"I ADMIRE AND RESPECT YOUR RELIGION BUT I MAY NOT PURSUE IT"
Isaiah Berlin and Interfaith Dialogue

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1. Introduction

The twenty-first century world is increasingly becoming "multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious."[1] In this unique and complex condition the question of negotiating and dealing with various ethnicities, cultures and religions becomes more acute and pressing. Hence, one is bound to look for fruitful and productive ways of navigating through the meandering maze of this difficult yet challenging context. In this modest article we look at Isaiah Berlin's idea of value pluralism and how this would help us respond creatively to the vexing question particularly of religious pluralism. We discover that in his view, the strict and uncritical adherence to and imposition of "dogmatically believed-in-schemes" of values and ideals usually result in destructive consequences to societies, cultures and peoples.[2] Thus, instead of proposing the harmony of many diverse voices into one voice, he recognizes the cacophony of voices. Instead of supporting uniformity, conformity and unanimity in values, his is a celebration of diversity, difference and abundance.[3] The first part of my elucidation deals with the triumvirates – monism, relativism and

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[1] Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002, 2.

[2] The two events that shaped the contemporary human history according to Berlin are: (1) the triumph of science and technological development, a well-known success story, and (2) "the great ideological storms that have altered the lives of virtually all mankind," a lesser known fact, which however, had brought about unimagined destruction to humanity. Examples are of the latter are: The Russian Revolution and its aftermath, totalitarian tyrannies, racism, religious bigotry, etc. Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal" in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy, London: John Murry Limited, 1990, 1.

[3] Berlin asserts: "The notion that One is good, Many-diversity-is bad, since truth is one, and only error is multiple, is far older, and deeply rooted in the Platonic tradition." Isaiah Berlin, "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will: The Revolt against the Myth of an Ideal Word" in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*.

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pluralism, ideas which are essential to understanding his value pluralism. Then this will be followed by indicating insights and possible applications of Berlin's value pluralism to what is referred to as theology/philosophy of religions.

2. Berlin's Value-Pluralism

Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism gains its own self-clarification and distinct contribution in the light of two other important ideas namely, that of monism and relativism.

2.1. Monism and Its Tenets

In his article, *My Intellectual Path*, Berlin writes:

> One of the intellectual phenomena which made the greatest impact on me was the universal search by philosophers for absolute certainty, for answers which could not be doubted, for total intellectual security. This from the very beginning appeared to me to be an illusory quest.[4]

Berlin was, of course, referring to monism which constitutes the underlying basis of much of western thought and utopian ideas.[5] This appealing and enduring idea/vision of having "absolute certainty" and possessing "total intellectual security" in political and moral life, which has gripped the imagination of thinkers, "from the pre-Socratics to all the reformers and revolutionaries of our own age,"[6] is not only erroneous but

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[4]Isaiah Berlin, "My Intellectual Path" in *The Power of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000, 4.

[5]Monism has led to political authoritarianism and totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Berlin states: "All the Utopias known to us are based upon the discoverability and harmony of objectively true ends, true for all men, at all times and places." Berlin, "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will," 211. See also page 212 where he further explains his point: "Thinkers from Bacon to the present have been inspired by the certainty that there must exist a total solution: that in the fullness of time, whether by the will of God or by human effort, the reign of irrationality, injustice, and misery will end; man will be liberated, and will no longer be the plaything of forces beyond his control-savage nature, or the consequences of his own ignorance or folly or vice; that this springtime in human affairs will come once the obstacles, natural and human, are overcome, and then at last men will cease to fight each other, unite powers and cooperate to adapt nature to their needs (as the great materialist thinkers from Epicurus to Marx have advocated) or their needs to nature (as the Stoics and modern environmentalists have argued)." This utopian thinking for all its pervasiveness is actually is for Berlin just a great myth.

[6]Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 5.

also fallacious, argues Berlin.[7] Thus, he makes his case by a critical assessment of what monism is and how it is simply contrary to the actual multifarious experiences of people.

Considered a *philosophia perennis*,[8] Berlin enumerates the basic tenets of monism as follows:

> a. That to all genuine questions there is one true answer and one only, all others being deviations from the truth and therefore false, and that this applies to questions of conduct and feeling, that is, to practice, as well as to questions of theory or observation – to questions of value no less than to those of fact;
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> b. That the true answers cannot clash with one another, for one true proposition cannot be incompatible with another; that together these answers must form a harmonious whole.
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> c. According to some they form a logical system each ingredient of which logically entails and is entailed by all the other elements; according to others, the relationship is that of parts to a whole, or, at the very least, of complete compatibility of each element with all the others.[9]

In this line of thinking, as soon as absolute certainty of truth[10] is established, it would not be difficult to imagine or think that there will emerge only one possible answer or solution to every human conundrum whether social, political, moral, scientific, etc. Each of these individual truths about life (whether facts or values) will then cumulatively, make up the overall stock of truths that leads toward the creation of a perfect

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[7]The French and German Enlightenment modern thinking were for Berlin manifestations of monism: "The notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me to be not merely unattainable – that is a truism – but conceptually incoherent; I do not know what is meant by a harmony of this kind." Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 13. See also pages 14 and 17, respectively, where Berlin speaks of monism as "self-induced myopia" and the possibility of realising this "ultimate harmony ... a fallacy."

[8]Speaking about his discovery of "supreme" values being incommensurable from each other, Berlin realizes that this new insight "has undermined my earlier assumption, based on the *philosophia perennis*, that there could be no conflict between true ends, true answers to the central problems of life." Berlin, "Pursuit of the Ideal," 8.

[9] Berlin, "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will," 209.

[10]I will be using the word truth or truth-claims to mean the following: ultimate ends, absolute goods, whole conception of the truth, forms of life and the conception of the ultimate good ensuing from cultural traditions.

society or perfect moral life. Hence, the duty of each man and woman is to discover the various manifestations of the truth and once discovered, start the process of integrating these pieces together to arrive at a coherent picture of the truth for the benefit of humankind. Berlin clarifies his point using the jigsaw puzzle as a. He contends: "mankind has been presented with the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle: if you can put the pieces together, it will form a perfect whole which constitutes the goal of the quest for truth, virtue and happiness."[11]

The various appearances of truths[12] whether religious, scientific or cultural, constitute as it were the husks to the core of the ultimate truth. As a result they do not necessarily clash, because they are the wrappings that make up the building blocks of the one universal absolute truth. They are, thus compatible to each other. It is highly crucial then, to identify the correct method (all other methods of ways being incorrect) at arriving at them. Genuine answers and solutions to life are knowable and achievable according to the monist. We can be absolutely certain about them and even identify where they could be found. Berlin expounds:

> A wider thesis underlay this: namely, that to all true questions there must be one true answer and one only, all the other answers being false, for otherwise the questions cannot be genuine questions. There must exist a path which leads clear thinkers to the correct answers to these questions, as much in the moral, social and political worlds as in that of natural sciences, whether it is the same method or not; and once all the correct answers to the deepest moral, social, and political questions that occupy (or should occupy) mankind are put together, the result will represent the final solution to all the problems of existence.[13]

For monism therefore, individual truths can be subsumed and harmonized into the single absolute truth. A standard norm facilitates in the adjudication process of determining priorities (ranking of truth).

Based on the foregoing, several implications maybe said about the monist view of truth:

(1) Truth is one (only one set of values is true, all others are false), and it is fixed, thus unchanging and has a universal scope. It would then be a failure for men not to discover this all encompassing truth for its own benefit.

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[11]Isaiah Berlin, "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West" in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 27.

[12]Truth in the plural implies the specific truths of the single universal truth. Truth in the singular refers to the monist commitment to the universal absolute truth.

[13]Berlin, "Intellectual Path," 5.

(2) A corollary implication is that, the truth resides in a particular cultural and intellectual form, falsifying all other cultural and intellectual traditions.
(3) A further consequence is: If it is possible to know and have the truth and to identify where the truth resides, then this necessarily implies an unflinching and thoroughgoing endorsement and backing of it, once discovered. Berlin is, of course, aware of the danger that this can have in political and moral life. The creation of the "best possible world" leads to the search for the correct/perfect way, and once the right way has been identified, the next best move is to guard it (truth), protect it, advocate and enforce it on others on the assumption that it will lead to the good, happy and virtuous life for all. But as Berlin would indicate, this "harmonization of life" into the perfect ideal has been tragic:

> the very notion of a final solution is not only impracticable but, if I am right, and some values cannot but clash, incoherent also. The possibility of a final solution – even if we forget the terrible sense that these words acquired in Hitler's day – turns out to be an illusion; and a very dangerous one. For if one really believes that such a solution is possible, then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it: to make mankind just and happy and creative and harmonious for ever – what could be too high a price to pay for that? To make such an omelette, there is surely no limit to the number of eggs that should be broken – that was the faith of Lenin, of Trotsky, of Mao, for all I know of Pol Pot.[14]

2.2. Pluralism and the Actual Human Experience of Diversity

To use a postmodern language, Berlin's quarrel with monism relates to its making a grand narrative out of its truth-claim. Contrary to the monist, Berlin goes for plurality of objective ends and ultimate values.[15] Monism was wrong in thinking that there is only one way of doing things, one way of conceiving political or religious life or one correct moral framework. In life there is diversity of truths, he argues. This is more consistent with the concrete experiences of human beings as they are confronted with myriad of incompatible possibilities and choices. Berlin clarifies:

> These collisions of values are of the essence of what they are and what we are. If we are told that these contradictions will be solved in

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[14]Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 15.

[15]Berlin's pluralism to some extent had been influenced by Machiavelli, Giambattista Vico, J. G. Herder and the Romantic movement. Common to them is the recognition of the diversity and uniqueness of other ideas, cultures and peoples. See, Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 13.

some perfect world in which all good things can be harmonized in principle, then we must answer, to those who say this, that the meanings they attach to the names which for us denote the conflicting values are not ours. We must say that the world in which what we see as incompatible values are not in conflict is a world altogether beyond our ken; that principles which are harmonized in this other world are not the principles with which, in our daily lives, we are acquainted; if they are transformed, it is into conceptions not known to us on earth. But it is on earth that we live, and it is here that we must believe and act.[16]

Rather than affirming the view of monism about the existence of one true morality, aesthetics or theology and supporting the monist view on the non-adversarial nature of truth, Berlin's value pluralism holds that

There are many objective ends, ultimate values, some incompatible with others, pursued by different societies at various times, or by different groups in the same society, by entire classes or churches or races, or by particular individuals within them, any one of which may find itself subject to conflicting claims of uncombinable, yet equally ultimate and objective, ends.[17]

To further lodge his criticism on monism he expounds on the different ways conflicts are experienced as a result of the pluralism of truths. He maintains that because of the presence of incompatible and incommensurable truths conflicts manifest themselves (1) in the different values of a moral or political system, e.g., justice versus mercy or compassion; (2) within the choice of the actual moral value itself, e.g., the choice of justice over mercy can lead to some disputes in terms of different interpretations of justice; (3) within various objective ends and ultimate values emerging from attempts of cultural traditions to make sense of life (cultural pluralism). On all these levels, collisions of values become an inevitable fact of life, argues Berlin. According to him,

What is clear is that values can clash – that is why civilisations are incompatible. They can be incompatible between cultures, or groups in the same culture, or between you and me. You believe in always telling the truth, no matter what; I do not, because I believe that it can sometimes be too painful and too destructive. We can discuss each other's point of view, we can try to reach common ground, but

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[16]Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 13.

[17]Isaiah Berlin, "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought" in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 79.

in the end what you pursue may not be reconcilable with the ends to which I find that I have dedicated my life. Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual; and it does not follow that, if they do, some must be true and others false. Justice, rigorous justice, is for some people an absolute value, but it is not compatible with what may be no less ultimate values for them – mercy, compassion – ... in concrete cases.[18]

Because authentic values are actually rivals in their truth-claims, it is virtually impossible to create a harmonious whole out of them both on the societal and personal levels. This fact results to real moral dilemmas that lead an individual for a choice of one compelling truth/value over the other (loss for the other). Put differently, it is virtually impossible for a society or a person in his or her lifetime to realize all the great goods available for him/her to achieve perfection. Berlin speaks of this crucial choice that we have to make and the possible sacrifice or compromises a society or an individual has to make in the following way: "Some among the Great Goods cannot live together. That is a conceptual truth. We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss."[19]

Berlin believes in cultural distinctiveness and uniqueness. Cultures accordingly have their own centre of gravity (ways of thinking, ways of doing things, etc.)[20] borne out of their concrete circumstances and social locations.[21] This leads to different conceptions of life unique only and internal to their respective cultural traditions. While cultures converge on certain values (even if this is the case, their priorities over values may be different), they are basically incompatible in terms of their conceptions of absolute ends and values, hence cannot be put into a single neat arrangement. Again here, on the cultural level, we are confronted with mutually exclusive choices.

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[18]Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 12.

[19]Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 13.

[20]"Herder laid it down that every culture possesses its own 'centre of gravity; each culture has its own points of reference, there is no reason why cultures should fight each other – universal toleration must be possible – but unification was destruction... The world was a great garden in which different followers and plants grew, each in its own way, each with its own claims and rights and past and future. From which it followed that no matter what men had in common – and of course, again, there was a common nature to some degree – there were no other universally true answers, as valid for one culture as for another." Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 9.

In short, we can say that for Berlin, our world (moral, political, religious) is so plural that conflicts and dilemma are an inevitable part of it. It is unrealistic and impossible, for example, for an individual to integrate simultaneously in his/her moral or religious value system divergent ultimate ends and values without leading him or her to utter confusion, worse, to insanity. Ranking these values based on priorities is also a futile work because they are products of different circumstances and contexts that a uniform rational yardstick will be of no use. This amounts to his saying that incomparable and incommensurable options are better left on their own for there is no universal rational measuring rod to evaluate their relative value. They can stand their own grounds and provide their own respective conceptions of truths. Berlin, then, acknowledges the independent status of divergent truth claims or values. If this is the limit of the human condition, we have just to face the fact that a single final solution (moral/political) to all our questions is unrealizable.

2.3. Berlin: A Pluralist Not a Relativist

As to the question of relativism or subjectivism, Berlin is very emphatic and clear that ultimate values and ends are not mere individual creation or a result of the subjective preference of an individual. "'I prefer coffee, you prefer champagne. We have different tastes. There is no more to be said.' That is relativism."[22] Berlin does not speak of truth or value-claims as a matter of taste or preference. Rather he holds that ultimate ends and values are a part of a culture's attempt to make sense of life and it represents the shared memory and struggles of peoples in their daily lives. In other words, there is a "social-cultural" history that anchors every ultimate end and value-claim. Thus, "multiple values are objective, part of the essence of humanity rather than arbitrary creations of men's subjective fancies."[23]

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[22]Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 12. Relativism for him is a denial of being able to have objective knowledge of facts and values in other cultures or moral frameworks. For, Berlin, however, knowledge of facts and values (rationale behind a cultural code) is very possible. While other past cultures maybe different from us, we can "enter" into them provided that we have sufficient imagination as well as sympathy and respect for cultures other than ours. On the one hand, a person can be an agnostic relativist, that is, one who recognizes others but fail in the imaginative sympathy aspect because he or she thinks that a shared common human experience is not possible. On the other hand, a person can be an ideological determinist wherein he or she views culture as a sort of a "cage" that limits, defines and determines ones destiny in life. Berlin avoids both of these views.
[23]Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 12.

They are, however, relational, that is, related to the cultural-social milieus that produced these truths/values. Hence, Berlin argues:

> I think these values are objective – that is to say, their nature, the pursuit of them, is part of what it is to be a human being, and this is an objective given... If I am a man or a woman with sufficient imagination (and this I do need), I can enter into a value-system which is not my own, but which nevertheless something I can conceive of men pursuing while remaining human, while remaining creatures with whom I can communicate, with whom I have some common values – for all human beings must have some common values or they cease to be human, and also some different values else they cease to differ, as in fact they do.[24]

Therefore, for him pluralism is not relativism and cultural truths or values as not closed system. They are accessible to others and intelligible. Berlin warns us "not to judge past cultures by the measuring rods of our own civilisation" and, "not perpetrate anachronisms..." in dealing with them.[25] He cautions us from our egocentricity and anachronistic tendencies.

Intercommunication on the basis of our shared humanity is possible, argues Berlin. "[W]hat makes men human is common to them, and acts as bridge between them."[26] Relativism is a non-recognition of this common human matrix of experience. Berlin believes in some sort of minimal universal moral and political categories but its content should be decided by specific cultural traditions. Elsewhere he writes:

> Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is only possible because what makes men human is common to them, and acts as bridge between them. But our values are ours, and theirs are theirs. We are free to criticise the values of other cultures, to condemn them, but we cannot pretend not to understand them at all, or to regard them simply as subjective, the products of creatures in different circumstances with different tastes from our own, which do not speak to us at all.[27]

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[24]Berlin, "My Intellectual Path," 12.

[25]Berlin "Alleged Relativism," 85. Berlin drawing from the ideas of Herder and Vico insists "on our need and ability to transcend the values of our own culture or nation or class, or those of whatever other windowless boxes some cultural relativists wish to confine us to."

[26]Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 11.

[27]Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 11.

Recognition of plurality or diversity, or incommensurable truths/values, however, does not mean an uncritical acquiescence to other's truth or value-claims. It demands some critical evaluation too on our part.

For intercultural communication to prosper, imaginative sympathy[28] and humility[29] are needed. The former allows us entry into the truth-claim of the other. The former recognizes our fallibility: "I am not blind to what the Greeks valued – their values may not be mine, but I can grasp what it would be like to live by their light, I can admire and respect them, and even imagine myself as pursuing them, although I do not – and do not wish to, perhaps could not if I wished."[30]

Berlin advocates universal toleration amidst diversity and maintaining a "precarious balance" in our dealings with others. True encounter with other truth/value claims happen when we are ready to listen from "where" they are coming from. According to Berlin, "So we must engage in what are called trade-offs, rules, values, principles must yield to each other in varying degrees in specific situations."[31] To avoid the "suffering of the innocent" making universal/absolute moral and political prescriptions applicable to all should be prevented. Here again, we feel his consternation against those who create all-embracing theories at the expense of human dignity being sacrificed.

3. Berlin's Value Pluralism and Theology of Religions

Compared to previous era, our world today is more cognizant of the "presence, power and richness of religious traditions."[32] Paul Knitter would further say that "[o]ur contemporary intercommunicating and interdependent planet has made us aware, more clearly but also more

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[28]He seems to be referring here to a certain limit in our ability to understand other cultures despite our commonalities: "We are called upon to exercise our imaginative powers to the utmost; but not to go beyond them; not to accept as authentic values anything that we cannot understand, imaginatively 'enter' into." Berlin, "Alleged Relativism," 84.

[29]Berlin writes about balance and humility: "The best that can be done, as a general rule, is to maintain a precarious equilibrium that will prevent the occurrence of desperate situations, of intolerable choices – that is the first requirement for a decent society; one that we can always strive for, in the light of the limited range of our knowledge, and even of our imperfect understanding of individuals and societies. A certain humility in these matters is very necessary." Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 17-18.

[30]Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 12.

[31]Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 17.

[32]Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002, 1.

painfully than ever before, of the multiplicity of religions and the many different ultimate answers."[33] This new awareness of the multiplicity of religions has led not only theologians and philosophers of religions to a serious reflection about the context of religious pluralism but more importantly, has made ordinary adherents of religions reflexive of their own identities and beliefs because of their encounters with followers of religions and faiths other than their own in their day-to-day existence. Raymon Panikkar aptly describes this:

> When the religious traditions of humankind began to come into a more intimate and wider contact than through skirmishes on the battlefields or in casual encounters, a new situation began to develop: the religion of our neighbour, who lives no longer beyond the mountains or overseas but just around the corner in the next house begins to present an unavoidable question both for dealing with the neighbour and for dealing with my own religion, too. We can hardly avoid comparing, judging and eventually deciding.[34]

These processes of "comparing, judging and deciding" that Panikkar mentions above have resulted and have crystallized into three responses to the religious other. In the field of theology of religions these responses are referred to as exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. The first two responses correspond in varying degrees to Berlin's idea of monism while the pluralist response maybe associated with the ideas that underpin his value pluralism. A brief description of each is warranted here.

Exclusivism is also variously called as ecclesiocentrism[35] or Replacement Model.[36] This has been the dominant position of the Catholic Church through much of its history until Vatican II. However, in recent times this position is vigorously espoused by Fundamentalist Christians and Evangelical Christian Communities. In this view, Christianity is considered to have received and possessed the absolute truth from God and through the church alone that God's offer of salvation is given. This view is echoed in the Latin dictum *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, i.e., outside the church there is no salvation. According to this view, when it comes to

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[33]Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 1.

[34]Raimon Panikkar, "Religious Identity and Pluralism," http://alt.rpivirtuell.net/workspace/users/535/Religionen%20Im%20Gespr%C3%A4ch%20-%20Texte%20aus%20RIG/RIG7-Panikkar-Identity.pdf, accessed on 8 September 2012.

[35]Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 74-79.

[36]Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 19-56.

other religions, they are lacking in truth and have no salvific value at all. Eventually, they have to be subsumed to the truth and saving grace of Christianity to attain their own salvation. Put simply, exclusivists believe that God's universal will entails that all peoples become Christians. Likewise, the Church founded by Jesus is the only true church and Jesus alone is the true messiah. For this reason, the aim of dialogue is to convert non-Christians to the catholic/protestant fold whatever this takes.

The exclusivist position reminds us of Berlin's discussion of the tenets of monism particularly about the nature of truth. Apparently, for monism, there is only one manifestation of truth and all other truth-claims are aberrations of this one truth. Applied to exclusivist thinking in religion, this implies that Christianity is the only true religion and rest of religions are deemed false or untrue. Isaiah Berlin has indicated clearly the violence that comes with this monistic and absolutist way of thinking. He also warned us of the arrogant and triumphalistic attitudes that develop from this way of thinking. To attribute "absolute certainty" and "total intellectual security" to any moral, political or religious system is a dangerous proposition, he argued. Harmonization of life based on an absolute religious perfection is tragic even if the idea is presumed beneficial to humanity. An uncritical promotion of this belief has resulted to tragic loss of life. We can only look at the stories of colonized peoples, who in the name of the Christian religion had been oppressed and subjugated, only so that missionaries can forcibly save their lost souls and free them from the errors of their "pagan" belief system.[37]

There is a more nuanced and more "balanced" version of the exclusivist view. This is called inclusivism, which is also known as christocentrism[38] or the fulfilment model.[39] While this view sheds off much of the arrogance in the exclusivist view, it is still considered under the umbrella of religious monism that takes one religion to be the centre in which other truth claims are judged and interpreted. In the case of inclusivist, the primacy of Jesus' mediation is crucial. While inclusivists positively relate with other religions by fostering mutual respect and cooperation with them, it still considers Jesus' role decisive, normative and constitutive in terms of salvation. In others words, the shades of truth and seeds of salvation present in other religions gain full potential and

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[37]The sword and the cross were the tools of the colonizers. Economic interests were primary over religious ones in colonizing people.

[38]Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 74-79.

[39]Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 63-103.

perfection in the light of the salvation brought by Jesus Christ. Differently put, an inclusivist uses his or her own faith tradition to evaluate and judge the other religious traditions. The purpose of dialogue while initially may seek enrichment from other religions, is geared eventually towards proclamation of the message of Jesus. Implicitly in this view, the church alone possesses the fullness of the means of salvation.

The inclusivist view dovetails Berlin's description of monism particularly the sense of confidence monism has in terms of clearly and confidently isolating the single path in which the absolute truth converges. Accordingly, whether using different directions or route, all will lead to a single converging path. In the inclusivist position, the final destiny and fulfilment is that of Jesus and the Church that he instituted. Berlin's description about monism bears repetition here: "no matter that there is a vast variety of doctrines, religions, moralities, ideas – all the same there must somewhere be a true answer to the deepest questions that preoccupy mankind."[40] However positive the view of the inclusivist is of other religions, we can ask if genuine dialogue really occurs when on the onset, one has already identified the final path that the dialogue should lead? Berlin would say that for the monist, there is no clash of truth claims because each builds up and contribute to the one universal absolute truth. In inclusivist language, this would be stated to mean that there is no clash between the gods of religions and Christianity because all will have to bow down eventually to the God proclaimed by Jesus Christ.

The ecclessiomonism and christomonism of the exclusivist and inclusivist respectively can be avoided through a third response to the preponderance of other religions. This third response is called pluralism or the mutuality model.[41] In this view, no one religion can claim superiority over the others because each religious tradition is a particular response to the Divine based on their specific contexts and experiences. Each is a valid way and each has an inherent value on its own. According to Jacques Dupuis, the "term 'pluralism' refers to the replacement of the single universal and constitutive mediation of Jesus Christ with many 'ways' or saving figures leading to God-the-Centre. The various religions, Christianity included, represent so many ways leading to God, each of which, differences notwithstanding, has equal validity and value."[42] Hence, we can say that pluralism is a recognition not only of diversity,

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[40]Refer to footnote 14.
[41]Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 109-157.
[42]Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 77.

differences and the contextual nature of religious claims but more so the belief that these differences and variety cannot be subsumed into a single system of thinking or belief system. It is thus an acknowledgment of the incommensurability of ultimate ends and values. Being the case, collisions and conflict are necessary consequences of incommensurability. Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism drives home this point clearly. We just have to make choices in life about which ultimate end to follow and when we do, we have to commit ourselves to that choice.

As indicated earlier, the three responses represent the various ways in which we grapple, wrestle and make sense of our experience of the manifold religions that surround us. For a meaningful interreligious dialogue, due consideration should be given to both the complexity of reality and the particular tradition in which this complexity is perceived or comprehended. Differently stated, a balancing act has to be taken in terms of the universality of God's love and the particular manifestation of this love for the believer. Therefore, the dialectical relationship between the universal and the particular and the one and the many should be seriously theorized. Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism has several signposts that can be tapped on in this challenging task of balancing the gaping gap between monism (exclusivist and inclusivist) and pluralism, to use his terminologies. To this issue, I now turn.

3.1. Pluralism as a Fact and Principle of Life

Berlin's value pluralism provides us with a very important lesson about life that we often fail to recognize because of our tendency to want to achieve a semblance of harmony and unity in life. Berlin makes us sensitive and aware not only of the irreducible and radical diversity that constitutes life in general and religious traditions in particular. Pluralism is not only a fact of life it is also a matter of principle of life. Differences in religious, political or moral frameworks or even traditions, cultures and ways of life are deeper than we thought. The attempt to harmonize them (into one religious system) or to bring them into a single synthesis can prove more destructive than beneficial. His value pluralism then allows us to respect differences and instil in us a sense of awe and wonder about the rich, vibrant and colourful tapestry of life. As Michael Jinkins aptly puts it, "Berlin believed that variety is, in and itself, a good thing, a viable end of human life, and that a society is fundamentally enriched by all the

diversity of its members."[43] Differently put, human beings have diverse yet equally convincing ways of achieving perfection in life. Not to recognize this fact of life is an utter travesty. In interfaith dialogue, recognizing the others' difference and accepting them on their own terms will better facilitate the dialogue. Not to do so will not only derail the dialogue process but even will put a stop to it.

3.2. The Threat of Conflict

Berlin's value pluralism is heedful of the verity of conflict, as well as, the reality of tragedy that may arise as a result of the clash of incommensurable objective ends and ultimate values. Ultimate values and ends are then not only multiple and diverse, they too are sometimes incommensurable and thus may end up clashing with one another. By making us cognizant of the element of conflict and exposing us to the possibility of tragedy that may arise from the clash of incommensurable ultimate ends and values, he then strongly encourages us to come up with creative resolutions to conflicts and tragedy to avert possible destructive consequences to human flourishing especially in an era characterized by religious plurality. Avery Plaw succinctly expresses this point:

> Suppressing or ignoring genuinely tragic conflicts then promises only to distort our understanding and exacerbate and perpetuate the underlying collisions of values, and thus to increase the likelihood of people being required to violate their own deepest moral convictions. Pluralism helps us to see a range of equally ultimate values and to alert us to the dangers that can arise from their conflict.[44]

For a naive practitioner of interreligious dialogue, the issue of tragic conflicts will not figure out in his or her discourse. But for a realistic one, this will be a central theme to talk about. By introducing the idea of conflict, Berlin gives an invaluable insight to doing interfaith dialogue, namely, that it is not all about harmony and cooperation and mutual understanding of truth claims among religions. Sometimes, it too is about non-understanding and non recognition of the common matrix of human existence. It also at times has to critically evaluate and confront the truth-claims of the other or even to condemn them. Disagreements and

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[43]Michael Jinkins, *Christianity, Tolerance and Pluralism: A Theological Engagement with Isaiah Berlin's Social Theory*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, 76.

[44]Avery Plaw, "Why Monist Critiques Feed Value Pluralism," *Social Theory and Practice*, 30, 1 (January 2004), 115.

misunderstandings may lead then to tragic conflict and violence. It is for this reason that practitioners of interfaith exchanges need to creatively manage possible tensions that may ensue by recognizing these signs of tensions rather than sweeping them under the carpet.

3.3. Avoiding the Slippery Slopes of Relativism

Berlin's value pluralism steers a delicate balance between absolutism and relativism by acknowledging shared human values (justice, liberty, wellbeing, etc.) that are alive and meaningful in specific cultures and traditions. Our shared humanity, that is, our different attempts to be human in our specific cultures and the different life forms that they generate, can be a minimal point for a meaningful and a respectful dialogue as well as consensus building. This essential element of his "normative pluralism" opens up the possibility for intercultural communication among cultures/religious traditions that is evidently needed in our global-postmodern world. Applied to interfaith dialogue, respect for religious traditions can be demonstrated by understanding these traditions (sympathetic imagination) in their own terms (because they have their own centre of gravity) – and not imposing our own biases and prejudices on them (religious chauvinism or anachronism) or patronizing (still coming from a perceived superior position) these different religious traditions and point of views. Berlin, however, reminds us, that our ability to imaginatively and sensitively understand the other entails a posture of humility on our part.

3.4. Need for Imaginative Sympathy

Berlin also gives us a realistic view of what acceptance of difference entails. Acceptance of difference does not mean completely understanding or conceding to the claim of the other. It, however, means having the trust and confidence that the view or belief of the other is a legitimate human pursuit and that the other's narrative will bring just like mine to the perfection or wholeness that the individual strives for. Berlin refers to this as the act of social or imaginative empathy, i.e., the act of listening and discerning the good in the other irrespective of whether or not one agrees with the claim of the other or not. The idea of imaginative empathy allows one to enter the shoes of the other in the hope of understanding another's context, thoughts and feelings as well as his or her motivations as much as possible in his own terrain. Such kind of imagination will result to a respectful and fruitful interfaith dialogue and conversation.

3.5. Drawing from One's Religious Tradition

Crucial also to remember in Berlin's value-pluralism is the view that he has about dialogue. Dialogue does not mean abandoning my own particular religious tradition or belief. Rather, in my respectful dialogue with the other, I bring with me my very own particularities in the dialogue process. It is actually using our cultural/religious specificities to discover what we have in common with them. In other words, dialogue does not entail abandoning our faith or beliefs rather they also constitute the way we approach the other whether in praise or in criticism of them. But this should not give us the feeling that we have a privileged position compared with the other. Michael Jinkins captures clearly what I mean here:

> There resides at the heart of our being human a terrible and wonderful freedom, no less profound than the historical and cultural givenness in which each of us finds ourselves. Our belonging to a particular social context can never excuse our inhumanity, our cruelty and brutality. But neither can we, without losing something as crucial to our identity as our freedom, choose to live in a state of cultural or historical amnesia, cutting ourselves off from the particular societies, the communities of faith, the histories of cultures that have shaped us.[45]

Concisely stated, respectful dialogue entails navigating between one's religion and that of the others.

4. Conclusion

Let me conclude by stating that Berlin's value pluralism has provided us a framework to understand and appreciate diversity in general and how it can provide a new way of looking at things especially with the question of religions. The strength of his ideas lies in the recognition of the fact of multiplicity and differences that make up life. He cautions us about the danger and the possible destruction that our preponderance to make a grand synthesis for all these differences might entail. The search for the absolutely correct and perfect religious, moral or political end is a futile exercise. As expected differences lead to clashes, however, these do not necessarily lead to violence provided that we learn to navigate around these differences and incompatibilities. In extreme cases, there are just no rational or logical criteria that can adjudicate different incompatible truth-claims. He reminds readers about the fragility and finiteness of the ideas,

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[45]Jinkins, *Christianity, Tolerance and Pluralism*, 116.

views and traditions that we hold on to and that as soon as we realize this, our arrogance will slowly vanish into the background as we see how rich the world can be with its multiplicity. Respect for the different starts when one begins to recognize how different the other is.

I would like to quote Michael Jinkins once again, as he brings to life Berlin's value pluralism to interreligious faith perspective:

> This quality of pluralism, 'real' pluralism (objective pluralism) practices by 'real' Christians ... again, is made possible if we do not believe that our faith in God grant us a privileged position outside the particularity of our own faith, somehow above history, culture and all religions, which allows us to pronounce judgment on the relative truthfulness of one religion over another.[46]

Put differently, of the insights gained from our engagement with Berlin's ideas, the following are crucial points for interfaith dialogue:

1. Awareness of one's biases and prejudices towards the other;
2. Understanding others in their own terms;
3. Avoiding projecting one's standards on others;
4. Recognizing the uniqueness of other faith-traditions and cultures;
5. Cultivating a posture of humility;
6. Acknowledging the common matrix of human experience.

An interfaith dialogue will not even commence without these basic respectful attitudes/values towards the religiously other.

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[46]Jinkins, *Christianity, Tolerance and Pluralism*, 155.