



## **Isaiah Berlin The Last Coherent Liberal?**

***Robert W. Haney***

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# Isaiah Berlin

## The Last Coherent Liberal?

*Robert W. Haney*

This sermon was delivered on 24 January 1999 by Robert W. Haney (1934–2005) at the (Unitarian Universalist) Theodore Parker Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, of which he was Minister from 1981 to 2001. The text is held in the Harvard Divinity School library, Harvard University, in Haney’s Papers (bMS 194, Box 7, Folder 5). Thanks are due to the library for providing a copy of the sermon, and to Arthur Lidsky and Joanna Lubkin for their help in clearing the way for publication.

People who have once been, as the saying goes, ‘in the public eye’, but who have disappeared from view for many a year, have only three ways of reinventing public interest. They may suddenly appear on one or more television talk shows; they may once again display their talents – if only to a limited degree; or they may die.

I was reminded of the first approach by the announcement the other day that Esther Williams was going to be guest on the Rosie O’Donnell Show. My immediate reaction to the news was: ‘I didn’t know that Esther Williams is alive.’

A happy example of the second approach was provided by a recent instalment of the *Inspector Morse* series on WGBH-TV. Who should appear as the superannuated chancellor of an Oxford College<sup>1</sup> but Sir John Gielgud, spouting pomposities in his exquisitely refined voice. His brief performance provided a very restorative antidote to the President’s<sup>2</sup> State of the Union Address, and to the commentaries that followed.

The third approach, although fatal, is the safest of the three, for the other two are more likely than not to be embarrassing. After the death of Sir Isaiah Berlin in early November of 1997 at the age of eighty-eight, the *New York Times* printed his obituary on its front

<sup>1</sup> sc. Oxford University.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Clinton.

page, and the flood of articles and reviews and tributes continues unabated. The current public interest in him is all the more remarkable, because, during his lifetime, his reputation was largely limited to academic circles.

Those of you who are well acquainted with me know that, just about now, I would normally launch into a succinct, but perhaps too detailed, biography of my subject. You will be happy to learn that I am not going to do that this morning, because Isaiah Berlin's external life was extraordinarily dull. Berlin basically lived a life of the mind. People who knew him report that he was a superb companion for lunch or dinner, followed, perhaps, by conversation over a glass of post-prandial port.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, it is said, he talked too much and listened too little; but such talk! It was filled with inviting allusions, revealing perceptions, and many a droll anecdote.

Born into a Russian Jewish family in Riga, Latvia,<sup>4</sup> he grew up in what is now once again called St Petersburg, where he witnessed the beginnings of Bolshevik thuggery. With his immediate family he soon moved to Great Britain, where he studied at Oxford. Apart from service in the British Embassy in Washington during the Second World War, the rest of his long life was spent at Oxford. Preferring shorter forms to the ponderous tome, he produced a few dozen essays combining great breadth of thought, astonishing clarity of language, and gentle good humour. Beginning as a philosopher, he found his *métier* as a historian of ideas, and it is in that role that I recommend him to your attention.

Johannes Bakker,<sup>5</sup> whom many of you know as our church's scholarly Unitarian friend from Canada, asked me a few weeks ago if I currently have any intellectual heroes. A long pause followed. He mercifully ended it by saying: 'Well, I guess you don't have any right now. But not even Schleiermacher?'

<sup>3</sup> Berlin did not drink alcohol.

<sup>4</sup> Livonia at the time.

<sup>5</sup> Cornelis Johannes ('Neil') Bakker (1917–2014), Unitarian minister.

‘No,’ I said, ‘not even Schleiermacher. But I am just beginning to read Isaiah Berlin, and I think he may make a good candidate for the job.’

Ah, but I hasten to add that I am not trying to convert you this morning. I merely invite you to reflect upon what you may believe you are *expected* to think, to reflect upon what you *truly* think, and then to reflect upon *Berlin’s* personal conclusions.

In a century that has seen the world torn asunder by authoritarianisms of all sorts – political, economic, religious – and that ends with the world’s peoples as adrift and as divided as ever before, we ought to ask ourselves, ‘What went wrong?’

We went wrong, Isaiah Berlin tells us, by the mistaken ideas in our heads. Advances in the sciences had led us to believe not only that a fundamental order, based upon natural laws, exists in the world around us, but that we could discover it and apply its rules to our every need. Those applications have come to include every area of human experience, from the planning of our economies to the raising of our children. We chose to believe that for every need there is a science, and for every science there are immutable rules.

Hence, we tell ourselves, were we more knowledgeable, all the rules could be expressed mathematically – as the fundamental laws of nature can be, or as we want to think – and all the best minds of this century have been nibbling away at the cliffs and volcanoes of our ignorance. One thing is certain (we tell ourselves): we are making progress toward comprehending, if not conquering, the ultimate Truth that governs all things.

In contrast, Berlin argues that most Western thought, whether it be theological, or philosophical, or scientific, suffers from a fundamental mistake. It assumes that there is some one entity or rule, some *one* principle or process that explains everything. This being the case, you and I can go on to assume that every practical problem – especially those concerned with how to live a good life – can be solved by appeal to the one great universal Truth. In most societies, woe to the minorities who disagree with the majorities in identifying that Truth. Or woe to the apathetic who disagree with the zealous!

In his anthropology, Berlin is significantly Romantic (with a capital ‘R’), and, to a limited degree, an Existentialist. Opposing determinism, he argues that individual identities are self-created but are *limited* by the constraints imposed by nature, history, biology and culture. In the best Romantic and Existentialist tradition, I suspect he would assert that the people whom we are most likely to remember are those who defiantly seek to transcend those constraints. However, the people who accomplish the most for the greater good of all are those who rework those limits to form something beautiful and significant for their place, even as a potter reworks a mound of clay.

If one word lies at the heart of Berlin’s world-view it is this: *pluralism*.

The word does not merely refer to the fact that a great variety of cultures and subcultures exists around this planet – and in our own backyards. Nor does it merely embrace the ethical consequences – sometimes respected by the liberally minded – that that variety merits our high regard and protection.

For Berlin, ‘pluralism’ entails the realisation that people are more likely than not to disagree significantly on purposes and the means of achieving them. There being no fundamental order governing the affairs of the human mind or heart – or, as some contemporary scientists would argue, governing anything else – we find ourselves, if we are faithful to our experience, participating in a great planetary conversation, involving people who *perceive* life differently and have different expectations of it.

Since our resulting values are based upon different standards, there can be little unanimity among us, and to expect otherwise is to indulge in a perilous form of self-deception.

If I may extrapolate from those conclusions, then I think that I should assert – although Berlin never does so – that a good many of our own country’s efforts around the world, including many of those in the United Nations, are fundamentally flawed, because they seek to impose Western – or specifically American – norms on the rest of the world. If we possessed any historical sense – if we were aware of the essential pluralism of all human experience –

we would talk less and listen more. We would certainly not take pride in the fundamentally barbaric notion that our country should rule the world, or does. *Tout passe*, and nothing disappears more quickly than national significance.

Our proper task, Berlin tells us, is to honour the variety of human experience, while cherishing our own approaches to living. It is to respect the quest for a larger liberty among *all* peoples, even though we shall probably disagree with some of their goals, even as they find inadequacies in some of ours. There is nothing eternally sacred, after all, about the American Way of Life.

I find one of the most exciting things in Berlin's essays to be his celebration of the great variety of ways in which people choose to live and give meaning to their lives. Unlike the teachers of doctrines or of scientific principles, he honours the responsiveness of people to the unknowable – even when he disagrees with them. He respects people like you and me – sometimes rational, sometimes irrational.

I think that Isaiah Berlin, unlike so many philosophers, profoundly enjoyed the uncertainties and perplexities of living. All by itself, his example in that regard is a splendid legacy.

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