
COUNCIL OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS
– SOUTH EAST LONDON BRANCH

**IS THERE A ROLE TODAY FOR CHRISTIANITY AND / OR
JUDAISM IN SETTING STANDARDS FOR BRITISH PUBLIC
SERVICE?**

14 MARCH 2023

Thank you very much for inviting me to come and participate in this evening's discussion on the question "Is there a role today for Christianity and / or Judaism in setting standards for British public service?"

Subject to certain qualifications to which I will come, my answer to this question is a simple and resounding no.

The United Kingdom today is perhaps as diverse a population as it has ever been, and members of the public include practising members of pretty much all sectors of pretty much all known religions; and they also include representatives of pretty much all non-religion-based ideologies and philosophies; and, perhaps most importantly, they include a large number of people, if not actually a majority, who do not consider themselves to belong to any religious or ideological community.

It is fundamentally and overwhelmingly important that in order for the standards system for British public service to command the

respect and acceptance of as large a percentage of the population as possible – an acceptance which is in itself of critical importance in a Parliamentary democracy that depends on a rule of law that ultimately rests on government by consent – no religious or other sectarian influences are thought to have shaped the standards for public service in a way that could be divisive, or could leave any member of the public feeling (rightly or wrongly) exposed, excluded or manipulated.

Put another way, it is vital that people who do not subscribe to any religious or other ideologies consider themselves to have as much right as those who do to articulate fundamental ethical and moral rules for society and to expect public servants, again whether they profess religion or not, to identify with, understand and commit to supporting and complying with those principles, in a manner that is completely neutral in religious terms and unaffected by religious doctrine.

This is, perhaps all the more important in a democracy that has an established church, and a legal system that has long shown a special tolerance and acceptance of both the established Christian church and other forms of Christianity and certain other religions.

As a practising orthodox Jew myself, for example, I benefit from secular legal recognition given to Jewish marriages and Jewish arrangements for the preparation of meat, amongst other things. I am personally conscious of the need not to allow special legal recognition for the established church and other religions to be allowed to turn into a perception that religious people claim some kind of moral superiority over others, or that they assert some kind of right to set moral and ethical standards for the entire population from a religious perspective.

If you will forgive me for perhaps making my primarily negative answer slightly more provocative, I will add an additional reason why it is important that organised religion does not appear to be asserting any a special authority or authenticity in contributing to the setting of standards for public service. Here I speak, for obvious reasons, in a purely private capacity, and in relation to

those parts of the Jewish community that I understand alone, and I will leave it to others to decide whether my comments apply to other religious communities with which they will be better acquainted.

Put bluntly, the present performance of institutional religion and religious communities in relation to ethical standards does not put us in a good position to be presenting ourselves as ideal arbiters or influences of public ethical standards.

This is not the forum in which to go into these matters in any detail, but suffice it for present purposes to say that in a number of ways, partly related to our handling of abuse scandals but going beyond that into many other areas as well, I would certainly not propose my own religious community as having an institutional ethical record of a kind that entitles it to lecture others on ethical matters, or to appear to be presenting itself as an ethical arbiter.

For all these reasons, it seems to me that it is essential in today's Britain and United Kingdom, that the standards for British public service are clearly seen to be predicated on basic moral and ethical norms with which every member of our society can be presumed to be comfortable accepting as the bedrock of public standards.

In this respect, the Principles of Public Life, articulated in their present form by the Nolan Committee some years ago, are particularly serviceable: honesty and integrity; openness and accountability; selflessness and objectivity; and leadership in relation to all of these, are pretty much unbeatable as unshakable principles that commend themselves to members of all religions and none.

Their fundamentally non-sectarian, and universal authority means that since their first enunciation in this form they have commanded respect and acceptance throughout the political and non-political world, and they remain today the underpinning of, in particular, the Code of Conduct for Members of the House of Commons, which it

is my job as Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards to oversee and enforce.

Having said, however, that I regard institutional religion as necessarily irrelevant to the setting of standards for the British public service today, let me describe the way in which I think religion in general remains not just relevant but crucial to the successful delivery of those standards.

There is a principal in Jewish thought, *derech erez kodma laTorah*, which can be broadly translated as “decency is a necessary prerequisite for compliance with Jewish law”. Much has been said about this rabbinic aphorism over the centuries, but I think it has acquired particular resonance and importance in today’s era, where we live in a world that is increasingly, and with many painful lapses, trying to articulate and refine core moral values based on nothing more and nothing less than humanity: the dignity and worth of each individual and their ensuing inalienable rights. This is a conversation and a development to which religion needs to remain relevant; and in the case of Judaism, this needs to be done by deploying this Rabbinic aphorism about *derech erez* – human decency – being a fundamental underpinning for religion. The tenets and rituals of Judaism are capable of helping an individual to enhance their sensitivity to others and to develop their contribution to the wider community, always if, and only if, a person’s religious observance is solidly founded on an understanding of human decency. Put another way, the concept of *tzelem eloikim* – humanity having been created in the image of God – is capable of being understood as an assertion that basic human instincts are a reflection of the Divine, and if nurtured, and given space to develop in a natural way, will form a profitable foundation for ritual and other religious expressions that are capable of extending and developing it.

The result of this is that while I believe that there neither is nor should be any kind of role for Judaism, or indeed any other religion, in setting standards for the British public service, I think there are enormous opportunities for religious people to allow an understanding of and involvement with the fundamental principles of public service – which themselves reflect universally accepted

human norms – to deepen and enrich their own religious experience and performance. By doing that, one hopes that a religious person who sees the Nolan principles and other articulations of basic human morality as a foundation for their own religion, and allows their religious practice to deepen and develop their understanding and performance of those standards, will not only enrich their own spiritual development but enhance their contribution to the wider public sector and civic communities. In particular, by allowing their overall communal understanding and performance of those standards to reflect their own religious beliefs and ideals, they will be making a unique contribution to the rich and diverse pattern of implementation of the standards of public life, which will then be enriched by the contributions and perspectives of different religions and other ideological communities.

So I do think that Christians and Jews have much to contribute – as Christians and Jews – to the implementation and maintenance of standards of British public service, and that they both will and should allow their religious traditions and understandings to contribute to the way in which they understand and give expression to those standards.

But ultimately, returning to the form in which the question is put, my conclusion, as will be apparent from what I have already said, is very much along the lines of “ask not what your religion can do for standards for British public service, but what can those standards – as expressions of common human decency and morality – do for institutionalised religion”.

People who profess to practice or follow a religion and who happen to be involved in public life should take care to ensure that their religion polishes and refines their Divinely derived human instincts so that their spiritual identity and their public service both benefit from it, without a single word or dictate of a religious nature passing their lips, or otherwise making itself observable to the entire populus whose needs they must serve equally, and who must feel equally and impartially served by all.

That means, for example, a religious person gaining spiritually from what begins as a basic moral commitment to honesty. As one of the Nolan principles, that essentially means not lying: not making excuses for having lied, not apologising for having lied, and not insisting on waiting until one has served a term after having lied to be readmitted into the ranks of public service. It means not lying. A person who accepts that as a fundamental proposition of basic human morality may go on to have much to contribute from a religious perspective to notions of truth and falsehood, to refinements of concepts of honesty and in many other ways. But acceptance of the pure and simple underlying concept must come first.

All those who aspire to the privilege of being allowed to perform public service should be eager to allow their own private religion to support them in that endeavour: so, put another way and in conclusion, there may be no place for institutionalised religion in the setting of standards for the public service, but there is plenty of room for religion to play a constructive part in the shaping of effective public servants.

Thank you very much.