Drawing on the Wisdom of Isaiah Berlin

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Isaiah Berlin was one of the intellectual wonders of 20th century England. Born in Riga in 1909, his family emigrated to England in 1921. Isaiah quickly adapted to life in his new land, attending St. Paul's School and Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He studied classical languages, ancient history, philosophy, politics and economics; he was a top student and a voracious reader. In 1932 he was appointed to a lectureship at New College, and he became the first Jew to be elected to a Prize Fellowship at All Souls, considered to be among the highest honors in British academic life.

During the 1930s, he was one of a group that developed "the Oxford philosophy," a movement that also included premier Oxford scholars J. L. Austin, A. J. Ayer and Stuart Hampshire. During the Second World War, Berlin was stationed in New York serving in the British Information Services (1940-42), and then at the British Embassy in Washington DC (1942-46). In 1945-46, he spent four months in the Soviet Union, meeting with persecuted members of the Russian intelligentsia, including Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak. His stay in the Soviet Union deepened his staunch opposition to communism.

After the war, Berlin returned to Oxford where his interests turned to the area of intellectual history. In 1950, he received a research fellowship at All Souls, allowing him to pursue his academic interests which were outside the mainstream of philosophy as it was then taught at Oxford. He made regular visits to American universities, where his lectures impacted on the development of intellectual

history as an area for academic research.

In 1957 Berlin was elected Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford. Also in 1957, he was knighted. In 1967, he resigned his chair upon becoming the founding President of Wolfson College at Oxford, a position he held until retiring in 1975. He continued to teach, write and lecture, and passed away in 1997.

That a Jewish immigrant boy from Riga became one of the foremost intellectuals of England is a tribute to Isaiah Berlin's brilliance, as well as to the receptivity of Oxford and the English academic community. He rose to great intellectual heights, and did so as a British Jew.

In his biography of Isaiah Berlin, Michael Ignatieff reports that Berlin's mother taught him in his Riga childhood: "We were Jews.…We were not Russian. We were not Letts. We were something else. We had to have a home. There was no point living in a perpetual qui vive. Above all, there was no point denying it, concealing it. To do so was undignified and unsuccessful" (Isaiah Berlin: A Life, p. 30). This early lesson stayed with Berlin throughout his life. Even as he adapted and "belonged" within English academic life, he was always aware of his being, in some sense, an "outsider." He understood the need to belong and therefore sympathized with Zionism, the movement that promoted the right of Jews to live their own lives and to be fully accepted as Jews. Berlin explained that to be a Jew "was to know how deeply men and women needed to be at home somewhere in the world. Belonging was more than possession of land and statehood; it was the condition of being understood itself" (Ibid. p. 292).

When he served in New York in the early 1940s, he was drawn to public Jews such as Rabbi Stephen Wise and Justice Louis Brandeis. He could not bear "apologetic American Jews" such as Walter Lippmann and Arthur Hays Sulzberger and saw them, in the words of Lewis Namier, as "trembling amateur gentiles" (Ibid., p. 105). Berlin and a colleague coined the acronym OTAG, Order of the Trembling Amateur Gentiles.

Berlin was not religiously observant in the Orthodox sense, but he never took his Judaism in the direction of Reform. "Berlin was adamant that if there was to be observance, it had to be as authentic, as traditional, as close to the ancient faith as possible.…For all his skepticism, his respect for the religious content of the ritual was unfeigned" (Ibid. p. 294).

Berlin's Jewishness may have played a role in a central aspect of his thinking. Jewish tradition teaches that all human beings are created in the image of God; all have access to God; the righteous of all nations have a place in the world-to-come. Whereas other religions and ideologies have claimed exclusive possession of truth (and eternal salvation), Judaism makes room for others. This recognition of "truths" among all people is uniquely important.

In his essay, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," Berlin developed his understanding of pluralism. He rejected the view that "all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only, all the rest being necessarily errors." He dismissed the notion that there was one dependable route to attaining this "one true answer." He argued against the idea that "the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole, for one truth cannot be incompatible with another—that we knew a priori" (The Proper Study of Mankind, p. 5).

Indeed, those who have posited one correct truth to the exclusion of any others—such people have fostered totalitarian societies, inquisitions, religious persecutions etc. They have been so certain that they alone have truth, that they disdain—and often punish—those who do not share their truth. And they commit their atrocities with self-righteousness! "To force people into the neat uniforms demanded by dogmatically believed-in schemes is almost always the road to inhumanity" (Ibid., p. 16).

Berlin's idea of pluralism is elegant. It differs from relativism that calls on us to accept all views as being equally valid. Rather, pluralism is "the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other…..Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is possible only because what makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them. But our values are ours, and there are theirs" (Ibid., p. 8).

In his essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berlin directed his attention to the predicament of oppressed classes or nationalities. "What they want, as often as not, is simply recognition (of their class or nation or color or race) as an independent source of human activity, as an entity with a will of its own, intending to act in accordance with it (whether it is good or legitimate, or not), and not to be ruled, educated, guided, with however light a hand, as being not quite fully human, and therefore not quite free." Berlin repudiated paternalism "not because it is more oppressive than naked, brutal, unenlightened tyranny, nor merely because it ignores the transcendental reason embodied in me, but

because it is an insult to my conception of myself as a human being, determined to make my own life in accordance with my own (not necessarily rational or benevolent) purposes, and, above all, entitled to be recognized as such by others. For if I am not so recognized, then I may fail to recognize, I may doubt, my own claim to be a fully independent human being" (Ibid., p. 228).

Berlin underscored these thoughts in his essay, "Nationalism." He pointed out the obvious: the thought of 19th and early 20th centuries was "astonishingly Europocentric." When even the most imaginative and radical political thinkers spoke of Africans or Asians, there was "as a rule, something curiously remote and abstract about their ideas….The peoples of Africa and Asia were discussed either as wards or as victims of Europeans, but seldom, if ever, in their own right as peoples with histories and cultures of their own; with a past and present and future which must be understood in terms of their own actual character and circumstances" (Ibid., p. 603).

Isaiah Berlin, steeped in academic studies, was not an "ivory tower" scholar. He thought deeply and cared deeply about politics and society. He thought deeply and cared deeply about the Jewish predicament as an oppressed and misunderstood minority group; he thought deeply and cared deeply about how humanity might be more respectful, thoughtful, and fairer.

His teachings are as relevant today as they were when he first expounded them.

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I was born and raised in Seattle, Washington, as were both of my parents. My grandparents had come to Seattle early in the 20th century from towns in Turkey and the Island of Rhodes. My ancestors had lived in the old Ottoman Empire since the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. Spanish religious intolerance at that time was counter-balanced by Ottoman religious tolerance.

In Seattle, Jews were a tiny minority of the general population. Sephardic Jews were a small minority within the city's Jewish population. My grandparents, like the other Sephardic immigrants, spoke Judeo-Spanish as their mother tongue. I thought it was perfectly natural and normal to grow up in Seattle with Turkish-born grandparents who spoke a medieval form of Spanish!

I strive to live according to the truth of my faith. Yet, I also am struck by a massive reality: I am part of a Sephardic Orthodox Jewish community that represents an infinitesimal percentage of humanity. There are at least seven

billion other human beings who live according to their faiths, and who know little or nothing about mine. If I have the true way of life — one for which I am willing to live and die — how am I to relate to the overwhelming majority of human beings who do not share my faith?

Growing up as an Orthodox Sephardic Jew in Seattle, I learned very early in life that I had to be very strong in my faith and traditions in order to avoid being swallowed up by the overwhelming majority cultures. I also learned the importance of theological humility. It simply would make no sense to claim that I had God's entire Truth and that seven billion human beings were living in spiritual darkness. I surely believed — and do believe — that I have a profound religious truth that guides my life. But I also believed — and do believe — that all human beings have equal access to God, since God has created each one of us in God's image.

One of the great challenges facing religions is to see the full picture of humanity, not just our particular segment of it. While being fully committed to our faiths, we also need to make room for others. We need, in a sense, to see humanity from the perspective of God, to see the entire canvas not just individual segments of it.

Religious vision is faulty when it sees one, and only one, way to God. Religious vision is faulty when it promotes forced conversions, discrimination against "infidels," violence and murder of those holding different views. How very tragic it is that much of the anti-religious persecution that takes place in our world is perpetrated by people who claim to be religious, who claim to be serving the glory of God.

While religion today should be the strongest force for a united, compassionate and tolerant humanity, it often appears in quite different garb. Religion is too often identified with terrorism, extremism, superstition, exploitation…and hypocrisy. People commit the most heinous crimes…and do so while claiming to be acting in the name of God.

Isaiah Berlin's concept of pluralism provides a framework to be faithful to our own truths, while being genuinely respectful of the truths of others. Religion should unite humanity in a universal striving for Godliness and righteousness.

References

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