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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*², Henry Hardy charges me with raising, in the critical part of my review, “some minor quibbles rather than plunging straight into the main topic”³. According to Hardy, my being “distracted into unprofitable byways”⁴ confuses the reader and averts attention from “the nub of our disagreement”⁵. 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 pluralism⁶ 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”⁷). 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”⁸. 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”⁹.

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

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

⁴ H. Hardy, *Hardy on...*, p. 102.

⁵ H. Hardy, *Hardy on...*, p. 102.

⁶ 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.

⁷ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 202.

⁸ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 213.

⁹ 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”¹⁰. 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 book¹¹, 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 theirs¹². 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 code¹³.

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 beliefs¹⁴. 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)¹⁵. 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”¹⁶. Even in the

¹⁰ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 205.

¹¹ 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”.

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

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

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 101.

¹⁶ 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”¹⁷. Most probably we will continue differing beautifully and remain good friends.

¹⁷ H. Hardy, *Hardy on...*, p. 100.

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God's Monism: A Further Reply to Beata Polanowska-Sygulska

When a person holds an argument with his neighbour on the opposite side of the street, why is there no chance of their agreeing? – Because they argue from different *premises*².

Obviously, if one God, only one morality – His law and the falsity of moral pluralism therefore³.

Stuart Hampshire

Beata Polanowska-Sygulska and I are like the arguing neighbours. We argue from different premises, and nothing will shift us from our basic positions. However, she is wrong and I am right, though she will never admit it, having too much capital invested in her opinion.

Polanowska-Sygulska and I are agreed, I think, that pluralism applies, for Isaiah Berlin, at three levels: within values, between values and between the systems of value that we call cultures, or visions of life, or “comprehensive views”. I am concerned with the last of these levels, given that a religion is a special kind of comprehensive world-view, one that asserts its own unique grasp of truth rather than accepting that its rivals may have no less a claim to acceptance.

We can also agree, surely, that it was one of Berlin's most deeply held beliefs, reinforced by his pluralism, that no one comprehensive outlook can be said to be uniquely true. Let me quote his own words:

Few things have done more harm than the belief on the part of individuals or groups (or tribes or states or nations or churches) that he or she or they are in *sole* possession of the truth: especially about how to live, what to be & do – & that those who differ from them are not merely mistaken, but wicked or mad: & need restraining or suppressing. It is a terrible and dangerous arrogance to believe that you alone are right: have a magical eye which sees *the* truth: & that others cannot be right if they disagree⁴.

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² “Punch”, 25 September 1841, p. 123.

³ S. Hampshire, *Justice is Conflict*, London 1999, p. 47.

⁴ I. Berlin, *Liberty*, H. Hardy (ed.), Oxford 2002, p. 345.

What he writes applies not only to religions, but religions are explicitly included. This is as it should be, because it is a fundamental part of their essence as religions that they should claim to be uniquely and universally true. The God of the Abrahamic religions, at any rate, is in this sense a monist and a universalist. God shows this in his first commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Jesus follows suit: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). Jesus also subscribes to the idea of perfection, which BP-S rightly sees as incompatible with pluralism. Compare Polanowska-Sygulska's "the ideas of ethical harmony and of perfection are logically incoherent"⁵ with Jesus' "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Of course, Jesus wasn't writing for a peer-reviewed academic journal, but it is pretty clear where he is coming from. And it is no good saying that things are different in heaven. As Berlin puts it, "it is on earth that we live, and it is here that we must believe and act"⁶.

The incompatibility between the pluralism of comprehensive outlooks and the monist universalism of the principal world religions is simply a fact, beyond argument. This doesn't prove that no religion is uniquely true, of course (though for me it makes it vanishingly unlikely). It just means that you cannot consistently, at the same time, be both a pluralist and a full believer in one of the religions in question. Nor does it mean that a believer cannot exercise pluralist empathy towards a non-believer, or vice versa, as Polanowska-Sygulska rightly wishes. Either one can certainly step into the shoes of the other and (try to) see the world from that radically different vantage-point. One can also tolerate the rival view, even if one holds that it is mistaken. Indeed, a willingness and ability to show such toleration is an acid test of deep liberalism.

Both Polanowska-Sygulska and Berlin confuse tolerance with agreement. Polanowska-Sygulska quotes a muddled passage from one of Berlin's letters to me in which, having said that a pluralist can belong to a universalist religion, he then glosses this as meaning only that the pluralist "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"⁷. She might have quoted my response to the passage, except that it undermines her position:

It seems to confuse *political tolerance*, if that is the right term, with *religious pluralism* (I had the latter in mind): toleration with intellectual assent. Of course someone who believes in toleration will not seek to suppress rivals to his own religious beliefs, even if the latter are held to be the only true beliefs for all of humankind. But if he is a religious pluralist, that is, accepts that no one creed has the monopoly of truth, then to espouse a universalist creed involves a contradiction in terms⁸.

Polanowska-Sygulska tries her best to sidestep my clear, simple argument by saying that it is not pluralistic to acknowledge "only one defensible standpoint with regard to a set of worldviews held by large groups of people"⁹. First of all, the large groups of

⁵ B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Pluralism and Religion Again: Reply to Henry Hardy*, "Archiwum Filozofii Prawa i Filozofii Społecznej" 2020/3, p. 127.

⁶ I. Berlin, *The Pursuit of the Ideal*, in: H. Hardy (ed.), *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, 2nd ed., Princeton 2013, p. 14.

⁷ I. Berlin, letter to H. Hardy of 17 April 1991. See: H. Hardy, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*, London 2018, p. 199; B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Pluralism...*, p. 128.

⁸ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, p. 200.

⁹ B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Pluralism...*, p. 128.

people are a red herring, and constitute no argument whatever for the truth of what they believe. Secondly, it is perverse to present a rejection of all monisms as unpluralistic: it is exactly what you would expect from a pluralist. Polanowska-Sygulska talks vaguely of “levels”, saying that I somehow reject religions “from above”. This cuts no ice. Any reflective person entertains not only first-order beliefs, but also second-order beliefs about the beliefs of others (and, in the case of the philosophically-minded, about their own beliefs). There is nothing improper or self-undermining about holding beliefs at both of these levels simultaneously. And the second-order belief that no first-order belief-system can claim unique truth entails that any belief-system that makes such a claim is to that extent false.

Polanowska-Sygulska is right to say that Berlin takes a position similar to her own in the face of my argument. One chapter of my book¹⁰ was devoted to an epistolary discussion with him on the topic in the 1990s (his eighties), and he never quite agreed with me, except perhaps in the last year of his life. But this does not establish that he was right, and the 1981 quotation from *Liberty* above shows that he was inconsistent on the subject. I prefer his earlier view, which is a better fit with his writings as a whole. I wish I had thought of reminding him of that passage during our discussion, though I did remind him of his frequently expressed view that no one comprehensive moral outlook can be uniquely true.

Polanowska-Sygulska ends by repeating that I don't sufficiently emphasise the potential for conflict *within* values. I in turn repeat that I was not setting out to provide a detailed account of all aspects of Berlin's pluralism: the sentence she quotes comes in a single-paragraph summary of pluralism in a brief survey of his view of human nature. I do not engage, there or here, with her special interest in the legal implications of pluralism, important as these certainly are. Moreover, whether value conflict is internal to a value or not is determined not by the world, but by the nomenclature we choose to adopt to discuss value. If we subdivide values more finely, internal conflict becomes external: the conflict between freedom of speech and freedom from abuse that I mentioned is either a conflict within freedom or a conflict between two kinds of freedom. Any argument that trades on a particular vocabulary of values is mistaking words about words for words about things – which Berlin held to be one of the most basic mistakes in philosophy.

I am grateful to Polanowska-Sygulska for enabling me to state my position more clearly (as I think) than I have before. She concludes her response by expecting that we shall remain friends. Indeed: why not? Anyone whose friendship is conditional on agreement is not a true friend.

¹⁰ H. Hardy, *In Search...*, chapter 10 (*Pluralism and Religion*).

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