

## Isaiah Berlin's *Four Essays on Liberty*

Henry Hardy

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*This article, written before Berlin's death on 5 November 1997, was a contribution to the series 'Speaking Volumes' in the Times Higher Education Supplement, where it appeared on 21 November 1997, p. 21. Contributors are asked to write about the book that has influenced them most.*

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My intellectual life has been dominated by the attempt to come to terms with the Christianity that I imbibed as a child, at home and at school. At Oxford, where I was subjected as an undergraduate to the aversively evangelical Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, I gradually ceased to believe in the formal doctrines of the Church; but I was not alone in finding that the loss of belief preceded (by many years) emancipation from the power of religious conditioning. I felt guilty of unbelief; anything that weakened the inhibiting power my religious upbringing had over me was devoutly to be embraced.

I had no idea when I joined Oxford's Wolfson College as a graduate student in 1972 that I was about to discover not only one of the principal sources of my liberation from this power, but also my eventual occupation. The College's President was Isaiah Berlin. It was clear as soon as I met him (at a scholarship interview for which I arrived late after a car accident, and during which he repeatedly went to the window to see if a taxi had arrived) that he was a remarkable man; but I had never read any of his work, and knew next to nothing about him.

I asked where I should start, and was rightly directed to *Four Essays on Liberty*, published three years earlier. I took it with me on a visit to a remote Exmoor cottage during a vacation, and was transfixed. Berlin likes to refer to the unmistakable sensation of 'sailing in first-class waters', and this was the sensation I experienced. Quite apart from the persuasiveness of the propositions contained in the book, here was obviously a man of rare insight into human nature, a man plentifully endowed with that 'sense of reality' that he welcomes when he finds it in others. There was room for disagreement on this or that point, but on the large issues – one felt in safe hands.

The central plank in the book is Berlin's value pluralism, his belief that the values humans pursue are not only multiple but sometimes irreconcilable, and that this applies at the level of whole cultures – systems of value – as well as between the values of a particular culture or individual. Even if there is no strict logical contradiction between this pluralism and Christianity (could Jesus have been a pluralist?), there is certainly a strong temperamental incompatibility, and I have found no more effective antidote to a religious hangover.

It is part of Christianity, as of the other great monistic religions, to claim there is one way to salvation, one right way to live, one true value-structure. This is the claim which, when it is

given fanatical expression, leads to fundamentalism, persecution and intolerance. Pluralism is a prophylactic against such dangers. It is a source of liberalism and toleration – not just the unstable kind of toleration that waits for the mistaken to see the light, but the deep toleration that accepts and welcomes visions of life that differ irretrievably from those we ourselves live by.

*Four Essays* is full of other gold, including the devastating critique of historicism and determinism in ‘Historical Inevitability’, the famous discussion of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ freedom in ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, and the examination of the tensions in Mill’s views in ‘John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life’. It is one of the richest and most humane books I have ever read. Unfortunately it was also badly published by Oxford University Press – only in paperback, which was a premature experiment – but it has risen above this inauspicious start and become a classic, as it deserves. It was not part of its author’s conscious purpose to liberate his readers from religious hang-ups, but any great book has unforeseen powers, and this was the power that worked in me when I needed it.