Introduction

Love and war have mingled human populations for eons. Even seeming isolates are hardly homogeneous. No population remains untouched by the genetic markers of panmixia. So with all our ethnic diversity, we humans remain one race. The branches of our language tree attest to eons of migration, commerce, and congress that antedate our written records. We seem fated to live together, and the rapid pace and broad franchise in our travels and interactions today, complemented by the human penchant for settling down in new surroundings, only raise to new intensity the salient question of this book: how we can live together with integrity.

Cultural and intellectual diversity have long prompted claims in behalf of skepticism and relativism. But the claims are specious: The fact of differences does not steal the warrant from all commitments or confirm the equal soundness of just any. Still less does it make differences unreal – as to derive not-p from p. Yet powerful pragmatic worries urge us to deny deep differences with one another, or give up all claims to truth, or concede that no way of thinking or living is better or worse than the rest. Otherwise, we are told, we are doomed to endless conflict, to bootless bloodshed, and ultimate self-destruction.

What I want to argue in this book is a simple thesis: that we humans, with all our differences in outlook and tradition, can

respect one another and learn from one another's ways, without sharing them or relinquishing the commitments we make our own. This is what I take to be pluralism. Pluralism is not relativism or skepticism. It is not lack of interest. It does not demand moral abdication or spiritual silence. Nor is the pluralism defended here the rather extreme claim that fundamental values are incompatible. In a way my pluralist thesis says just the opposite: There is room in a society for divergent values, practices, and beliefs, even in many central areas of human concern. The price of pluralism in this sense is the recognition that it need not be the case that everyone is right. The profit of pluralism is the space it allows for individuals and groups to retain their identity and commitments, not blurring the differences that make all the difference or blunting the seriousness that distinguishes high seriousness from mere entertainment.

I start from the matter of religious differences, the salient cultural differences among us. For it is in religions that the values we hold most precious are most elaborately articulated, verbally and intellectually, morally and symbolically: The language of ritual – spiritual or secular – projects a catena of values that structures most human lives and frames communities that reach out, often from the remote past and perhaps far into the future. Religious diversity does not mean that one who takes religion seriously and holds fast to personal or shared beliefs and practices somehow faces a forced choice between dogmatism or parochialism on the one hand and relativism or skepticism on the other. Tolerance, respect, and openness are not the inevitable fruits of skepticism – although a penchant for tolerance and a desire to show respect may prompt pleas for skepticism or tempt surrender to the doubts and restiveness that naturally accompany any claim to higher truths and any moral demands that press beyond the more immediate claims of appetite and passion. Relativism, at its best, is patronizing. It too may begin by urging openness. But once it places all claims to truth and virtue on a par, it vitiates the impulse it began from and ends up taking nothing seriously. There is more respect in arguing with others, treating them as equals, than in merely stroking them. Seriousness about others'

views and practices means willingness to learn through dialogue and serious study. But fruitful dialogue demands our knowing something about who we are ourselves, what we believe and care about, and how what is other *actually is other*. Without the discipline of self-knowledge to complement our curiosity, interest collapses into mere projection and conjecture.

Some seek to iron out religious differences by dismissing their practical impact, reducing religion notionally to a matter of faith – as if beliefs about what matters most had no bearing on how we lead our lives. Some deny religious differences, imagining all religions alike at bottom and oblivious to the way that religious ideas may address quite different questions and concerns – or the way that religious practices and norms may challenge blanket toleration. Failing to spin familiarity from the unfamiliar, some inquirers into religious diversity indulge themselves by romanticizing what looks foreign. They essentialize the exotic and typify the extreme. None of these tactics opens a high road to pluralism for individuals or societies.

The self-knowledge that pluralism demands is hard won. It means coming to peace with oneself, reconciling one's heritage with one's personal outlook and existential insights, and integrating oneself in a community even as one differentiates oneself from it. But this kind of attachment and separation – always a work in progress – is part of what it takes to establish oneself as a moral and spiritual adult. Societies face a higher order task of integration. Their members do not need to think and live in lockstep, but they do need to find ways of living together. Tolerance is the minimum demand of pluralism in any healthy society. Religious tolerance does not mean homogenizing. Pluralism preserves differences. What it asks for is respect. That means openness, interest, and recognition of the room the universe affords for those who differ intellectually, morally, and spiritually. But tolerance has limits, implicit in the very idea and the values that sustain it: Religions that thwart human flourishing must themselves be thwarted. So a pluralistic society needs its own, rather open-ended, broad-minded vision of the human person, the boundaries of human dignity, and the dimensions of

human fulfillment. Liberal ideology, with its secular heritage and secularizing rhetoric, may fight shy of such a vision or of enunciating the standards that would mark its parameters. But without such standards the liberal commitment to pluralism becomes self-defeating. Fortunately, the world's religions themselves, from which many a liberal ideal is abstracted, provide a congeries of useful models of respect. But not every ideal works smoothly and amicably alongside the rest. So today's societies, pluralistic de facto, have their work cut out for them.

If our public space were somehow cleared of discourse that smacks of spirituality, it is sometimes urged, the most troublesome excrescences of religious diversity would dissolve – or at least keep to the private sphere. Secularism is the cure for sectarianism. With such thoughts in mind, John Rawls argued that since government is inherently coercive, and since political discourse in a democracy is constitutive to the work of governance, public deliberations about core norms – those that raise constitutional issues – should, by rights, take place in a religion-free zone. Since the publication in 1971 of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls's political philosophy has been widely taken as the touchstone of liberal thinking. But a deep ambivalence compromises the approach: Is liberal theory a clarion call for openness to diversity, or is it the manifesto of a secular age? Having left behind the religious sensibility of his youth, Rawls responded to the culture wars of our times by drawing away from the openness that *A Theory of Justice* was meant to champion, turning in a secularist direction. Lest his concerns seem unfairly to single out religions, he extended his warning against sectarianism to any proposal grounded in a "comprehensive doctrine," metaphysical or religious. That leaves those who stand outside the Rawlsian circle to wonder whether core values that anchor the liberal dispensation, such as the inestimable worth of the individual human life and the paramount worth of human flourishing, are among those to be muffled in deliberations about the basic rules that govern a society.

With an Orwellian twist, Rawls titled his guidelines and the book that proposed them *Political Liberalism*. Excluded from

public debate about core matters of public principle were any arguments not deemed anchored in reason by those Rawls felt safe in accrediting as arbiters of the reasonable. Where the veil of ignorance had shaped core Rawlsian norms, a new nocturnal council is at work, at least within good Rawlsian conscience, and probably (as a natural consequence) in the sphere of social interactions as well. Mill would not be alone in blenching at hearing such demands called liberal. So, having sketched a basis for personal and societal pluralism as regards religion in my first chapter, I turn in the second to Rawls's argument that religious and metaphysical discourse has no proper place at the deliberative table in a democracy.

Central to the thoughts that motivated Rawls's proposal were the continuing objections of pro-life advocates to the widespread practice of abortion. But Rawls couches his case in universal terms. The sweeping generality that results slights the religious underpinnings of many a classic argument against slavery. In search of "reasonable" rather than religious or metaphysical warrant for environmental protections, Rawls seeks to ground environmental protections in the premise that it is irrational to foul one's bed: Religious or metaphysical appeals, say, to human stewardship or to the intrinsic worth of biodiversity or ecological preservation are apparently too dependent on a comprehensive doctrine. Property rights or national sovereignty are more suitably secular.

Rawls labors to delimit the scope of his restraints, but he is not very successful in framing a consistent screen. That aim itself is deeply flawed. Any real-world effort to implement what Rawls proposes would provoke widespread indignation at the chilling of free expression, *especially* in public deliberations. Should fashion, however, succeed in barring from public fora overt appeals to religious precepts or metaphysical concepts, the net effect would be a rising wave of hypocrisy, of motives cloaked, camouflaged, and dissociated from the traditions that inspired them. The Soviet experience presages what would happen next: Advocates of any suspect thought would couch in double meaning the arguments they hoped would win credit to their cause.

Concrete issues often drive seemingly universal claims. So Rawls's discomfort with (specific) religious postures is sublimated in universalism and legalism. Hoping to focus the issues more concretely, in Chapter 3 I address some moral minima and maxima: Are there some practices that we all should condemn and hope to see abolished? I cannot claim that the practices I name here – genocide, engineered famine, and germ warfare; terrorism, hostage taking, and the suborning of child warriors; slavery, polygamy, and incest; rape and cliterodectomy – are damned universally. There are cultures and subcultures, individual inclinations, and even some states that have sustained some of these practices historically and continue to sustain them. But I argue that they are wrong nonetheless. Unanimity is not the criterion of universality. There are good grounds for our revulsion, and it matters little whether objections are couched in religious or metaphysical (including humanistic) terms.

Turning from the minimal to the maximal, I consider the Decalogue, a classic code rooted in a distinctive cultural context, which gives thick, concrete articulation to the universal themes that underwrite such minimal norms as I have calendared, thereby transforming broad if abstract principles into the makings of an ethos and thus a way of life. In addressing the Decalogue, I do not argue from the premise that these commands are the words of God, the demands of the Transcendent made actionable. That kind of claim bears weight only for those who already embrace the twin tablets. Rather, as in all my work at the interface of religion and ethics, I think we must judge the source by the content before we can begin to understand the content by reference to its highest source.

In its original recension and in its living context at the heart of Mosaic law and practice, the Decalogue *is* predicated on the idea that its norms are God's commands. Clearly it would be wrong to try and legislate its precepts in a pluralistic society. Enough history clings to these rules to make such imposition of their norms oppressive and, for some of the commandments, impractical. Besides, the adjustments necessary in wrenching these norms

from their context would deracinate them tellingly. The Decalogue is not a pre-Socratic fragment or a stand-alone canon. It is constitutive in an integrated system of law, organic enough that its components risk their integrity and lose the full richness of their meaning when isolated from the way of life they project. Yet these norms have been adapted in new contexts and have guided and steadied the moral lives of many who live beyond the tradition in which their imperatives took root.

The ethos informed by the Decalogue is perfectionist and aspirational. God's words here address the individual. That makes this tiny code potentially transformative. Interweaving moral and legal standards, it opens avenues of growth whose full reach is unbounded. The scattered examples of moral minima that I have sampled, by contrast, make no overt reference to transcendence. Yet they too allude, implicitly, to the divine, not as a source of authority but as a floor and backstop to the minimal claims of human dignity: If there is transcendent value in humanity, as our horror, say, at torture and mutilation may attest, then the human image itself bespeaks a higher canon of value – much as the beauty of a sunrise or the sublimity of the mountains or the sea elevates us from a world in which all values seem merely instrumental.

What do we learn about pluralism when we set the Decalogue's overt intentionality toward the transcendent alongside the erasure of divinity in self-consciously secular norms? Part of what we learn is the power of organic systems. The sweeping ideas and broad norms that Rawls called comprehensive can be dangerous or reassuring. So, the tone and tenor of an ethos are just as critical as the formal properties of an argument in determining what should count as reasonable. Like Alasdair MacIntyre, I think we need to keep alive our awareness that moral ideals function actively in living practice, but grow stale and sterile when abstracted from their systemic context. So do metaphysical ideals. That fact parallels what Kuhn saw (inspired, as Quine was, by the holism of Pierre Duhem) in scientific and cosmological constructs.

But holism is not the same as relativism. It does not make truth claims or moral norms arbitrary. If systems – of language or ritual, law, morals or propriety, theory or theology – are *constructed*, that does not make them somehow impertinent. Neo-Darwinism is no less true for being a construct, and the British and American Constitutions are no less just because they differ. There are many ways of weaving together a life or a vision, whether for an individual or for a society. One strength of pluralism as I understand it is that it does not iron diversity into pleats of secularity. It preserves the robust variety of norms, ideas, and ideals that give life and energy to human thought and practice. Many a would-be liberal finds particularity threatening, as if it meant particularism. But that bias may overlook the way values get their liveliness from their engagement in the thick of life and how thoughts get their concreteness by connecting not just with other thoughts but also with practices, persons, and peoples in their particularity.

The opposition of the particular to the universal balks at a false dichotomy. It ignores the constitution of authentic universals by the particulars that body them forth. Correspondingly, the universality of the secular is a high-priced illusion. Often it means giving up a hearty concreteness for pale abstractions. Secularism too often fails to keep its promises of universality. What grows very clear when Rawls lays his cards on the table is that a secularism that promised to embrace (and replace) what was precious in particularity has willfully suppressed vital strands of tradition, even the ones from which its own ideals are abstracted. Natan Sharansky recalls an image of Cynthia Ozick's that heartened him as he struggled with the false dichotomy that cast its shadow over his years of imprisonment and torment in the Soviet Union. Communism had summoned everyone to give up loyalty to a heritage – religious, ethnic, linguistic, or historical – to become a new Soviet man. A thinner particularity was to replace old identities and values. What Sharansky found, in making common cause with dissidents of every stripe, was that the particularities that moved his allies gave sinew to a more genuine universality. The image from Ozick was that of a shofar: "Nothing happens,"

Sharansky wrote, "if you blow into the wide end. But if you blow into the narrow end, the call of the shofar rings loud and true."[1]

In *The Law of Peoples*, Rawls asks how a liberal society should relate to societies that are not liberal, but "hierarchical." Rawls's intentions are irenic, but his means prove inefficacious. To demonstrate his pluralist good faith, he models a "society of liberal peoples" and the standards he imagines they would choose in relating to nonliberal but "decent" peoples. As in his work on justice, he invokes the veil of ignorance to augur what liberal peoples would (and therefore should) find tolerable. As the acid test, he pictures a "people" that he calls Kazanistan. The name is invented, like that of Pakistan, a word made up of the initials of that country's notional regions – Punjab, Afghania, Kashmir, Iran, Sindh, Tukharistan, Afghanistan, and in the end, Baluchistan. That naming was lightened by a play on "Paki," a word implying spiritual purity. But Rawls's invention exceeds his coinage of a name: Purity here becomes a postulate. To show that liberal societies can welcome "decent" peoples who do not share their own high standards of social and political legitimacy, he reverts to a habit of thought that is ultimately mathematical: Just as he defined rationality in *A Theory of Justice* so as to yield the very foundations he thought should undergird a just society, he now posits the conditions a "decent," if hierarchical, people would have to meet and *then* posits a people that meets them. The imagined society does meet the standard he sets. But it does so *ex hypothesi*. Here, as in *A Theory of Justice*, the reasoning is a slipknot: It holds so long as its conditions are met. But it meets them by stipulation.

A Theory of Justice is often thought to argue normatively. But its core claims are descriptive: They rest on an affirmation about what *we* would call justice, complemented by the claim that rational choosers behind a veil of ignorance would alight on just those standards. In extending this idea cross-culturally, Rawls posits liberal *peoples* who would accept in fellowship peoples who are not liberal but still decent. Of course, they would, if

[1] Sharansky, *Fear no Evil*, xxii.

those exotics met just the standards Rawls postulates that the representatives of liberal peoples would find both necessary and sufficient for acceptance. *The Law of Peoples*, then, contrary to Rawls's hopes, contributes little to global understanding or the prospects of world peace.

Pluralism, in my view, is neither quite as hard as finding a lowest common denominator among incommensurables nor as easy as positing the solution to a problem that *ex hypothesi* has exactly that solution. It is a real-world problem, not a mathematical puzzle. It demands real, ongoing work – good will, intelligence, open-mindedness, yes – but also work, domestically and internationally. It means making allowances, seeking understanding, knowing a bit about oneself and a bit about the others too. It does not demand the sacrifice of logic or common sense, declaring differences unreal or bracketing as inconsequent what matters most to others. It does not mean chucking our values or giving up what we think or know or hope to accomplish. It does not demand squaring the circle to make everything and everyone fit together neatly and nicely. The kind of acceptance pluralism asks for when it commends acceptance of others is a lot like the kind of acceptance that we hope we can give ourselves when we look in the mirror honestly enough to see our weaknesses and charitably enough not to minimize our strengths. That, after all, to see others as we best see ourselves is a fine corollary of the golden rule.