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## Pluralism and Religion Again: Reply to Henry Hardy

Responding to my review of his fascinating *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*<sup>2</sup>, Henry Hardy charges me with raising, in the critical part of my review, “some minor quibbles rather than plunging straight into the main topic”<sup>3</sup>. According to Hardy, my being “distracted into unprofitable byways”<sup>4</sup> confuses the reader and averts attention from “the nub of our disagreement”<sup>5</sup>. Let me then follow Hardy’s advice and tackle the main problem right away. Let me also disregard our disparate backgrounds and temperaments and limit myself solely to intellectual argument. What Hardy and myself wrangle about is the relationship between Isaiah Berlin’s pluralism<sup>6</sup> and universalist religions such as Christianity and Islam. Hardy insists that pluralism and religion cannot be reconciled. In his view, taking pluralism seriously entails rejection of the universalist tenets of the principal world religions. Berlin was of the opposite opinion, and so am I.

Let us step into Hardy’s shoes. According to him, mainstream religions are externally monistic, since they deny external pluralism (“a pluralistic attitude to rival universalisms”<sup>7</sup>). It is not excluded, though, that a religion may be pluralistic internally, for it may allow “that its rules, ideals, values can conflict with one another in incommensurable ways”<sup>8</sup>. Despite the differences in their specific messages, the principal world religions share one claim, which makes them externally monistic: “that there is only one true religion, which is therefore universal”<sup>9</sup>.

When he rejects universalist religions, Hardy judges them, so to say, “from above”, that is, from the position of somebody who recognises the multiplicity of religions but who distances himself from all of them. Is such a stance true-to-type pluralistic? Hardy

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<sup>2</sup> H. Hardy, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*, London 2018.

<sup>3</sup> H. Hardy, *Hardy on Polanowska-Sygulska on Hardy on Berlin on Pluralism and Religion*, “Archiwum Filozofii Prawa i Filozofii Społecznej” 2019/2, p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> H. Hardy, *Hardy on...*, p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> H. Hardy, *Hardy on...*, p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> According to Berlin, human values are objective and knowable, but irreducibly plural. So they can be neither ranked in the abstract nor reduced to a common measure. Some of them may prove to be incompatible and/or incommensurable, which may lead to value conflicts that are sometimes rationally unresolvable. In consequence, the ideas of ethical harmony and of perfection are logically incoherent.

<sup>7</sup> H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 202.

<sup>8</sup> H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 213.

<sup>9</sup> H. Hardy, *Hardy on...*, p. 103.

evidently believes that it is. Yet, as he states in his book, “A pluralist is one who believes that there can be more than one acceptable moral or cultural outlook”<sup>10</sup>. That being the case, Hardy’s outlook, paradoxically, bears the hallmarks more of monism than of pluralism, in so far as it acknowledges only one defensible standpoint with regard to a set of worldviews held by large groups of people. I set out this problem in my review of Hardy’s book<sup>11</sup>, but he passed over it in his commentary.

Pluralists in Berlin’s sense do not perceive either different religions or different believers “from beyond”. They stay, as it were, on the same level as others, be they believers, agnostics, atheists or non-believers. As Hardy rightly says, pluralists recognise many outlooks as acceptable, on condition that they respect a common moral minimum. Thus, even if they are non-believers, they still, precisely because they are pluralists, seek to understand what kind of world it is for those who don’t share their lack of belief, and how believers can come to pursue values which are not theirs<sup>12</sup>. The same applies to a believer’s attitude to non-believers. Berlin clarified this very aspect of pluralism in a letter to Hardy. I quote the relevant passage once again:

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<sup>13</sup>.

Berlin could not have put this more clearly: a pluralist looks on other views from within his own perspective – no matter what his own views are – and does his best to understand and tolerate them. Berlin was so keen on comprehending other people’s motives that he even tried to explain Nazism in terms of false empirical beliefs<sup>14</sup>. To sum up, while Berlin, so to say, “situates” adherents of pluralism among other people who hold different, including religious, views, Hardy insists on elevating his *religious pluralist* (or, in fact, his *anti-religious pluralist*) to some upper level that allows him to judge the validity of religions. Whatever meaning Hardy attaches to his phrase *religious pluralism*, it is definitely not the meaning that Berlin assigns to the term “pluralism”. To my mind this is why the two of them did not, and could not, reach agreement.

Let me now very briefly address Hardy’s response just to one “minor quibble” of mine, listed by him as no. 3)<sup>15</sup>. The relevant passage reads as follows: “I am said not to give enough weight to conflict within values. I explicitly mention this conflict, in what is in any case intended as a short summary of Berlin’s views”. In my review I indeed criticised Hardy for not having sufficiently emphasised the complex and internally pluralistic nature of values, which may lead to conflicts breaking out within them. In Hardy’s monograph one encounters just one sentence devoted to this point: “There can also be conflict *within* values, pitting, for example, freedom of speech against freedom of abuse”<sup>16</sup>. Even in the

<sup>10</sup> H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 205.

<sup>11</sup> B. Polanowska-Sygułska, *Cultural Pluralism and Religious Belief: Around Henry Hardy’s ‘In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure’*, *Archiwum Filozofii Prawa i Filozofii Społecznej* 2019/2, p. 98: “According to him all religious beliefs are mistaken; the only defensible position is his own”.

<sup>12</sup> I. Berlin letter to me of 18 February 1997. See: I. Berlin, B. Polanowska-Sygułska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, Amherst (NY) 2006, p. 84.

<sup>13</sup> I. Berlin to H. Hardy, letter of 17 April 1991. See: H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 199.

<sup>14</sup> Hardy rightly criticises Berlin for not separating clearly enough the question of comprehensibility from the question of acceptability. See: H. Hardy, *In Search...*, pp. 253–254.

<sup>15</sup> H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 101.

<sup>16</sup> H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 175.

shortest “summary of Berlin’s views” it was worth at least noting that this insightful observation bears heavily on political and legal philosophy. For it controverts the huge systematic theories inspired by the Lockean–Kantian tradition. This is because no liberal ideal of liberty, justice or equality can be insulated from collisions among incommensurables in the heart of these ideals themselves. Secondly, if pluralism subverts Lockean–Kantian ethics and theories of fundamental rights, this is of absolutely fundamental importance to legal philosophy, because unavoidable value-conflicts offer a powerful argument against representing human goods as a matter of rights, and thereby submitting them to judicial power. On the contrary, recognition of such clashes speaks for leaving fundamentally contested issues open to forms of political settlement and compromise that can be renegotiated later. Thus, the conviction that Dworkin’s “princes of law” are capable, thanks to their superhuman expertise, of cleansing the Augean stables of incommensurables, that is, of providing the single right answer to legal problems, proves to be totally illusory. In sum, I sustain my objection about conflict within values and do not agree that my criticism constitutes merely “a minor quibble”.

Hardy was disappointed that numerous reviewers of his monograph concentrated upon his achievement as an editor, disregarding the philosophical part of the book. I on the other hand chose to start a philosophical discussion with him, though I don’t expect him to find my arguments convincing or, consequently, to agree with Berlin and me. Yet, as he repeated after our master, “disagreement is more interesting and revealing than agreement”<sup>17</sup>. Most probably we will continue differing beautifully and remain good friends.

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<sup>17</sup> H. Hardy, *Hardy on...*, p. 100.

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