

Celebrating 80 years since VE Day: by reference to British values, what are the best values for humans to aspire to?

Introduction

The 8th of May 2025 marked the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe (VE) Day, a historic moment that signified the formal acceptance by the Allies forces of Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender. VE Day is seen as a foundational step in the development of British values: a victory of democracy, justice, freedom, and unity over fascism. Yet, eighty years later, these same values – foundational to our liberal democracy – have become a source of division in modern Britain. As populism grows in influence in domestic politics,^{1 2} British values increasingly appear politicised, applied inconsistently, and even used for exclusionary purposes. From growing inequalities to political demonstrations that evoke themes of nationhood,³ it is often within national and ethnic identity that citizens search for stability.⁴ As the future of Britain appears to be at a crossroads, the question of what the best values for humanity to aspire to remains as pertinent as ever.

This essay does not seek to provide an exhaustive answer to this important question that has concerned philosophers across cultures and eras. Instead, we take a different approach by drawing specifically on Sikh jurisprudence to explore what the best values for humans to aspire to are. We argue that the normative foundations underpinning British values are, at their core, universal human ideals. These ideals are reflected in, and in some cases even prefigured by, Sikh teachings; the latter can widen our understanding of British values and, by extension, contribute to a richer conception of the values that humans should aspire to.

¹ Populism is a broad political ideology and, at its core, places 'ordinary people' against a perceived elite, often appealing to a narrowed set of values.

² E.g., Diane Taylor, 'UK party leaders urged to end 'pernicious currents of hatred fuelling anti-migrant protests' *The Guardian* (London, 11 August 2025).

³ Phil Mackie and Ewan Somerville, 'National flags have started lining our streets. They may say something more.' *BBC News* (London, 24 August 2025).

⁴ Cameron Henshall, Fida Sanjakdar, and Howard Prosser, 'Fundamental British values': navigating nationalism and teacher practice' (2024) *Globalisation, Societies and Education*.

This essay will proceed as follows: Section I will outline and define the tenets of Sikh Jurisprudence, before justifying its historical and contemporary relevance to this inquiry (I). Sections II through V will then each explore the four official British values in turn,⁵ and how our understanding of these principles can be enhanced through engagement with Sikh jurisprudence: Democracy (II), Rule of Law (III), Individual Liberty (IV), and Mutual Respect and Tolerance for Those of Different Faiths and Beliefs (V). Through our comparative approach, it is hoped that this essay can offer a renewed vision of the best values for humans to aspire to and, in doing so, maintain the importance of British values today.

I. Sikh Jurisprudence

It is first necessary to offer a brief exposition of Sikh jurisprudence, as this will serve as the analytical framework for our discussion of aspirational values throughout this essay. Broadly defined, jurisprudence is the philosophy of the law. As a formal science, its function is to ascertain the principles on which legal rules are based, rather than to assess actual systems or current views of law.⁶ While there are several established schools of thought within jurisprudence, Sikh jurisprudence offers a distinct inquiry that is rooted in the religious history of Sikhism and forms its own jurisprudential philosophy. Through Sikh jurisprudence, we are therefore searching for fundamental principles or concepts that underpin the teachings of the Sikh faith, or Sikhi. Since Sikhism does not have a formal legal code, it is important to consider the jurisprudential philosophy expressed by the Sikh Gurus during their lives.

Understanding Sikh jurisprudence requires a brief introduction to the history of Sikhism, which is the world's fifth largest religion. Sikhism was founded in 1479 and is considered relatively young compared to other major religions. It emerged during a time of tension between Hinduism and Islam, and caste oppression in Punjab, North India. The founder of Sikhism was Guru Nanak Dev Ji, who became the first of ten Sikh Gurus. While later Sikh Gurus and the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the holy book of Sikhism and final Guru, would further elucidate the philosophy of Sikhism, the founder,

⁵ For British values, we adopt the 'Fundamental British Values' (FBV) which emerged from the British counter-terrorism strategy *Prevent* (2011).

⁶ The Law Dictionary, 'Jurisprudence' (*The Law Dictionary*, unknown publication date) <<https://thelawdictionary.org/jurisprudence/>> accessed 31 July 2025.

Nanak, established the core tenets of the Sikh faith and laid the foundations for its development. Nanak's ideas of social organisation, theology, and literature form the bedrock of the Sikh religion.⁷ He preached that the Divine, *Akal Purakh*, is the Absolute One, *Ik Onkar*, and it is singular, eternal, and formless.⁸ This core philosophy would later appear in the *Mool Mantar* at the beginning of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji.

To elaborate on this jurisprudential philosophy, after two decades of preaching this word of the Divine across the Indian subcontinent, Nanak founded the town of Kartarpur in Punjab. In the first *dharmshala*, a sacred space for the Sikhs, Nanak's followers brought into practice the key elements of his philosophy. This philosophy, and we argue jurisprudence, can be categorised into three core elements. First, *kirat karni* means doing work. Second, *naam japna* means meditating on the Divine Word. Third, *vand chakna* describes being charitable. Nanak and his followers believed that this philosophy of spiritual progress would lead to the Divine Truth. It has also been argued that the practice of these principles contribute to achieving social justice.⁹ This latter point should not be understated, as Nanak was reputed not solely for requiring worship of his followers, but also for requiring social action and the creation of a community of belief and works.¹⁰

This introduction to Sikh jurisprudence, beginning on the Indian subcontinent, may seem abstract from British values. However, there is a shared history between the Sikhs and British that is both overlooked and illuminating for this essay. In celebration of VE day, there were 1.5 million Sikh volunteers in the Indian army who fought alongside the British military during the two World Wars. 83,000 Sikh soldiers gave their lives in defence of British values. Sikhs therefore shared the trenches alongside British forces and fourteen Victoria Crosses were subsequently awarded to Sikhs.¹¹ This outstanding military contribution should be of no surprise. The Sikh soldier's reputation for courage

⁷ Saanika Patanik and Nehal Agarwalla, *Sikhs: A History of a People, Their Faith and Culture* (1st edn, Dorling Kindersley Ltd 2023) 32.

⁸ Ibid 40.

⁹ Upkar Pardesi, 'Social Justice from a Sikh Perspective' (*LinkedIn*, 16 July 2014) <<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140716213508-31210902-social-justice-from-a-sikh-perspective/>> accessed 31 July 2025.

¹⁰ Sunil Khilani, *Incarnations: A History of India in 50 Lives* (1st edn, Penguin Books 2017) 98.

¹¹ HC Deb 30 April 2019 vol 659 col 55WH.

and fearlessness came from a historic tradition of martial culture, developed against a backdrop of political and religious oppression in Punjab.¹² The Sikh warrior spirit, demonstrated in the advancement of British values on VE day, illustrates how these values are not uniquely British and Sikh jurisprudence can offer valuable insights into the values that humans ought to aspire to. Moreover, Sikhism is not a religion that existed in the abstract. The life and works of Gurus exemplify the practicability of Sikh ideas, and we can view these ideas through socio-political institutions throughout this essay.¹³ This exposition of Sikh jurisprudence has demonstrated its salience for the principles underlying British values, which we shall now explore in greater detail.

II. Democracy

Democracy is a core British value that underpins our political life, inspiring us to govern in a manner that protects individual rights and promotes equality between citizens. It can be seen in the system of government in the United Kingdom which operates as a constitutional monarchy within a parliamentary democracy. More than solely a system of government, however, democracy is also a set of values that underpins a fair and inclusive society and is central to realising the other three official British values. Meaning ‘the rule of the people’, democracy can be seen through methods of collective decision-making that promotes equal participation in governance. Several mechanisms in our parliamentary democracy reflect this, including local and national elections where eligible citizens vote for their representatives as well as the various rights and freedoms allowing citizens to participate in public law.¹⁴

Despite acting as model for parliamentary democracy, there are concerns about the UK’s democracy,¹⁵ leading us to question whether the values of participation and accountability are being undermined. Brown notes that these include changes to certain rights and freedoms that are seen as essential

¹² Madra and Singh

¹³ Devinder Singh, ‘Human Rights – A Core Concern in Sikh Doctrine’ (2022) 25.

¹⁴ E.g., the Human Rights Act 1998 which incorporated the rights set out in the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic British law.

¹⁵ Thomas Brown, ‘Parliamentary democracy in the UK’ (House of Lords Library, 18 April 2023) < <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/parliamentary-democracy-in-the-uk/> > accessed 31 July 2025.

features in a democratic society.¹⁶ Public perceptions also exhibit increasing distrust in representative institutions.¹⁷ Concerns about the health of democracy are not unique to Britain, as building a fair and inclusive society was a key concern in the development of Sikhism. To reinvigorate the British value of democracy as an aspirational value for humans, Sikh jurisprudence can therefore demonstrate how the best values for humans to aspire to can be harmonised with a democratic ethos. As set out in I, the central aspiration in Sikhism is unity with *ik onkar*. To achieve this, Guru Nanak initiated the concept of *sangat* which is central to the Sikh way of life. As a community of people (men, women, and children) with similar feelings, ideas, and values,¹⁸ the institution of the *sangat* embodies democratic ideals through its emphasis on equality and collective decision-making within the congregation. The lives of the Sikh Gurus also embodied democratic values. For example, Nanak stated that “*as long as we are in this world, we must share knowledge/spiritual wisdom by listening or speaking it*”. Devinder Singh suggests that this aligns with a consensus oriented approach to good governance, where consultation is required to understand what is in the best interest of the entire group.¹⁹ Moreover, any adherent to Sikhism can participate in institutions without discrimination based on caste, race, gender, or status. We can therefore see the foundations for democratic governance within Sikh jurisprudence.²⁰

However, Sikh jurisprudence distinctly offers a vision for the best values for humans to aspire to by aligning high ethical standards and truthful conduct with good governance in order to achieve the highest goals in life.²¹ Highlighting the importance of adhering to the collective will and maintaining individual integrity, Nanak cautioned us to beware of self-interested persons by advising to “*not associate with those who are overly concerned with their own desires, needs, or interests.*”²² Sikh

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Daniel Devine, ‘A Crisis of Political Trust? Global Trends in Institutional Trust from 1958 to 2019’ [2025] British Journal of Political Science 1.

¹⁸ Devinder Singh, ‘Good Governance: A Perspective from Sri Guru Granth Sahib’ 24(1) The Sikh Bulletin 11, 12, 26

¹⁹ Ibid 12.

²⁰ Arvinder Singh, ‘Guru Gobind Singh’s Idea of Good Governance’ (2015) 2(1) International Journal of Research 785.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid 27.

jurisprudence illustrates how democratic ideals can be aspirational when it is implemented alongside participation and integrity. By placing democracy as an ethical duty for the individuals involved, Sikh jurisprudence shows why it is one of the best values for humans to aspire to.

III. Rule of Law

Linked to the value of democracy, the rule of law is also a central British value that supports healthy democratic functioning and prevents the abuse of state power;²³ it inspires us to reclaim our legal rights on an equal footing to other members of society, including the wealthy and privileged. At its core, the rule of law means that no-one is above the law. Dicey famously stated that in his second principle of the rule of law that “*every man, whatever be his rank or condition, is subject to the ordinary law of the realm and amenable to the jurisdiction of the ordinary tribunals.*”²⁴ Equality between individuals and the state is embedded within the rule of law, with core concepts also including equality before the law, protection for fundamental rights, and access to justice.²⁵ As an aspirational value, the rule of law is important as it ensures legal rights are actually fulfilled in practice, regardless of a person’s background; this ensures due respect is given to the rights of those marginalised in society.²⁶ While established as a British value, the rule of law risks existing as an abstract aspiration in theories and textbooks. As a value for humans to aspire to, the rule of law should be given meaning as a reality in the lives of citizens in accessing legal rights and obligations. The aspirational value is fairness, yet this is threatened by barriers to access to justice. The latter acts as an impediment to the rule of law, such as cuts to legal aid initiated by the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, as well as systemic inequalities that prevents recourse to our legal system.

To give renewed meaning to the rule of law as an aspirational value for humans, Sikh jurisprudence can lend inspiration due to its focus on equality and justice in all aspects of life. As stated earlier,

²³ The Constitution Unit, ‘What is the rule of law?’ (*Constitution Unit Explainers*, unknown publication date) < <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/explainers/what-rule-law> > accessed 14 August 2025.

²⁴ Select Committee on Constitution Sixth Report, *Appendix 5: Paper by Professor Paul Craig: The Rule of Law* (HL 2006-07)

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ JUSTICE, ‘The State We’re In: Addressing Threats & Challenges to the Rule of Law’ (JUSTICE 2023).

underpinning Sikh jurisprudence is the belief in one universal God, *ik onkar*. This core philosophy rejects distinctions made on the basis of class, race, and gender as everyone is considered equal in the eyes of God. Building on this concept, Guru Nanak elaborated a right of justice for all by stating that “one must administer justice by being absorbed in the spiritual wisdom of the Guru”. Devinder Singh argues that this is an injunction against arbitrary behaviour, bearing close resemblance to the British value of the rule of law.²⁷

Building on this vision of fair treatment, we can see examples of this commitment to equal treatment and the protection of rights in the lives of the Gurus. For instance, Guru Gobind Singh founded the Khalsa tradition in 1699 from a group of Sikhs that were committed to their faith, becoming the *Panj Pyare* or ‘Five Beloved Ones’. As a response to the oppression faced by Sikhs during the Mughal rule, the establishment of the Khalsa created a community of Sikhs that would defend the oppressed against injustice created by the ruling classes;²⁸ this had a lasting impact on Sikh philosophy, celebrated each April during the festival of Vaisakhi. The Sikh vision of justice and equality can therefore strengthen the British conception of the rule of law. By widening the rule of law beyond solely legal rights, Sikh jurisprudence can inspire us to instil a culture of participation and fairness across the treatment of all humans, while resisting arbitrary power and impediments to justice.

IV. Individual Liberty

Individual liberty is a further foundational British value, embodying the sovereignty and autonomy that humans need to exercise the freedoms in a democratic state governed by the rule of law. Whereas democracy and rule of law are often associated with the state, individual liberty allows citizens to freely exercise various rights outside the control of government. We can see a commitment to individual liberty in human rights and equality legislation in the United Kingdom, such as the Human Rights Act 1998 and Equality Act 2010; each contains legal instruments that enshrine and promote the value of individual liberty. For example, the Equality Act promotes individual liberty by protecting

²⁷ Devinder Singh, ‘Human Rights – A Core Concern in Sikh Doctrine’ (2022) 25, 30.

²⁸ Dasvandh Network (ed), ‘Khalsa’ (Dasvandh Network, unknown publication date) < [7](https://dvnetwork.org/page/khalsa#:~:text=The%20Khalsa%20is%20a%20central,righteousness%2C%20and%20service%20to%20humanity.> accessed 21 August 2025.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

individuals with protected characteristics from indirect and direct discrimination within society. While there is a shared commitment to individual liberty as an ideal, its limits are often contested, particularly in relation to certain freedoms such as speech and assembly.

To attain a clearer conception of individual liberty that humans should aspire to, one that honours human dignity and autonomy, Sikh jurisprudence offers relevant insights into the boundaries of our freedom. As a key tenet of Sikh jurisprudence, Guru Nanak spoke of the oneness of all of humanity through *ik onkar*. As all humans are children of the same creator, they are divinely interconnected and no-one is therefore superior or inferior to one another.²⁹ Therefore, Sikhism recognises the inherent value of liberty for individuals owing to their divine interconnectedness; in this way, Sikh jurisprudence insists that individual liberty ends when it infringes on the rights of others.³⁰

As an example of this vision, Sikh jurisprudence offers particular insights through its history with religious freedom. Sikhism teaches religious freedom, emphasising that all people have the right to follow their own paths without coercion or punishment from others.³¹ Sikh history features examples of Sikh Gurus and their followers making sacrifices in defence of religious freedom. For instance, Guru Arjan Dev Ji became the first Sikh martyr in 1601 following his execution by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir.³² The Guru refused to accept restrictions on his individual liberty to practice the Sikh faith, opting instead to accept torture and martyrdom as a more satisfactory fate. This commitment to individual liberty is immortalised in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, stating that *“Henceforth, such is the Will of God: No one shall coerce another; no one shall exploit another. Everyone, each individual, has the inalienable birth right to seek and pursue happiness and self-fulfilment. Love and persuasion is the only law of social coherence.”*³³ Sikh jurisprudence therefore

²⁹ Satpal Singh, ‘Guru Nanak and the Oneness of All Humanity’ (*The Interfaith Observer*, unknown publication date) < [³⁰ Devinder Singh \(n 27\) 25.](http://www.theinterfaithobserver.org/journal-articles/2019/11/13/guru-nanak-and-the-oneness-of-all-humanity#:~:text=He%20(%20Guru%20Nanak%20)%20emphasized%20that,Creator%20who%20has%20created%20all%20of%20us.> accessed 25 August 2025.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

³¹ American Humanist Association, ‘Humanist Common Ground: Sikhism’ (*American Humanist Association*, unknown publication date) <<https://americanhumanist.org/paths/sikhism/>> accessed 31 July 2025.

³² Ranvir Singh, ‘Sikhi worldview traditions’ (2020) *RE Online* 6.

³³ Ranvir Singh, ‘What does Freedom Mean in the Sikh Religion’ (2019) *RE Online*.

offers a unique basis for the value of individual liberty, based on the concept of God's love for all and later expanding to include the tradition of martyrdom. Sikh jurisprudence widens the British value of individual liberty by grounding it in the spiritual sovereignty of individuals³⁴ and not solely legal rights. We can therefore see how the best value for humans to aspire to is a version of individual liberty that allows individuals to flourish at their core, and also alongside one another. By offering the same freedoms to all humans, this widened conception of individual liberty illustrates why it is one of the best values humanity can aspire to.

V. Mutual Respect and Tolerance For Those of Different Faiths and Beliefs

Finally, the British value of mutual respect and tolerance for those of different faiths and beliefs is essential if we aspire to live in a liberal and pluralist society. Unlike the preceding values, this has historically received less attention, given the relatively recent phenomenon of increased diversity in the United Kingdom since the end of the Second World War. Nonetheless, mutual respect and tolerance between different faith and beliefs is as important as democracy or individual liberty in our discussion of the best values for humans to aspire to. This is important given the changes in British political life that have occurred since VE day War. For example, recent research has shown that cultural and identity politics have now carved out a significant space in the country's electoral politics,³⁵ underlining the importance of aspiring for respect and tolerance. Given the birth of Sikhism in an era of religious turmoil and oppression, Sikh jurisprudence can offer insights into the best values for humans to aspire to while striving to live in a society with plural faiths and beliefs.

As the founder of Sikh jurisprudence, Nanak was known to speak out fearlessly against the inequalities of his time; these included political aggression, the Hindu caste system, as well as the culturally embedded violation of women.³⁶ Nanak was famous for proclaiming that '*ni ka Hindu hai na ko Mussulman*' (there is neither Hindu nor Muslim), demonstrating on his vision of oneness between humans. Building on the discussion of Sikh jurisprudence, this philosophy of complete

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ National Centre for Social Research, 'Identity issues now a key dividing line in Britain's politics' (*NatCen*, 12 June 2024) < <https://natcen.ac.uk/news/identity-issues-now-key-dividing-line-britains-politics> > accessed

³⁶ Sunil Khilani (n 10) 98.

equality across class, gender, and race can be seen in practical examples of Sikhi, demonstrating a vision for mutual respect that extends far beyond mere tolerance. Khilani argues that the Sikh philosophy of equality is typified by the *langar*, the practice of eating together in a community kitchen. As an “*every day act of radicalism*” against the restrictions of the caste system,³⁷ gurdwaras extend charity to all and welcome people who may be hungry, irrespective of their background.³⁸ Moreover, the four doors of the gurdwara symbolise that it is open to people from all directions and from all walks of life. At every gurdwara, the Door of Peace, the Door of Livelihood, the Door of Learning, and the Door of Grace represent the Sikh principle of inclusivity for everyone.³⁹ This respect and welcome to those of different faiths and beliefs is also reflected in the text of the Guru Granth Sahib, in which “*No one is my enemy, and no one is a stranger. I am friendly towards everyone.*”⁴⁰ Western philosophers often treat tolerance as non-interference, however Sikhism enriches this value by actively advancing respect and equality between those of different faiths and beliefs. Therefore, Sikh jurisprudence demonstrates how the British value of mutual respect and tolerance for those of different faiths and beliefs can be elevated to an aspirational value, beyond merely accepting or tolerating differences. By recognising the divine in all humans, Sikhism emboldens us to radically pursue equality and respect for the welfare of all, regardless of our faiths and beliefs.

Conclusion

This essay has undertaken an in depth examination of what the best values for humans to aspire to are, by reference to each of the official British values. Unlike typical discussions of the values that humans should strive for, this essay has utilised Sikh jurisprudence as an analytical tool to assist with answering this question, both due to its rich historical insights and the contributions of Sikhs while celebrating eighty years since VE Day. We have demonstrated that there are shared normative foundations between British values and Sikh jurisprudence; common threads running throughout our

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ HC Deb 30 April 2019 vol 659 col 58WH

³⁹ Townscape Heritage, ‘A History of Sikh Temples or Gurdwaras’ (*Townscape Heritage*, unknown publication date) < <https://th.jewelleryquarter.net/sikh-temples/> > accessed 31 July 2025

⁴⁰ Ranvir Singh (n 33) 6.

discussion of aspirational values for humanity have been equality, compassion, inclusivity, and justice. Overall, by employing the insight of Sikh jurisprudence alongside British values, we see how ultimately the best values for humans to aspire to unite personal freedoms with collective justice, and meet differences with complete equality. These values honour the spirit of VE day on its eightieth anniversary, while preparing for challenges of the modern era.

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