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Cultural Pluralism and Religious Belief: Around Henry Hardy's *In Search of Isaiah Berlin*: *A Literary Adventure*

1. A gift for Berlinophiles

Henry Hardy, a doctor of philosophy (Oxford) and Isaiah Berlin's lifelong editor, had often been asked why he did not write on Berlin himself. His reply used to be in two parts. First and foremost, he observed that he was an editor, not an author. Then he added that he had in fact written several pieces, principally on commission. To the suggestion that he should write more he would reply with typical English self-deprecation: "Read what I have already written, and perhaps you'll withdraw your suggestion".

Fortunately 2018 marked a change in Hardy's attitude. In its fall his first book, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*, appeared, and was reprinted only months later². The volume was received enthusiastically³. Timothy Garton Ash commented: "this fantastic book (...) is (...) superbly edited, beautifully produced, [and] extremely well written". Other reviewers characterised it as "a wonderful book on a wonderful subject" (John Banville, *The Guardian*), "vivid, heartfelt and eloquently written" (JR, Amazon), "absolutely fascinating (...) absolutely absorbing (...) a delightful read" (Nigel Warburton, "The Best Philosophy Books of 2018", *Five Books*), "written with passion, wit and verve" (Aurelian Craitu, *Los Angeles Review of Books*).

The commentators emphasised the extraordinarily productive partnership between Hardy and Berlin, and the fascinating friendship which their collaboration eventually became. They praised Hardy's tremendous editorial success: "Anybody who enjoys Berlin's writing owes a huge debt to Hardy, whose valiant and long-term struggle to get the essays out has resulted in the magnificent volumes we have access to today" (Steve Foulger, Amazon), "Currently, Berlin's published works stand at over twenty volumes, all of which have been either edited or co-edited by Hardy. This must count as one of the great editorial achievements of recent times" (Johnny Lyons, *Dublin Review of Books*).

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² H. Hardy, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*, London 2018 (repr. with corrections 2019).

³ All the excerpts quoted below are available at The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library hosted by Oxford's Wolfson College: <http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/onib/books.html>, accessed on: 31.08.2019.

Yet only two out of over twenty reviewers referred to Hardy's own philosophical investigations, which form the second part of his book, entitled *Probing ideas*. Nigel Warburton limited himself to the following statement: "Henry Hardy is a highly intelligent thinker in his own right". Steve Foulger briefly outlined the content of the philosophical part of the book: "Hardy looks at two areas where he felt that Berlin's value pluralism needed further explication – how religions, as essentially monist and potentially authoritarian organisations, fit into a pluralist world; and the nature of the common core of basic values that prevent value pluralism collapsing into relativism". Other commentators, such as David Herman, found Hardy's book "an absolutely compelling memoir" of "a brilliant editor who single-handedly transformed Berlin's reputation" (David Herman, *Jewish Chronicle*)⁴. However, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin* is much more than that. It was not without reason that Hardy devoted his professional career to editing Berlin's work. The main incentive for his having made such a choice was his fascination with Berlin's philosophy. Hardy states this explicitly: "it was my response to Berlin's ideas that motivated my work on his writings"⁵. While doing the editorial work and struggling with the author's reluctance to publish his writings, Hardy was simultaneously engaged with his own penetrating research. In addition to his correspondence with Berlin about purely editorial matters, he initiated an exchange of philosophical letters devoted to value pluralism and the "moral core". Thanks to his twenty-three-year collaboration with Berlin in his lifetime, and a further twenty years work after Berlin's death, Hardy gained a unique expertise in Berlin's writing and in the literature on it. Hardy's contribution to the study of Berlin's ideas is well worth analysing and discussing. But before I come to that, let me comment on the first part of the book.

2. My own "personal impressions"

In the 1980s and 1990s I was privileged to meet and correspond with Isaiah Berlin. I also met Henry Hardy as a natural consequence of my work on Berlin's philosophy. I remember innumerable occasions when Berlin's reaction to my bibliographical questions was "Go to Henry. Henry will know". And Henry did know. Despite my torturing him constantly with hundreds of queries and requests, we eventually became friends. I cannot help juxtaposing Hardy's recollections of his collaboration with Berlin with my "personal impressions" of the meetings with our common master. It was with the utmost amusement that I read in Hardy's book: "Berlin was not good at sticking to the point in conversation – a very attractive quality unless one wanted to make practical progress – and I almost always wrote him a letter when I wanted to do business"⁶.

I adopted a similar strategy. While staying on scholarships in Oxford, where I was intensively working on my DPhil on Berlin's doctrine of liberty, and then on a book devoted to his achievements, I used to prepare essays for the appointments as if I were an undergraduate and he my tutor. It was my own "invention" to bring written texts to be discussed during our meetings. My aim was to focus his attention on the problems that I wanted to talk about. Otherwise his thoughts would be bound to wander off in unpredictable directions, together with his boisterous utterances, articulated at rapid

⁴ For the second quote see: D. Herman, *A new book of Isaiah*, "The Jewish Chronicle" 1.02.2019, <https://www.press-reader.com/uk/the-jewish-chronicle/20190201/282243781825901>, accessed on: 31.08.2019.

⁵ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. xi.

⁶ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 28.

speed. It was not without reason that Berlin was, a bit spitefully, called by Michael Oakeshott “a Paganini of ideas”⁷. I found out that the only effective way to “bridle” his irrepressible temperament was to present a written record of my investigations into his thought. My hosts at St John’s, where I stayed several times, were utterly amazed by Berlin’s demanding attitude. It was not easy to persuade them that the Oxonian idea of preparing essays for appointments was exclusively mine.

Another passage in Hardy’s book that evoked my own past experiences records his first reading of Berlin’s *Four Essays on Liberty*:

I devoured the book and was transfixed. Berlin liked to refer to the unmistakable sensation, when reading, of encountering unusual excellence, writing, for instance, of an essay by L. B. Namier: “This essay was of an altogether higher quality. In reading it one had the sensation – for which there is no substitute – of suddenly sailing in first-class waters”⁸. This was the sensation I experienced on first looking into Berlin⁹.

I happened to read Berlin’s famous essay *Two Concepts of Liberty*, published as a pamphlet, during the dark night of martial law in Poland. It transferred me from the world of hopelessness and oppression to an imaginary meeting with a sage who understood absolutely everything – the loathsome experience of being enslaved, the anger unavoidable in such circumstances, and the conditions which were an affront to one’s dignity. The master of empathetic understanding not only seemed to have grasped the acute feelings of the oppressed, but he had also evidently fathomed the nature of totalitarianism and its sources. Both Hardy and I were transfixed by Berlin’s writing, though we came from utterly different worlds and were of completely disparate backgrounds. As for me, I not only “sailed in first-class waters”: I additionally experienced the sensation of, so to speak, saying hello to myself. In other words, all of a sudden I felt free¹⁰.

I cannot help elaborating on one particular aspect of the relationship between Berlin and Hardy. I sometimes gained the impression that my interlocutor was a bit apprehensive of his editor. When he referred to Hardy’s publishing projects, he behaved like a defiant schoolboy, rebelling against a strict master. He openly showed his unwillingness to have his works published in his lifetime. Yet, at the same time, he seemed to be aware that he would eventually have to yield, at least to a certain extent. There was no doubt of his great respect for his editor, who in most cases won their constant tug-of-war. This is how Hardy characterises the strategy which he adopted while working as Berlin’s “prehumous” literary executor: “throughout our relationship I felt I had to push as hard as I dared, at every step, in order to secure the best outcome that I could in the face of Berlin’s ingrained self-doubt, hesitancy and caution”¹¹.

This was the image of their relationship that I used to have before reading *In Search of Isaiah Berlin*. To my astonishment I encountered in the book the confession: “I both loved and feared Berlin”¹². I was utterly flabbergasted by this revelation. Is it possible that the demanding schoolteacher might be afraid of his obstinate pupil? For Hardy does from time to time step into the character of a strict master: “If Berlin did not want

⁷ LSE Archives, Oakeshott 1/3.

⁸ I. Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, H. Hardy (ed.), London 2018, p. 123.

⁹ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 23.

¹⁰ I talked about this with Isaiah Berlin during our conversations in 1986 and 1991: see I. Berlin, B. Polanowska-Sygułska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, Amherst (NY) 2006, pp. 159, 207.

¹¹ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 31.

¹² H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 2.

to do something, even a clear earlier commitment would not stand in his way. Not for nothing was he the over-indulged only surviving child of doting parents¹³. Moreover, in Hardy's recollections there is – however subtle – the characteristic didactic tone of a tutor:

I acquired a strong taste for the kind of editorial work that makes possible the publication of a book which otherwise would not have appeared. It is largely a type of midwifery, doubtless, but has the other attraction of allowing a vicarious claim to a tiny fraction of the paternity¹⁴.

Yet, on the other hand, Hardy did have reasons to fear Berlin, who proved to be self-deprecating, inconsiderate, infirm of purpose, and notoriously insecure. He might well (and once did) withdraw his consent to have a new volume of his essays published, even at the last stage of editorial work. This is why the editor's admiration for the philosopher's work was "well laced with frustration"¹⁵. Hardy comments on the ordeal that he was constantly going through: "I was never able to relax, and daily anticipated disaster"¹⁶. Another sentence acts like a lens focusing all the traits of their collaboration: "I propose; he demurs; later he yields; the critics approve; he is pleased; we start again no further forward"¹⁷. In the meantime, Berlin would do anything to postpone if not stop the editorial work that was being unwaveringly performed by his literary executor. It is worth quoting here several excerpts from his letters to Hardy: "my natural inclination is towards the posthumous, as you may imagine"¹⁸; "make no haste! I am all in favour of procrastination. The whole prospect fills me with alarm"¹⁹; "If you present me with a clean manuscript (...) of the whole thing one day, I would undertake at least to read it, and scribble things on it. But not yet, oh Lord, not yet!"²⁰; "Wait, I beg you! (my permanent cry to you – (...) 'festina lente' [Latin for 'hurry slowly'])"²¹; "Hold your (and my) horses"²². One can imagine how exhausting it must have been for the editor to fight this perpetual battle with the author. It should be added that Berlin's manuscripts did need a lot of editorial work, especially as he was notoriously unorganised and unscholarly. For instance, he used to "improve" quotations. The footnotes which he provided were often inaccurate, as he did not check his sources scrupulously. He openly acknowledged his unscholarliness: "I never annotate anything I read, never mark passages, never do anything that serious scholars do – it's a grave fault, I admit, but I am too old to mend now"²³. Tracing missing sources and correcting inaccuracies required tireless labours, and when all the work was already completed, Berlin could all of a sudden change his mind and forbid publication of the prepared manuscript. No wonder Hardy feared Berlin. So it turns out that each of them felt anxiety about the other. Anyway, the collaboration between the indecisive genius and the obsessive pedant (Hardy's characterisations) proved to be enormously fruitful²⁴. Berlin reported

¹³ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 27.

¹⁴ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 62.

¹⁵ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 47. The other reason were the unclarities in Berlin's work which Hardy addressed in his letters to him.

¹⁶ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 27.

¹⁷ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 147.

¹⁸ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 138.

¹⁹ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 55.

²⁰ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 137.

²¹ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 79.

²² H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 156.

²³ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 104.

²⁴ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, pp. 1–11.

to Hardy: "Herbert Hart says that you have transformed my reputation for ever, and had a more decisive effect on it and indirectly me than anyone has ever had. It may well be so. What a charge to labour under!"²⁵.

3. Probing ideas

The second part of the book is devoted to the philosophical discussion between Hardy and Berlin, initiated by the former in 1991 and continued nearly till the latter's death in November 1997. Hardy gives an account of their correspondence, quoting numerous letters and furnishing them with comments. In this way he makes available to the readers of *In Search of Isaiah Berlin* fascinating material, which throws light not only on Berlin's philosophical views and many difficulties inherent in them, but also on Hardy's continuous quest and, eventually, on the relationship between the two utterly different personalities.

Let me first make some comments on the chapter that introduces the philosophical section, entitled: *Not Angels or Lunatics: Berlin on Human Nature*. There are two interpretations there that give rise to doubts. While presenting Berlin's vision of human nature Hardy writes that:

[it] was rooted in the conviction that the most important and distinctive human characteristic is freedom of the will, because it enables us to make the necessary deliberate, conscious choices between our conflicting ends, and so forge our own identities. (He sometimes called this "basic freedom", as opposed to the specifically political concepts of negative and positive liberty)²⁶.

What Hardy seems to suggest here is that to be free in the basic sense requires making choices, that is, executing one's freedom. This is not exactly how Berlin conceived of this attribute of the human being. What he had in mind is a biological/psychological characteristic, suppression of which dehumanises the oppressed or tortured man. In other words, basic freedom is the ability to make choices, however trivial. Berlin explained the concept of basic freedom in a letter to me of 18 February 1997:

Choice: there are two sorts of choice (...). One is basic choice, that a human being is not fully human, not human at all, unless he can choose between A and B; I may be tied to a tree, or subject to torture, or whatever, but I can choose either to accept this or try to fight against it, to bend my little finger or not bend it, or whatever; I must have some basic powers of choice in some region – if I am deprived of choice, then I become a robot, hypnotised, to that extent not free, therefore not human. That kind of freedom, the power of basic choice, however limited, is part of what it is to be a human being (...)²⁷.

Another excerpt which does not seem "Isaiahish" appears in a list of basic human needs which Hardy ascribes to Berlin. Among many others we find the following item: "(rational) self-government"²⁸. The adjective "rational" brings back to one's mind Rawlsian original position or even Raz's ideal of autonomy, but not Berlin's notion of human nature. While emphasising that what reason can do, it should do²⁹, Berlin

²⁵ Letter of 2 October 1979. H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 22.

²⁶ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 173.

²⁷ I. Berlin, B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished...*, p. 87.

²⁸ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 179.

²⁹ In an unpublished letter to Claude Galipeau of 16 May 1991.

is simultaneously sceptical about its capabilities and points to its limits. Moreover, he reveals that the pursuit of the ideal of autonomy and an increase in self-knowledge may be destructive to artistic creativity:

If I am a poet, may it not be that some forms of knowledge will curtail my powers (...)? Let us suppose that I require as a stimulus to my imagination illusions and myths of a certain kind which are provided by the religion in which I have been brought up or to which I have been converted. Let us assume that some honourable rationalist refutes these beliefs, shatters my illusions, dissipates the myths; may it not be that my clear gain in knowledge and rationality is paid for by the diminution or destruction of my powers as a poet? (...) Again, if I am a singer, self-consciousness – the child of knowledge – may inhibit the spontaneity that may be a necessary condition of my performance (...). Reflection may ruin my painting if this depends on not thinking (...)³⁰.

Hardy put the qualifier “rational” in parentheses; yet, in my opinion it would be better if he entirely omitted it.

Let me now deal with the crucial remaining chapters in the second part of the book, especially with the exchange of letters between Hardy and Berlin. There are several motifs which recur in their philosophical correspondence. First, there is the Gordian knot of the relationship between pluralism and religion, a knot which was eventually left uncut. I shall give particular attention to this problem later in the article. Secondly, Hardy considers the metaphors of the common moral core and the human horizon, which are essential to Berlin’s doctrine of pluralism. In particular, he exposes Berlin’s inconsistent uses of them and tries to eradicate the muddle. Among other things, he refers to George Crowder’s clarification of both metaphors. I shall not elaborate on this issue as I entirely agree with the author’s interpretation (and oppose that of Crowder). Hardy then comments on a draft of John Gray’s study of Berlin’s thought and raises the problem of the relationship between pluralism and liberalism. I tackled this issue in *Unfinished Dialogue*³¹ and in a recently published article³², so again I shall not engage here with this highly disputable issue.

Finally, Hardy presses Berlin to answer the accursed question concerning human evil. In Hardy’s view, and also in that of other students of Berlin’s thought, his account of morality “doesn’t exclude enough”³³. In particular, Berlin used to explain cruel deeds in terms of empirically false convictions, as in the case of Nazis, who believed that Jews were subhuman. Hardy strongly emphasises that evil acts spring not only from mistaken beliefs, but also from the natural propensity on the part of humans to do wrong. His persistence eventually made Berlin admit that it is possible to speak about the “intrinsic badness” of some deeds, even if their motives can be explained in human terms³⁴. So to understand is not to forgive³⁵. I fully agree with Hardy that Berlin did not sufficiently highlight malign human tendencies, perhaps because of his over-generosity and his extremely tolerant attitude. It is to Hardy’s credit that he nailed Berlin down on the possibility of understanding someone’s motives and yet simultaneously condemning

³⁰ I. Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, H. Hardy (ed.), Princeton 2013, p. 254.

³¹ I. Berlin, B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished...*, pp. 279–300.

³² B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *The Value-Pluralism and Liberalism Problem Revisited*, “Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia” 2019/14, pp. 99–108.

³³ This is a quotation from Roger Hausheer: see H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 253.

³⁴ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 256.

³⁵ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 255.

his behaviour. Incidentally, John Gray tackled exactly the same issue in one of the interviews which he gave me. This is how he commented on Berlin's view of the cruelty of the Nazis:

One issue on which I never agreed with Isaiah was the nature of evil. I recall a long conversation with him in which he insisted that Nazism was based on false empirical beliefs. Of course I agreed. But I went on to suggest that if the falsity of their beliefs could be demonstrated to Nazis, they would simply go on to invent new falsehoods. Nazism was not a mistake in reasoning but an expression of hatred. I felt at the time and still feel that Berlin held to a version of the Enlightenment belief (itself a version of the Socratic faith) that evil is a type of error. But why are humans so fond of this error?³⁶

However, there are some passages in the chapters in question which in my opinion require comment. To begin with, Hardy writes as follows: "value pluralism and cultural pluralism are more analogous than is sometimes allowed. Value pluralism is a thesis about the relationship between individual values, cultural pluralism about that between the constellations of value that constitute cultures"³⁷. There are two problems with this statement. Value pluralism is indeed a thesis about the relationship between individual values, but not only that. An important contribution which moral philosophy owes to Berlin is his contention that values are complex and internally pluralistic entities, which may be subject to inner conflicts. Hardy does not give enough weight to this essential point. Secondly, usage of the term "cultural pluralism" has its tradition, which should not be utterly left aside. It was set forth at the beginning of the twentieth century by an American philosopher, Horace Kallen, to denote his vision of multicultural America, as opposed to the ideal of a melting pot, in which the new American nation is smelted:

"American civilization" may come to mean the perfection of the cooperative harmonies of "European civilization" (...) a multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind. As in an orchestra every type of instrument has its specific *timbre* and *tonality*, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society, each ethnic group may be the natural instrument, its temper and culture may be its theme and melody and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all may make the symphony of civilization³⁸.

Thus, in its original meaning "cultural pluralism" is the American counterpart of the term "multiculturalism"³⁹. Neither Berlin nor Hardy mentions this. On the very same page we read: "People may be moral empiricists and yet be prepared to fight to the death for their deepest (moral, ethical, religious) beliefs"⁴⁰. It seems that moral empiricists would not be disposed to hold religious beliefs, at least as far as Christianity, Islam or Judaism are concerned. All these religions contain metaphysical theses which are not empirically knowable.

Another controversial passage concerns the common moral core. Hardy asserts that if it is understood in the Berlinesque way as "certain common principles which

³⁶ J. Gray, B. Polanowska-Sygułska, *Okrucieństwo jest częścią ludzkiego świata* [Eng. *Cruelty is Part of the Human World*], in: B. Polanowska-Sygułska, *John Gray i krytyka liberalnego legalizmu* [Eng. *John Gray and the Critique of Liberal Legalism*], Kraków 2017, pp. 297–298.

³⁷ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, pp. 207–208.

³⁸ H.M. Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States*, New Brunswick–London 1998 [1924], pp. 116–117.

³⁹ See: H. Hardy, *In Search...*, pp. 205–206.

⁴⁰ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 205.

human beings, in a great many places and a great many ages, have almost universally believed"⁴¹, it proves to be too conservative and hence does not allow for moral progress. The idea of moral progress does not sound "Isaiahish". I can remember from our conversations that Berlin used to speak about change; sometimes for the better. But he hardly ever referred approvingly to the idea of moral progress. According to him values are not "fixed like stars in heaven"⁴². They are capable of change – some old ones may fade and new ones may emerge. But this observation is not the same as a belief in their improvement.

My last comment refers to a contention on page 212: "pluralism means that ultimate ends necessarily conflict"⁴³. They may conflict but they need not to. I shall not elaborate on this oversight as Berlin himself rectified it in a letter to Hardy of 21 January 1997: "you give the impression (...) that all ultimate values collide. As you know they do not: there is nothing wrong with happiness and liberty, knowledge and equality, etc."⁴⁴.

Let me now engage in a battle with the knotty issue of the relationship between value pluralism and religion. Hardy pertinently characterises its nature by quoting Hamann: "On this marrowbone I gnaw, and shall gnaw myself to death on it"⁴⁵. Our correspondents discussed this problem over the years 1991–1997. They did not succeed in reaching a consensus, and each of them held to his original view. The question which tormented Hardy was as follows: Can a pluralist consistently belong to a universalist religion? In his opinion such a pluralist would be guilty of self-contradiction⁴⁶. Berlin's took the opposite position:

Can a pluralist belong to a universalist religion? Yes (unlike your answer), he can. That only means that he professes the universalist religion of his own [sc. his own universalist religion?], but allows other religions or views or whatever to be expressed, unless they offend against what must be called the large minimum accepted as a common moral code (...) ⁴⁷.

It is not easy to follow Hardy's line of argument, since the chapter on *Pluralism and Religion* tells the story of an extended discussion in the order in which it occurred – false starts, changes of mind and all, rather than summarizing it in a logical sequence. What is more, over the course of time he introduced new conceptual differentiations and his views evolved. To cut a long story short, the conclusions which he reached are as follows: Most mainstream varieties of religious belief are universalist in the sense that they "claim to lay down what is right for everyone everywhere always"⁴⁸. Thus, they adhere to *religious monism* – "the view, that there is only one true religion"⁴⁹. It is then obvious that they can uphold neither *religious*⁵⁰ nor *cultural pluralism*⁵¹, both of which admit that "there can be more than one acceptable moral or cultural outlook"⁵². That being the case, religion proves to be inconsistent with both of these types of pluralism.

⁴¹ I. Berlin to H. Hardy, 17 April 1991: see H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 199.

⁴² I. Berlin, B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished...*, p. 125.

⁴³ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 212.

⁴⁴ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 227.

⁴⁵ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 207, 281 (note 21).

⁴⁶ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 207.

⁴⁷ I. Berlin to H. Hardy, 17 April 1991: see H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 199.

⁴⁸ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 207.

⁴⁹ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 203.

⁵⁰ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 203.

⁵¹ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 226.

⁵² H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 205.

Consequently, if pluralism is to be taken seriously, then mainstream religions have to be rejected. Hardy did not hide in his letters to Berlin the fact that his motive for wishing to ostracise religion was personal: "I had a strongly Christian upbringing, and on that account, like so many others, experienced considerable anguish in the slow process of relinquishing (...) the beliefs I had been taught"⁵³. Berlin's pluralism attracted him greatly, as he saw in it "an escape route from the suffocating religious indoctrination"⁵⁴ of his youth. He writes quite explicitly: "What I want, in short, is that all universalist creeds should be ruled out a priori"⁵⁵. In an interview which he gave to Kei Hiruta, Hardy expressed the same wish in a more elaborate form: "if you believe, as I do, that religious belief at least has the potential to become oppressive and destructive, then anything which encourages religion to exist and to thrive seems to me regrettable"⁵⁶. Berlin was reluctant to share his editor's view in this respect. This is how Hardy comments on his disappointment that they didn't reach agreement:

It seems to me now that I ought to have tried harder to set out my reasons for being dissatisfied with his explanations; and that, had I succeeded in this, we might have come nearer to an understanding. That we didn't remains one of the greatest regrets I have about our correspondence⁵⁷.

In other words, Hardy deplores his not having persuaded Berlin to change his mind.

Let me now try to disentangle this knot and identify the reasons why the correspondents failed to settle their differences. My diagnosis is as follows. Berlin did not properly understand Hardy's argument as set out in his letters. Neither – to a certain extent – did I at first reading. There are passages which make things really confusing. Let me give two interconnected examples. In his letter of 11 June 1991 Hardy wrote: "Universalist religions seem to be clear cases of monism"⁵⁸. Is this really so? Didn't Hardy confuse universalism with monism? In his next letter (21 June 1991) he writes: "a Christian, as a universalist, cannot be a pluralist, least of all in regard to other universalist faiths, which are necessarily incompatible with his own"⁵⁹. Hardy's later comments explain what he actually meant here. He makes a distinction between *internal* and *external* pluralism: "A religion (or culture) is *internally pluralistic* if it allows that its rules, ideals, values can conflict with one another in incommensurable ways. It is *externally pluralistic* if it allows that rival religions (or cultures) have a claim to be no less valid"⁶⁰. So it looks as if what he had in mind in the earlier letter of 11 June 1991 was *religious* or *cultural* monism, and in the later one of 21 June 1991 *external* pluralism.

He also dispels doubts about the relationship between religion and *internal* pluralism, admitting that religious belief may be *internally pluralistic*. He observes that the Sermon on the Mount bears the imprint of value pluralism in the sense that the (eight) virtues listed in it cannot be maximally developed simultaneously⁶¹. Moreover, he even claims that "there is no reason why Jesus could not have been an internal pluralist, particularly given the way

⁵³ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 212.

⁵⁴ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 24.

⁵⁵ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 207.

⁵⁶ H. Hardy, K. Hiruta, *Editing Berlin, Interpreting Berlin*, in: H. Hardy (ed.), *The Book of Isaiah: Personal Impressions of Isaiah Berlin*, Woodbridge 2009, p. 142.

⁵⁷ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 225.

⁵⁸ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 212.

⁵⁹ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 214.

⁶⁰ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 213.

⁶¹ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 202.

he distanced himself from the rule-bound morality of the Old Testament"⁶². None of these later explanations were available to Berlin; and without them he could not have properly understood Hardy's questioning. The two correspondents operated on different planes. Berlin discussed mostly value pluralism while Hardy referred to the second-order truth of pluralism. Berlin focused mainly on the attitude of the pluralist, entailing empathetic understanding and tolerance, while Hardy had in mind whole systems of universalist belief.

Hardy is definitely right that a *religious monist* cannot be a *religious pluralist*. Does it follow that e.g. a Christian cannot be a *religious pluralist*? There is no doubt that he can't. Only an unbeliever (in any universalist religion) can possibly be a *religious pluralist* in Hardy's sense. However, this implies that a *religious pluralist* does not find any universal religion valid. According to him all religious beliefs are mistaken; the only defensible position is his own. Is he then a genuine pluralist? Hardy writes: "A pluralist is one who believes that there can be more than one acceptable moral or cultural outlook"⁶³. In that case the answer has to be no. Hardy's pluralist recognises the existence of the plural outlooks of universalist religions, but does not find any of them acceptable. More than that, he is positive that "anything which encourages religion to exist and to thrive" is regrettable! Furthermore, the attitude which he adopts is purely rational; he utterly ignores the double nature of religions, that is, that they operate to a certain extent like scientific theories, but to some degree they are like cultures or even myths⁶⁴. The *religious pluralist* in Hardy's sense treats rival religions solely as (false) theories.

Maybe it was for all these reasons that Berlin was reluctant to draw the general conclusion about religious belief that Hardy suggested⁶⁵. Let me quote another passage from his correspondence with Hardy: "one can be a pluralist and believe in the universal validity of one's own views, and in the error of other views – but not in the impermissibility of holding them"⁶⁶. Is such an outlook intellectually acceptable? It seems that the answer may be positive, on condition that such a believer, say a Christian, does not rigidly stick to the hard-line universalism of his religious belief. He may adopt such a position if he follows Leszek Kołakowski's recommendation in his celebrated essay *In Praise of Inconsistency*⁶⁷. He may keep in mind the double nature of religion,

⁶² H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 213.

⁶³ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 205.

⁶⁴ See H. Hardy's extremely interesting comments on the double nature of religions: H. Hardy, *In Search...*, pp. 209–210.

⁶⁵ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 184. According to H. Hardy the key to understanding I. Berlin's way of looking at religion is provided by his own attitude to religious practice: "For him the ceremonies and practices of Judaism kept the collective identity of the Jews alive. And he was perfectly happy, indeed anxious, to join in with them on this basis without subscribing to any of the doctrinal, metaphysical claims that they entailed. This seems to me an intellectually and morally unacceptable conjunction of views". See: H. Hardy, K. Hiruta, *Editing Berlin...*, p. 142.

⁶⁶ I. Berlin to H. Hardy, 6 May 1991: see H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 204.

⁶⁷ "Our lives are lived under the strain of contradictory loyalties. We must choose between conflicting loyalties in concrete situations, and act in favor of one at the expense of another, without repudiating the other altogether. We are loyal to individuals, to our own philosophy, to chance associations, to organizations, to nations, to parties, to regimes and friends, to ourselves and our neighbors, to our own nature and our convictions, to practical causes and universal principles. How many loyalties we have, in how many insurmountable conflicts they involve us!

Where a constant conflict exists, genuine synthesis is rarely achieved. Rather, apparent and deceiving syntheses are embraced so that we may seem consistent with ourselves. After all, the one value which has been instilled into us since childhood is consistency. Our proposition, which should make us realize that consistency in such cases is an ideological fiction, tends at least to eliminate one kind of conflict – that which arises out of the belief in the value of consistency. Let us therefore resolve this contradiction in at least one area, by proclaiming that the world is contradictory. For indeed, contradictions are multiplied when their existence is not recognized. In other words, to praise inconsistency also means to repudiate a certain value – that of a self-consistent life. The contradiction between the value of a self-consistent life and the value of an ordinary, common-sense life may be the kind of contradiction that can be abolished unilaterally, i.e., not by achieving a synthesis but by repudiating one of its terms". L. Kołakowski, *In Praise of Inconsistency*, "Dissent" 1964/Spring, p. 208.

so accurately identified by Hardy. Last but not least, he may follow these teachings of Jesus Christ: “My Father’s house has many rooms” (John 14:16); “whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 38:41). An unquestionable Christian, the Rev. Michael Jenkins, does combine his religious faith with adherence to pluralism. He maintains that Christian theologians have much to learn from Berlin⁶⁸. He also points out that “some of Berlin’s principal conversation partners, notably Giambattista Vico, Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder, were distinctively Christian thinkers, and their faith was neither tangential nor ancillary to their appreciation of pluralism. Their pluralism was, in fact, a natural development of their theological reflection”⁶⁹. While we may seriously doubt whether Hamann was indeed a pluralist, Vico and Herder were unquestionable predecessors of this standpoint in ethics. In opposition to Berlin, Hardy would probably say that they were mistaken. One cannot help juxtaposing his attitude with that of the evangelicals active in Oxford when he was an undergraduate. According to Hardy’s critical account, they maintained that “Christianity, if true, required one’s total and uncompromising allegiance”⁷⁰. Both stances – that of the evangelicals and that of Hardy himself – are equally rigid, despite their substantial differences.

None of my doubts and reservations about the philosophical part of *In Search of Isaiah Berlin* are meant to challenge the unquestionable value of this fascinating book. My criticisms show that I have taken Hardy’s investigations seriously. There are statements in the philosophical section with which I cannot agree more. There are also ones that do not convince me. I very much hope that my critique will move the discussion of pluralism forward.

Let me conclude with a comment concerning the first part of Hardy’s book. It is a unique and lavish gift for all Berlinophiles, and one which could be given them by only one person. I feel enriched by reading it.

⁶⁸ M. Jenkins, *Christianity, Tolerance and Pluralism*, London–New York 2004, p. 2.

⁶⁹ M. Jenkins, *Christianity...*, p. 3.

⁷⁰ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 212.

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Hardy on Polanowska-Sygulska on Hardy on Berlin on Pluralism and Religion

“The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments”. These are William James’s words in the first of his lectures on pragmatism, delivered in 1906². Many others have made similar observations.

When I read Professor Beata Polanowska-Sygulska’s review of my book about working with Isaiah Berlin and challenging his ideas³, it seemed to me to exemplify the truth enunciated by James. Polanowska-Sygulska is by nature or upbringing, or both, a religious believer, and I am an anticlerical infidel, rebelling against the religious indoctrination of his youth. We bring these pre-existing conditions to the main issue that divides us – the tenability of religious belief by a pluralist – and they, as much as, if not more than, the arguments we deploy, determine the positions we adopt. The fact that she is a Polish cradle Catholic and I a lapsed English Anglican may also be relevant to this bifurcation. Nevertheless, we are good friends (to declare an interest), and share a consuming interest in Berlin’s ideas.

The editors of this journal have invited me to respond to Polanowska-Sygulska. Given what I have said above, it may be thought that such a response can amount only to a restatement of the prejudice that I bring to the discussion. But I hope that, having recognised this risk, I am better placed to avoid it. And naturally I do believe that, if we restrict ourselves to the arguments, the case I make can be successfully defended against Polanowska-Sygulska’s attempt (and Berlin’s) to resist it. I shall indicate briefly here why I say this, leaving a longer rebuttal for another (possibly non-existent) occasion.

The first two parts of the three-part review are gratifyingly positive, as are some passages in the third part, and I shall say nothing about these. As Berlin often observed, disagreement is more interesting and revealing than agreement, since it can reveal weaknesses in the position under attack, and may help to eliminate them. It is in the closing paragraphs of the third part that Polanowska-Sygulska’s gloves come off. She begins this part, mistakenly in my view, by raising some minor quibbles rather than plunging straight into the main topic. This distracts the reader from the more important

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² W. James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, London–New York–Bombay–Calcutta 1907, p. 6.

³ H. Hardy, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*, London 2018 (repr. with corrections 2019).

matters that follow, especially as what she says is largely irrelevant to them, and mostly unpersuasive. Let me despatch these trivia as briefly as I can:

1. Polanowska-Sygulska wishes to define Berlin's "basic freedom" – his name for free will – as the ability to make choices, rather than as the actual making of choices (the exercise of freedom). This is a distinction without an important difference, for if we did not exercise free will, the mere possession of it would be of no use to us. But in any case, I myself write (she quotes the passage): "freedom of the will (...) enables us to make (...) choices", which is her own and Berlin's position. There is no disagreement here.
2. She objects to my inclusion of "(rational) self-government" in a list of human goals. This is indeed an error on my part, but not the one she supposes. On p. 4 of *Liberty* Berlin writes of the "social and political ends sought by men – such as unity, harmony, peace, rational self-direction, justice, self-government"⁴. I mistakenly telescoped the last three items as "rational self-government", but this is vanishingly close, if not identical, to rational self-direction, so the error is venial, though I do correct it in the paperback, thanks to Polanowska-Sygulska's query. My parentheses merely indicate that Berlin also wrote of "self-direction" *tout court*: indeed, that is a synonym for positive liberty. Polanowska-Sygulska's problem is with "rational", but, as we see, it is Berlin's own word, and moreover need not have the Rawlsian overtones she deprecates on Berlin's behalf. As Berlin writes in a letter to which she herself alludes, "I do not look upon rational approaches as fundamentally flawed – what reason can do, it should do"⁵.
3. I am said not to give enough weight to conflict within values. I explicitly mention this conflict⁶, in what is in any case intended as a short summary of Berlin's views.
4. Polanowska-Sygulska complains that neither I nor Berlin recognise a sense of "cultural pluralism" deployed by Horace Kallen, who uses it to mean multiculturalism. I make perfectly clear what I mean by "cultural pluralism", and am not concerned with other strands in the history of the term, though I do distinguish between cultural pluralism (in my sense) and multiculturalism⁷. Berlin, however, does sometimes use the term in Kallen's sense⁸. This is a tiny red herring.
5. Polanowska-Sygulska queries my remark that moral empiricists may wish to defend their religious beliefs to the death, on the grounds that moral empiricists would not be disposed to hold religious beliefs. I define *moral empiricism* as the belief that morality is contingent and thus subject to empirical change, by contrast with *moral absolutism*, which holds that moral truth is *a priori* and the same in all possible worlds. Polanowska-Sygulska rightly observes that the main religions contain metaphysical theses which are not empirically knowable (for me, another argument against them). But there is no reason in principle (much as I should deplore it in practice) why moral empiricists should not also subscribe to metaphysical religious theses, which, for them, do not include the edicts of morality.

⁴ I. Berlin, *Liberty*, H. Hardy (ed.), Oxford 2002, p. 4.

⁵ Unpublished letter to Claude Galipeau, 16 May 1991. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Berlin 227, fols 109–110 at fol. 109v.

⁶ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 175.

⁷ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 205.

⁸ For example in another letter to Claude Galipeau, 15 April 1991. In: I. Berlin, *Affirming: Letters 1975–1997*, H. Hardy, M. Pottle (eds.), London 2015, p. 415.

6. I criticise Berlin's notion of the common moral core as not allowing for moral progress, and Polanowska-Sygułska counters that Berlin didn't believe in moral progress. But he did. Moral progress is neither inevitable nor irreversible, but it does sometimes occur, as he clearly recognised in, for example, *A Message to the Twenty-First Century*, a 1994 address in which he speaks of the state of politics at the time:

Rationality, tolerance, rare enough in human history, are not despised. Liberal democracy, despite everything, despite the greatest modern scourge of fanatical, fundamentalist nationalism, is spreading. Great tyrannies are in ruins, or will be – even in China the day is not too distant. I am glad that you to whom I speak will see the twenty-first century, which I feel sure can be only a better time for mankind than my terrible century has been. I congratulate you on your good fortune; I regret that I shall not see this brighter future, which I am convinced is coming. With all the gloom that I have been spreading, I am glad to end on an optimistic note. There really are good reasons to think that it is justified⁹.

7. Finally, Polanowska-Sygułska takes me to task for writing: “pluralism means that ultimate ends necessarily conflict”. As she rightly observes, “They may conflict but they need not”. It would indeed have been clearer if I had written “some ultimate ends”, but at least I didn't write (or mean) “all ultimate ends”. Let me admit, though, for what it's worth, that here she scores a point.

In her last half-dozen paragraphs Polanowska-Sygułska finally comes to the nub of our disagreement, “and this is where the story really starts”¹⁰. Even here she is distracted into unprofitable byways. She observes that “Hardy deplores his not having persuaded Berlin to change his mind”. Not at all: I was just as ready to change *my* mind if Berlin had persuaded me of the validity of his view. I still am, if someone else so persuades me.

She also objects that I have refined my terminology and my arguments since the discussion with Berlin took place, thus weighting the scales unreasonably against him. I plead guilty to the former, but not to the latter. If one is concerned to establish truth, one does not observe a statute of limitations that forbids the posthumous introduction of new considerations. If one party to a discussion dies, he is certainly put at a disadvantage in relation to new lines of enquiry; but the enquiry can and should continue, with all the means at its disposal.

My basic position on the central issue is very simple. Berlin rejects, on pluralist grounds, any claim that one system or constellation of values is uniquely true for all people, at all times, in all places. Since values, ends, needs, desires can and do conflict, often incommensurably, there can in principle be no single rational ordering of them that can be defensibly advocated to, still less imposed on, everyone. Attempts to do one or both of these have been made, are being made, and will always be made, in the spheres of both politics and religion. Berlin himself concentrated on the rejection of political or cultural monism, especially the forms of totalitarianism that became dominant in his lifetime, above all Communism and Fascism. My contention is that any religion that claims to be wholly and uniquely true for everyone in all circumstances falls foul of the same objection, and must accordingly be rejected. This puts paid to the principal world religions – certainly

⁹ I. Berlin, *Affirming...*, p. 581.

¹⁰ Several characters in: S. Milligan, E. Sykes, *The Goon Show*, “Dishonoured”, s. 5, ep. 12, first broadcast: 14.12.1954, script available at: <http://bit.ly/2mQzb6t>, accessed on: 29.09.2019.

Christianity and Islam – even if there are grey areas where we find forms of spirituality that do not make universal claims. About Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Judaism and Shintoism, for example, it is perhaps not possible to be so unambiguously clear. But in my submission it is part of the core essence of religious belief as such that universalist claims are made. The *point* of religion includes the delivery of certain truth to believers. Polanowska-Sygulska summarises this case well: “if pluralism is to be taken seriously, then mainstream religions have to be rejected”.

What does Polanowska-Sygulska say against this position of mine? I select the points that seem clearest from a sometimes foggy discussion.

8. I confuse *universalism* with *monism*. No: in the case of religion, both terms describe the same thing. A religion that is universally true is also monistically true: it is true for everyone (*universalism*), and it is the only truth (*monism*) – because it necessarily excludes all rivals.
9. I confuse *religious monism* with *external monism*. No again: in the case of religion, both terms once more describe the same thing. *Religious monism* is “the view that there is only one true religion, which is therefore universal”¹¹; *external monism* is the denial of *external pluralism* (“a pluralistic attitude to rival universalisms”¹²) – that is, it is exemplified by the view, again, that there is only one true religion, which is therefore universal.
10. I ignore, in the case I make against religious pluralism, my own account of what Polanowska-Sygulska calls “the double nature of religions, that is, that they operate to a certain extent like scientific theories, but to some degree they are like cultures or even myths”. In their “scientific” aspect they can hardly be plural, but in their cultural or mythical aspect they can co-exist with other religions. True enough, but the existence of the (monistic) “scientific” aspect, which for me includes allegedly definitive moral injunctions, is enough by itself to exclude religious pluralism. Polanowska-Sygulska refers favourably to Leszek Kołakowski’s recommendation of inconsistency, but that strikes me as a cop-out, an excuse for lazy thought. Consistency where consistency is due. If the best defence of religion against a charge of inconsistency that Polanowska-Sygulska can mount is a defence of inconsistency, religion is in trouble.
11. Michael Jinkins, Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried Herder (persons of varying degrees of celebrity) are both pluralists and Christians. But the errors of others do not justify our making the same errors. As Polanowska-Sygulska observes, “Hardy would probably say that they were mistaken”. Quite.

I return to my starting point. Polanowska-Sygulska and I have different temperaments and/or personal histories. We therefore start from different prejudices when we consider the status of religious belief. Both of us should try to stand outside our prejudices when evaluating each other’s arguments. I have tried to do this here, but may not have succeeded. Nevertheless, I hope I have given the reader some objective grounds to doubt the truth of Polanowska-Sygulska’s position (to which, I maintain, she clings in the teeth of the evidence), and to think my own worth considering.

¹¹ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 203.

¹² H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 202.