

UDAY SINGH MEHTA IN CONVERSATION WITH AKEEL BILGRAMI ...

To mark the publication of Akeel Bilgrami's major recent book, *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment* (Harvard University Press 2014 and Permanent Black, 2014, details below), we requested the political theorist, Uday Singh Mehta,



UDAY MEHTA

to converse with Akeel Bilgrami on issues raised by his book and related matters. Uday Singh Mehta is the author of the pathbreaking *Liberalism and Empire: Nineteenth Century British Liberal Thought* (1999), which won the J. David Greenstone Book Award 2001 for the best book in history and theory.

It turned out to be a scintillating, deeply thoughtful discussion.



AKEEL BILGRAMI

Q1

I think of you, especially in the essays that constitute this book, as doing a rather particular kind of philosophy. It is a very distinguished tradition of practitioners, including the late Richard Rorty, Bernard Williams, and Alasdair MacIntyre in the Anglo-American tradition; Michel Foucault, in the French tradition, Adorno and Walter Benjamin in the German tradition, and of course several others. One of the things that marks this way of doing philosophy (if that is the term we should use) is that the familiar, and typically sharp lines, that separate philosophy from the humanities and the social sciences are willfully and self-consciously breached. I don't mean that they are breached just for heck of it, but that questions are posed in such a way that makes answering them reliant on such a breach. Bernard Williams, as you know, proudly affirmed philosophy as a humanistic discipline. Your own work is heavily informed by the Dissenting tradition of 17th century thought and by contemporary history and social science. And, yet, in many ways this way of

doing philosophy is the minor key of contemporary Anglo-American, and increasingly, even Continental philosophy. How would you describe what you do? Does it matter to you if it is thought of as “doing philosophy,” or does that description seem arcane to you, as it did for Richard Rorty?

AI

I must confess that my work has not been motivated by any self-conscious effort towards trying to reorient the discipline of philosophy nor even to follow a tradition set by the philosophers you mention, much as I admire them all. Rather, it's just that certain issues grabbed my interest and I followed what I thought was most important and urgent in them and when that led to having to read history and intellectual history, and to study some political economy and politics and a variety of cultural phenomena, I just followed that lead as best I could—mostly for the sake of coming to some fundamental understanding of the issues. You are certainly right that most philosophers do not have a capacious understanding of their subject and many might even view this sort of outreach as contaminating their discipline. However, looking at things from the other side, we mustn't forget that the social sciences themselves, particularly Economics, have manifestly abandoned the historical, the broadly conceptual, and, above all, the value-oriented aspects of their pursuits. So it is possible that we are now at a disciplinary moment when philosophy is poised to pick up that slack and pay close attention to the very things that the social sciences have

abdicated. This would, then, be an exciting time to be doing philosophy.

Q2

One of the very striking claims you have been making for several years, and which you make in these essays (and which has had a huge influence on me), is that for a figure like Gandhi, politics in its many forms, including in our agency as citizens, just was not the terms through which he thought of bettering the world. This is a remarkable claim, especially since we so often think of Gandhi as having inaugurated mass politics in India. Encouraging a certain type of mass public action is one of his most enduring influences all over the world. The idea that there could be something profoundly wrong with the world; and that nevertheless, the redress to that condition was not to be secured through political means, goes against the dominant grain of modern thinking. Could you say more about this? Is this a way of animating the category of ethics as something sharply distinct from politics, rather than the way it is typically thought of as something tied to politics?

A2

When I made the claim you cite, I was trying to understand what I described as a “studied indifference” in much of Gandhi’s theoretical writing (of course, we must not understand the term “theoretical” here in any academic sense) to the kind of liberal, constitutional, framework within which the very idea of politics was mostly understood in the tradition of his colonial masters. I was trying to put that indifference together, on the one hand with Gandhi’s incessant moralistic perspective

on things and his constantly avowed religiosity and, on the other hand, with his resistance to political abstractions that took one away from the experiences of ordinary people in their quotidian social habitat. In order to integrate these different aspects of his thought, it seemed to me right to attribute to him a skepticism about the idea that what is bad *in human beings* (a constant theme for Gandhi as for all religious moralists) can be set right simply by making them over into some abstract form of being called “citizens” in a form of polity that came to be associated with the nation-building exercises in Europe since the Westphalian peace. That is what I meant when I suggested Gandhi was an anti-political thinker. This is quite compatible with viewing Gandhi as having inaugurated a form of mass politics in India that was highly original and imaginative. You ask something slightly different: whether he believed that a wrong *in the world* (which is somewhat different from what is bad *in us*) could be redressed by political means. Well, for him, I think a lot depends on what that wrong is or, better, what level of description you give it. It also depends on which phase and context of his thinking we are talking about. So, for instance, if you described the wrong in terms of what he opposed in very specifically oppressive actions and policies of the British government in colonial India or colonial South Africa, he certainly repeatedly appealed to mass politics of one kind or other to resist such wrongs. Clearly, in this sense, he believed in a politics of resistance. So also, as others have pointed out, when it came to the

resolution that was moved at the Karachi Congress in 1931, he found himself in a context where he openly committed himself to a radical (rather than an orthodox liberal) version of political principles and rights. Even on secularist politics he changed his mind, as Bipan Chandra has documented, from the time of his early writings to what he was saying by the 1940s. (I discuss some of this in my chapter on secularism in the book.) But it is also well known that he believed that there was a great deal in modern civilization of the West that was tied to capitalism and more generally to attitudes of gain and profit and consumerism that you could not merely constrain by liberal or even social-democratic conceptions of politics, i.e., by a familiar set of political, legal, and economic constraints. Rather one should shun the entire mentality that underlies it. He certainly did not have a socialist alternative that was supposed to follow upon a transcending of capitalism in the way that Marx did; instead he wanted to *preempt* capitalism in India (not unlike Marx in his very late phase when he was focused on the peasant communes in Russia) and to do so by repudiating the mentality, the cognitive outlook, that lay behind it. This required a deeper reflection about what the corrosive moral and political effects of that mentality are. *Hind Swaraj*, among other things, is a harshly worded reflection about just that.

Q3

Staying with Gandhi, one of the ways in which Gandhi strikes me as almost unique among colonial critics of imperialism is that his challenge to the empire seems singularly unmarked by a sense of inferiority, or a lack of self-confidence—itself so often a product of the empire. This does not seem to me to be true of Nehru, Ambedkar Jinnah, or for that matter Kenyatta or Nkrumah. They all appear not just to have been influenced (as Gandhi clearly was too) by the ideas and practices of the empire, but also in some way distorted, even disfigured, by them. I am not sure you agree with this characterization of Gandhi (and the others), but it makes me wonder if the reason for it might have something to do with what you argue, namely that Gandhi's opposition to the empire is ultimately a part, and only a part, of a much larger critique of modernity. Gandhi (like Marx), as you point out, is ultimately really concerned with a kind of alienation from nature and from ourselves, which for both of them are the defining traits of modernity. In that sense his critique of empire, even though very sharp, is almost a secondary purpose, and because of that he can inoculate himself from the distortions, such as those that stem from wanting to wrestle power from the imperialists.

A3

The way I've put the point you are making is to say that Gandhi had a very specific sort of confidence that later, even very powerful, anti-imperialist voices such as Fanon or, say, Edward Said, did not possess. Your term "inferiority" is perhaps a slightly misleading description to put on what the source of the lack of this confidence in the others really is. So take someone like Said, who is so widely read today. He wrote eloquently about the distortions that "the West" has shown in its

understanding and conceptualizations of *the cultures of the global South* (or what was called the “Orient”). But he never really asked what was wrong in the West’s own civilizational tendencies, in its own conceptualizations, in short what was wrong in the West’s understanding of *itself*. It requires a specific kind of confidence to ask that, a confidence that comes not from overcoming a sense of inferiority so much as from possessing a set of intellectual and conceptual reserves. It really comes, in my view, from being a *philosopher* of a sort that I believe Gandhi was and Said and Fanon were not. It comes from having deeply reflected on moral concepts and the moral life and its relation to politics and economics and culture. That is really my primary reason for being so interested in Gandhi and, as you say, for my placing him side by side with Marx and looking at his ideas on nature, alienation, and so on. Your question, as you have formulated it, makes it seem that if one sees this quality in Gandhi’s thought, one must see his anti-imperialism as secondary and somewhat unimportant. I wonder if that can be right. It would be a bit like saying Marx’s anti-capitalism is made less important because he believes that transcending capitalism is in the service of freeing human beings into a new and liberated subjectivity that is unalienated. I would prefer to say that Gandhi’s anti-imperialism was supremely important to him but it *nested within* his eventual ideal of a self-governing moral human subject, just as Marx’s critique of capitalism did.

Q4

You were a close friend and colleague of the late Edward Said. By pure happenstance during the last conversation I had with Edward (on the phone) he mentioned you with great affection and admiration and spoke of the course you were teaching together. You write very movingly in your essay about him. It is an essay about Edward but also about friendship. Your relationship was clearly a friendship of many parts — shared intellectual passions, political commitments, a deep love of music, and many other things. Reading your essay on Said it made me think about friendships and the academy. How have these and other (I am thinking of Noam Chomsky and Prabhat Patnaik to whom you dedicate this volume) specifically “academic” friendships molded your life in the American academy and are there such friendships that link you with India? Has friendship been important to the ideas that you cherish?

A4

It’s hard to talk about specific friendships in a public forum, Uday. But, I do see the point of your question. Speaking generally (individuals apart), in the academy and in intellectual life more broadly, when you learn about ideas from others they become friends in a way that is closely tied to personal respect as much as intimate or amiable relations. Anyone with any experience in the academy will notice that intellectual ability is far more common than intellectual character, and may even perhaps be less important than it. I reckon all of us over a lifetime of

thinking and writing come across and, if we are lucky, come to know a handful of people (if that) of whom one thinks: if he or she thinks I am alright, I must at least approximate being alright. They may be one's friends, of course, but they are not merely so.

Q5

Finally, since this book is being published in America and India, what are your thoughts about these two rather difference contexts in which you are intervening? This is clearly not a book of policy recommendations, but you are avidly engaged with public and intellectual life in India. What are some of the points where you see your work as confronting the new political dispensation in India following the recent elections?

A5

I do spend about six weeks in India each year and yes I do try and keep up with Indian politics and occasionally, if asked, write about India in more public spaces than books and learned journals. About the outcome of the recent elections, I can't, in a short space, do much more than say that there is nothing to do but to work as hard as we can in the next few years to try and make sure that there is a very different outcome next time. It has never before been as frustrating for me to be away from India since it is more urgent now than ever before (except perhaps the brief period of 'the emergency') to put one's effort in opposing the government and its policies.

Q6

Could you name 5 or 6 books *outside* your discipline that have influenced your work in recent years?

A6

In no particular order and without too much reflection let me put down the following:

- 1) Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*
- 2) Various writings of Marx that I have studied over the last few decades including (what is often excluded by others influenced by Marx), *the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*
- 3) Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*
- 4) M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*
- 5) Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*
- 6) Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*

AKEEL BILGRAMI



Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment

“Akeel Bilgrami, a leading analytical philosopher, has over the years also engaged philosophically with contemporary issues of Indian politics. The essays in this volume show him intervening with great analytical skill as well as sagacity in the debates over secularism and identity politics.”—Partha Chatterjee

“It is a rewarding experience to read these thoughtful and penetrating essays, with their wide-ranging, provocative, and challenging ideas and insights, deeply informed and carefully reasoned, and reaching to issues of fundamental concern in the contemporary world.”—Noam Chomsky



The jacket photo is of an installation by Manisha Bhattacharya. Bringing clarity to a subject clouded by polemic, *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment* is a rigorous exploration of how secularism and identity emerged as concepts in different parts of the modern world. At a time when secularist and religious worldviews appear irreconcilable, Akeel Bilgrami strikes out on a path distinctly his own, criticizing secularist proponents and detractors, liberal universalists and multicultural relativists alike.

Those who ground secularism in arguments that aspire to universal reach, Bilgrami argues, fundamentally misunderstand the nature of politics. To those, by contrast, who regard secularism as a mere outgrowth of colonial domination, he offers the possibility of a more conceptually vernacular ground for political secularism. Focusing on the response to Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, Bilgrami asks why Islamic identity has so often been a mobilizing force against

liberalism, and he answers the question with diagnostic sympathy, providing a philosophical framework within which the Islamic tradition might overcome the resentments prompted by its colonized past and present.

Turning to Gandhi's political and religious thought, Bilgrami ponders whether the increasing appeal of religion in many parts of the world reflects a growing disillusionment not with science but with an outlook of detachment around the rise of modern science and capitalism.

AKEEL BILGRAMI is Sidney Morgenbesser Professor of Philosophy and Director, South Asian Institute, Columbia University.

“Carrying on the critical spirit of Edward Said, Bilgrami presents a profoundly original *emancipatory* genealogy of secularism-and-religion, identity, and enchantment, and, in so doing, of the hidden historical and conceptual connections between them. It is emancipatory in bringing to light within them the possibility of a distinct kind of radical politics today—one that draws on seventeenth-century English radicalism, German romanticism, Marx, and especially Gandhi, among others. In the conclusion he shows the striking affinities of this remarkable achievement to Said's critical humanism. This is a must-read for anyone who wishes to think differently about these central problems of the present and respond constructively to them.”—**James Tully**

“Bilgrami became known as one of the leading voices on the problem of secularism long before the topic became fashionable in the United States, and has continued to articulate a thorough and rigorous approach to tough questions that are now very widely debated. One has a strong sense of the continuity of position—and more impressively, the continuity of Bilgrami's recognizable voice, with its combination of seriousness about thinking, the humanity of wide sympathies, and a certain argumentative ferocity—over a period of some twenty years. This book has been eagerly anticipated by a wide interdisciplinary audience as essays from a leading thinker in the field; it will appeal broadly, and its lasting impact is assured.”—**Michael Warner**