nevertheless, these commonalities are sufficient enough to enable mutual understanding and a dialogue among diverse cultures. It is this capacity of mutual understanding and empathy that distinguishes Berlin's value-pluralism from relativism. The key point in this respect is that the capacity for inter-cultural empathy is the evidence of the universality of values that give shape to that capacity and points to the adequacy of pluralism rather than relativism. Berlin does not give us a precise definition of these universal values that cross cultural boundaries, but he appears to endorse what he calls the 'human horizon', which is the basic common experience that identifies us as human beings. As such, Berlin's idea of 'shared human horizon' has a critical force of avoiding moral anarchy and relativism while acknowledging the plurality of modes of being human. On the constructive side, Berlin's empathic pluralism encourages and promotes the inter-cultural dialogue by drawing on the idea of a basic humanity and relating different cultural views to each other. That is to say, its hermeneutical potentials are greater than its transgressive possibilities. If that is the case, then, Berlin's empathic pluralism provides us with an evidence of his preoccupation with an intimate dialogue between cultures. Therefore, Berlin's empathic pluralism is more than simply an insight into the minds and lives of other humans; it is also a way to coextend the human capacity for criticism of violence.

Despite all the differences that one can find between the metaphysical and spiritual foundations of Gandhi's idea of pluralism and Berlin's suspicion of metaphysical and teleological claims in his definition of value pluralism, they both vindicate the possibility and acceptance of moral communication and reject the charge of relativism brought against their view of pluralism. For Gandhi and Berlin, one way of differentiating pluralism and relativism is to admit a core of

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shared or universal values which allows us to reach an agreement on at least some moral issues. Gandhi's cultural pluralism is opposed to relativism, since it is based on a belief in a basic universal human nature beneath the widely diverse forms that human life and belief take across cultures. It also involves a belief in the fact that understanding of moral views is possible among all people of all cultures because they all participate in the same quest for Truth. This is why Gandhi affirms, 'Temples or mosques or churches.... I make no distinction between these different abodes of God. They are what faith has made them. They are an answer to man's craving somehow to reach the Unseen' (in Kripalani, 1969: 62). Such a pluralist attitude conducted at the deepest level and in a spirit of genuine reciprocity and solidarity was not for Gandhi just a spiritual requirement, but also a political necessity. Pluralism, for Gandhi, is something substantive, involving the freedom of each individual to regulate their own lives without placing themselves at the mercy of their selfish desire. This is why Gandhi equates pluralism with the notion of self-rule, because it needs to be experienced by each one as an individual code of conduct and as a model at the national level. For Gandhi, a pluralist society is composed of disciplined individuals regulating their own lives. Elaborating on this idea he wrote in January 1939: 'The power to control national life through national representatives is called political power. Representatives will become unnecessary if the national life becomes so perfect as to be self-controlled'.¹ In other words, in Gandhi's idea of a pluralistic society there would be continual reciprocity among all the members of society. That is why in the Gandhian model of pluralism, we have an upward movement of authority from the 'base' to the 'apex' in the form of circles. Hence the Gandhian vision of pluralism is critical to and transcends the liberal democracy. Gandhi observes that:

Although this is the age of democracy, I do not know what the word connotes; however, I would say that democracy exists where the people's voice is heard, where love of the people holds a place of prime importance.

¹ Quoted in *The Penguin Gandhi Reader* (New Delhi, 1993), p. 79.

In my Ramrajya, however, public opinion cannot be measured by counting of heads or raising of hands. I would not regard this as a measure of public opinion... (CWMG, 1958, 489–90).

This definition of public opinion holds the key to Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of pluralism, because it develops the necessary connectedness between the two concepts of negative and positive freedom. As for Berlin, his conception of a decent society is only required to give moral priority to standard human rights instead of a full set of democratic rights. According to him, 'there is no necessary connection between individual liberty and democratic rule' (Berlin, 2002: 177).

Berlin is well-known as a political philosopher who gives the priority to negative freedom as the absence of interference to positive freedom as an effort to initiate social and political change. According to Berlin, positive freedom is more dangerous than negative freedom because it is more easily corrupted. Therefore, in the face of pluralism, Berlin ranks the liberal value of negative freedom ahead of others. Berlin's specifically liberal view of freedom is certainly too narrow, though it is understandable in the political context of the Cold War that he was formulating it. We have here the fundamental difference between Berlin's conception of pluralism and Gandhi's theory of obligation which extends the concept of citizen's duties far beyond what he considers as an 'individualist' and 'hedonistic' sense of rights in liberalism. In the eyes of Gandhi, negative freedom and individual autonomy of Berlinian type may appear so self-oriented as to be irreconcilable with a firm sense of political and social responsibility. From this perspective, Gandhi's idea of pluralism deflates Berlin's liberal defense of individual rights by insisting that rights exist only as derivative from performance of duty. Moreover, Gandhi's contribution to pluralist thought is the way he places such emphasis on duty that for him pluralism without responsibility is a contradiction in terms. We can refer here to a letter that Gandhi wrote to Maganlal Gandhi in 1910 in which he clearly makes the point of where one's duty must lie:

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Please do not carry unnecessarily on your head the burden of emancipating India. Emancipate your own self. Even that burden is very great. Apply everything to yourself. Nobility of Soul consists in realizing that you are yourself India. In your emancipation is the emancipation of India (CWMG, 10: 206–7).

The relationship that Gandhi makes between one's nobility of soul and the primary role of the person in fulfilling social responsibilities contributes to the empathic conception of pluralism from a non-liberal angle. The conclusion to be made here is how this Gandhian mode of thinking pluralism offers a way to enlarge the Berlinian concept of value pluralism as an alternative of moral monism. It is true that Gandhi's transformative conception of pluralism did not have any appeal to a Western liberal theorist like Berlin. However, although Berlin's conception does not take us to defend a classical or laissez-faire form of liberalism, it is true that its lack of a Gandhian Constructive Programme is a real weakness in its position overall. This does not mean that, in trying to strike a balance between the Gandhian and Berlinian concepts of pluralism, anything goes, but it does suggest that despite their essential differences, the two conceptions can be read as complementary in order to hold on to the idea of a common human horizon. To judge by the continuing controversy stimulated by the pluralist ideas of Gandhi and Berlin, one can conclude that they have both left us with clues that are well worth following up. This is a small step towards that objective.

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