

By reference to British values, what are the best values for humans to aspire to?

The English language is generally less complicated, but for its many polysemous words. One of such words is a critical subject matter of this essay. Value in this context, refers to the beliefs of people about what is right and wrong and what they consider as important¹. In brief, this essay evaluates what the best values are for humans to aspire to and burdens the author to draw linkages with British values. What then are British values? The foremost major official public document that highlights fundamental British values was the “Prevent Strategy”², a 2011 document that the Home Office presented to Parliament, detailing an integrated Government policy to prevent the growing spate of terrorist activities.

These values are: democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs and have since been incorporated into the curriculum. Two of these values stand out as they resonate with, in the author’s view, the best and aspirational values for our human society as well as considerable aspects of Sikh jurisprudence. The essay is structured to follow this same pattern, thus a discussion of the two values, why they are the best or aspirational and how they reflect Sikh jurisprudence and then, a conclusion.

Mutual Respect and Tolerance of different faiths and beliefs

The best definition of mutual respect is one that references the recognition of a person’s value and human dignity. To say that one has respect for a person’s faith and belief is to recognise that their religion and belief system is an appendage of their human dignity, thus the dignity to choose and express the best form of ideals that add meaning to their lives. To tolerate, is to accept and embrace, which also means to try and understand or at best acknowledge the fuller existence of a faith or belief. The idea that every British or person living in this country has the freedom of their worship and can express their faith, is a vitally aspirational value because there are countries where the tenets of religion

¹ Oxford University Press, Oxford English Dictionary (online edn, 2024) <https://www.oed.com> accessed 5 August 2025

² HM Government, Prevent Strategy (Cm 8092, 2011) 34 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/613d2a46d3bf7f000af1a1c6/prevent-strategy-review.pdf> accessed 5 August 2025

are imposed not just on citizens but on residents and tourists³. Alternatively, this value of tolerance encourages plurality of religious doctrines and promotes mutual respectfulness of each other's religion and ideology to the extent that they are not incompatible with the UK's constitutional doctrines nor pose a threat to public order and safety.

At the heart of this value is the need to foster inclusion, diversity and equality, as provided for in The Human Rights Act 1998. The Act guarantees everyone the right to their freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change their religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest their religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.⁴ Article 10 further provides for everyone to enjoy a right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers⁵.

Further, in section 10 of the Equality Act 2010⁶ a religion or belief is considered a protected characteristic; prescribing that nobody be treated differently or unfairly as a result of their religion or belief. A religion has been conceptualised to mean any religion or non-belief in a religion and a belief implies any religious or philosophy or the lack thereof. Essentially, whether in the workplace, educational establishment, community life, interactions with government establishments and social services, everybody's religion and belief must be respected, accepted and embraced.

This is important because Britain is not a monolithic society. Its current population is characterised by strands of diverse characteristics. Outside white citizens, 19 various groupings by ethnicity have been identified, forming some almost 26% of the population of England and Wales alone⁷. The reality is that

³ In most theocracies, there is a single religion whose values form the basis of the country's constitutional ordering, guiding both public and private life.

⁴ See Article 9 of The Schedule of Articles, Human Rights Act, 1998

⁵ Ibid

⁶ The Equality Act 2010

⁷ Office of National Statistics 2022 'Population of England and Wales', <<https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest/>> accessed 5 August 2025.

within those diverse strands of people are likely to emerge various languages, cultural and religious belief systems. Such characteristics are so unique and powerful to human nature that people either travel with them or they are handed over from generation to generation, irrespective of geography. It is therefore quite likely to encounter a fifth generation Punjabi British family still holding true to their Sikh faith. It does not make them less British, rather it enhances their diversity within a desirably multicultural setting.

The reason it is necessary to be respectful and tolerant to differing religions and beliefs beyond its constitutional essence is the fact that it's a necessary tool for social harmony. This country could not do much about its diversity because it has always been better for it. Whether through the migration of British subjects during the colonial era or the Windrush generation brought in to help rebuild the country after World War II or communities who have fled their countries to seek refugee status or work visa policies introduced to fill critical sectors of the economy, migration to this country has mostly been largely to its economic benefit. The least the country could do is ensure that the characteristic diversity of its expanding population is highlighted and the differences, respected.

By teaching British children in schools about other religion and belief system or highlighting their freedom of choice, people are being groomed to see the world beyond what they know or are familiar with and to accept differences. This reduces tendencies such as racism, bigotry, superiority, marginalisation, insecurity or even extremism. The value also quite frankly acknowledges that not everybody embraces change the same way and therefore significant effort has to be made to enlighten people to understand these vital elements of social change.

It may be important to highlight that the UK doesn't exactly score a 100% on this value of tolerance of religions. There are serious concerns of islamophobia and widespread hostilities towards other less mainstream religious faiths. Many immigrants for example have been the butt of jokes and have endured protests as a result of stereotypes ascribed to their faiths and religious practices. Some people have also been forced to comply with workplace standards even if they flout their religious beliefs.

Despite these challenges, the UK can be said to be a good enough success story of religious tolerance, accepting refugees of varied faiths and embracing communities of new religions and beliefs. Many communities and workplace celebrate Eid together, eat at Diwalis and exchange pleasantries and kind wishes during Christmas.

This ideal is aspirational because many countries in the world are undergoing various social changes. Humanity itself is evolving and globalisation has made the reality of diversity, indispensable. Inevitably, there would always be diversity of religion and beliefs and more religious and ideological sects would probably emerge such that being tolerant, respectful, accepting and embracing of the human dignity of choice is a survival mechanism.

In a world that has faced historical instabilities occasioned by religious wars, religious diversity is a just end. For example, during Medieval centuries, foreign invaders and foreign rulers in India were obsessed with religious prejudices such that they advocated the policy of forcible religious conversion of Hindus⁸. Out of that value of respect and tolerance also comes the essence of being conscious enough to interrogate opposing belief system without condescendence. That means that an adult Christian must have the liberty to decide to become a Muslim or Sikh or even atheist without feeling threatened and vice-versa.

It is that level of consciousness and spiritual fortitude that led the Guru Nanak to question the caste system and Hindu rituals. Indeed, Guru Nanak exemplified the highest form of religious tolerance by his long association with Mardana, who came from a family of devout Muslims. Further, Sikhism embodies religious tolerance by eschewing religious superiority and marginalisation. The holy words of the Guru Arjun, the fifth prophet of Sikhism, "I am estranged with no one, nor is any one alien to me" deeply emphasises this value⁹.

⁸ Arvinder Singh 'The Sikh Notion of Religious Tolerance' (2014) 1(10) Reviews of Literature <<https://oldrol.lbp.world/UploadArticle/208.pdf>> accessed 5 August 2025

⁹ Ibid

Sikhism teaches the belief in a pluralistic society where tolerance is considered a saint's hallmark. After all, nobody has monopoly over wisdom and knowledge and each person must seek their own enlightenment through meditation and devotion to the Almighty. Equality was further enshrined into Sikhism when Guru Nanak declared that "there is no Hindu and there is no Muslim"¹⁰. Without a doubt, the essence of the value of mutual respect and tolerance of religion and beliefs is to intrinsically highlight that all humans are equal and their belief system must be accorded the same equality such that no one should feel less important about their beliefs. This is by far, a precious value for humans to aspire to.

The Rule of Law

The rule of law is a fundamental governance principle and constitutional philosophy that highlights the relationship between elected political leaders and citizens. Modern democratic societies are best organised under this ideal: that both the government and governed are subject to the laws of the land. Lord Steyn has described the rule of law as a term of institutional morality such that no good law or use of public power should enable oppression¹¹. Rule of law generally implies that the law is certain, there is an independent judiciary, there is due process and that the law is applied equally.

Rule of law deals with the propensity of abuse of power. After all, it was Lord Acton who famously wrote in a letter to an Anglican Bishop that power tends to corrupts, and absolute power, corrupts absolutely¹². The principle helps calibrate the exercise of legal and political power and to ensure the observance of human rights which have been long accepted as inalienable rights endowed to men in equal terms, by their creator¹³.

¹⁰ Gemma Grant, 'What is Sikh Jurisprudence (2019) Winner's Essay 2019 Guru Nanak Social Mobility Scholarship <https://singhbarrister.co.uk/previous-scholarships> accessed 5 August 2025

¹¹ Lord Steyn, *The Constitutionalism of Public Law* (London: Constitution Unit, 1999) p4

¹² John Acton, Acton-Creighton Correspondence. Unknown, 1887. Online Library of Liberty, <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/acton-acton-creighton-correspondence>> accessed 17 August 2025

¹³ Paraphrases the introductory line of the American Declaration of Independence which is said to have drawn inspiration from the writings of John Locke and Montesquieu.

In explaining the rule of law, Lord Bingham has provided eight fundamental principles that have often been useful in dissecting the principle¹⁴. Firstly, that the law must be accessible and, so far as possible, intelligible, clear and predictable. Secondly, the resolution of legal rights and obligations should not be discretionary but based on the law, that there should be equality before the law and ministers and public officers must act within the confines of the law. Further, the law must protect human rights and provide means for timeously resolving legal disputes, there must be fair adjudicative procedures and that state must comply with national and international obligations.

In juxtaposing this to the English system, it is submitted that the major sources of law in England and Wales are constitutional doctrines and royal prerogatives, most of which are unwritten, Acts of Parliament and Case law - which often amalgamates the various principles of common law and equity - and lastly, international agreements. Whilst it has been largely argued that unwritten constitutions may affect the certainty of the law, a good portion of the laws of England and Wales are written and are accessible on major government websites. There is also sufficient academic commentary on the constitutional doctrines written by revered jurists such as Coke and Blackstone. To the extent that English common law has the biggest influence around the world, one can make conclusions about its clarity, certainty and intelligibility.

One can also argue that there is a sophisticated system of resolving legal disputes through a robust judiciary and court system which is again, among the best in the world. Human Rights are also well clarified in important statutes and the country undertook significant reforms under the Constitutional Reforms Act¹⁵ to deepen separation of powers. The Prime Minister and Government recognises that the exercise of power must come with restraint and that they are equal under the law. For example, in

¹⁴ Lord Bingham, Speech on the Rule of Law at the Sixth Sir David Williams Lecture, 16 November 2006, p6 <<https://www.cpl.law.cam.ac.uk/sir-david-williams-lectures/rt-hon-lord-bingham-cornhill-kq-rule-law>> accessed 17 August 2025]

¹⁵ Constitutional Reforms Act 2005.

2023, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was fined for not wearing a seatbelt¹⁶ and the decision of the Miller case¹⁷ reinforced Parliamentary sovereignty and restrained the use of the royal prerogative powers by the government. Essentially, the UK's justice system is generally fair and the state complies to its laws and international agreements. In light of Lord Bingham's eight principles, there is no doubt why the rule of law is an important British value.

There are however some critical challenges that pose a threat to the viability of the rule of law in England and Wales. As an aspiring criminal barrister, one would be remiss not to talk about the growing concerns in the criminal justice delivery system. The Leveson Report has highlighted record high levels of caseload in the crown courts, leading to delays in the administration of justice¹⁸. There are also significant cuts in legal aid and investments in the criminal court system, a situation that is causing a scare away from criminal practice. There are also concerns with complex procedures within the criminal justice system and new forms of extracting and analysing evidence thereby prolonging jury decision-making.

There are significant challenges faced by the Police and other investigative bodies and concerns about the abuse of police powers. There are also significant occurrences of unequal access to opportunities and marginalisation in many quarters in the UK. These things which bother on human right abuses and the effective and timely administration of justice do not augur well for the rule of law. There may be some laws in England and Wales that may have also outlived their usefulness, for example the

¹⁶ BBC News 'Rishi Sunak fined for not wearing seatbelt in back of car' (BBC, 21 January 2025) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-64353054>> accessed 17 August 2025

¹⁷ *R (Miller) v The Prime Minister; Cherry v Advocate General for Scotland* [2019] UKSC 41, [2020] AC 373.

¹⁸ Brian Leveson, Independent Review of The Criminal Courts Part 1 (18 June 2025) <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/686be85d81dd8f70f5de3c1f/35.49_MOJ_Ind_Review_Criminal_Courts_v8b_FINAL_WEB.pdf> accessed 17 August 2025

Vagrancy Act¹⁹ and s90²⁰ stops and searches which require review especially because of the threats on young, ethnic minority people.

The reason the rule of law is all the more important as a value is that it prescribes the rules of acceptable standards of behaviour and interactions among citizens daily. A country or society where an employer respects the rights of employees, where the police respects citizens, where husbands accord respect to their wives and children and where schools protects and safeguards the rights of children, knowing the responsibilities placed on them is desirable. Knowing what one's legal obligations and rights are and having faith in the prescribed judicial system, comes with confidence in our political institutions. For instance, when parents know that there is a mechanism for them to even appeal an admission decision and would be heard fairly, it gives them confidence in local council decisions. An effective judicial system also prevents mob-justice and vengeance ensuring law and order.

Despite this country's shortcomings, the rule of law is an aspirational value because the world has not only had its fair share of human right abuses and wars, it has experienced various undesirable historical occurrences such as slavery, apartheid, genocides, despotism, fascism and the holocausts. Many human lives have been scarred and the human race have never truly recovered from some of these atrocities that spat on the face of the rule of law.

Racism, domestic and gender abuse and xenophobia also pose serious threat in many other parts of the world. Institutionalising a system of rule of law is emphasising equality and promoting the virtue that nobody is privileged to subject their fellow human being to any form of indignity and that where it happens, the law should take its case without fear or favour. The rule of law is not utopian, it demands that where there are challenges, there can be deliberate efforts at addressing them and ensuring that the world is fairer and just.

¹⁹ Vagrancy Act 1824

²⁰ s 90 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994.

This value holds even truer as the UK celebrates eighty years of surrender by Germany of its military operations, effectively leading to the liberation of Europe after a tumultuous six years. In celebrating VE Day, one must be reminded of the sacrifices made by those who fought in the war. There is no doubt that among many other convictions, many of them fought for the equality of the world and the need to defend the sovereignty of their respective territories against fascism, a phenomenon which stands in contradistinction to the rule of law. The rule of law as a value system becomes a timely reminder that never again should any country feel so superior to invade other countries and that where there are global conflicts, they can be resolved amicably under an effective dispute settlement mechanism.

Ultimately, the rule of law resonates with Sikh jurisprudence as the teachings of Guru Nanak emphasises equality, collective responsibility and respect for the common man. In a world where humanity abides by the Guru's postulation of "Ek Ong Kar" meaning 'we are one', nobody would look down on their neighbour based on their religion, race or ethnicity. Equality would also imply that equality before the law and that whether "Jew or Gentile", Minister or ordinary citizen, rich or poor, the true test for legality should be the law and where people offend the laws of the state, they must be dealt with devoid of any differential treatment.

It has been argued that many of the Guru's actions were animated by his strong sense of justice and abhorrence of marginalisation. Inevitably, the indiscriminate use of military force by the Mughals provoked the Sikh Gurus to protest against the atrocities of the ruling class, taking up the cause of the people and undergoing all sorts of suffering²¹. Sikhism also teaches about the protection of human rights and the avoidance of exploitation. Guru Nanak declares in Var of Majh that to deprive others of their rights ought to be avoided as scrupulously as the Muslims avoid the pork and the Hindus consider beef as a taboo. He adds to it that 'The Guru stands by thee if you usurpest not one another's dues' (Guru Granth, p. 141)²²

²¹ Kirpal Singh Chhabra, 'The "Rule of Law" and Sikh Thought' (Sikh Philosophy and Network, 27 June 2007) <<https://www.sikhphilosophy.net/threads/the-rule-of-law-and-sikh-thought.25849/>> accessed 15 August 2025

²² Ibid

Conclusion

In the general scheme of things, there are many values in life that are worthy of aspiring to: forgiveness, humility, generosity, kindness etc. Yet these are all relevant at the level of inter-personal human interactions. On the larger national and even international level, these two values of tolerance for religions and beliefs and rule of law have wider outcomes for the effective functioning of our society which is why in the author's view, these values are highly aspirational. This essay has primarily answered why these are the best values by emphasising that the world is fast becoming globalised and mutual tolerance and respect is therefore a mechanism for survival.

The rule of law is also the standard by which many functioning democracies are measured, therefore its efficacy has direct linkages with social harmony and protection of the liberties of individuals. Evidently, what we know as British values are of wider global significance. Most countries looking to achieve meaningful development; "one which protects human rights - which are too often denied - or guarantee security - which are too often threatened- and protect the health of those without wealth"²³, should cherish these values.

²³ These were paraphrased from the famous opening speech of Speaker John Bercow at Westminster Hall on the occasion of the visit and address by then President Barack Obama to Parliament in 2011.

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