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

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Introduction

Values are the principles that guide human behavior and shape societies. They influence how individuals interact, make decisions, and contribute to communal life. In the UK, the government has identified five core British values: democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs (Department for Education, 2014). These values are not only central to British civic identity but also reflect universal ideals that promote justice, peace, and human dignity. This essay argues that British values offer a strong foundation for universal human aspirations and global and personal examples will be used to explore the best values for humanity.

Democracy

Democracy is the principle of giving people a voice in governance through fair representation and participation. It ensures that power is derived from the consent of the governed. Amartya Sen describes democracy as a universal value, emphasising its role in promoting freedom, equality, and public reasoning (Sen, 1999).

For example, India, despite its vast diversity, has maintained a functioning democracy since independence in 1947. Democratic institutions have enabled peaceful transitions of power and protected minority rights (Sen, 1999). Democracy fosters peaceful conflict resolution, civic engagement, and accountability. It empowers individuals to influence decisions that affect their lives, making it a deeply aspirational value for societies worldwide.

In my own experience, in 2022 I visited UCAS headquarters to successfully campaign for the inclusion of a carer-identification criterion in university applications, ensuring future young carers are recognised and supported (UCAS, 2022). This initiative reflects the democratic value of giving voice to underrepresented groups. My work with the Carers Trust Youth Advisory Panel and lobbying efforts with MPs further demonstrate my commitment to the rule of law and civic engagement. These experiences have empowered me to advocate for policy changes that uphold justice and equality. As a result, democracy is a good value for humans to aspire to as it allows the public to make change to support others rather than a dictator favouring only themself.

Rule of Law

The rule of law means that all individuals and institutions are subject to laws that are fairly applied and enforced. It is essential for justice, equality, and protection from arbitrary power. The United Nations emphasises that the rule of law is foundational to human rights and sustainable development (United Nations, 2004).

For example, in South Africa, post-apartheid legal reforms established constitutional protections that uphold equality and human dignity, demonstrating the transformative power of law in healing divided societies (United Nations, 2004). Legal systems that uphold the rule of law ensure accountability, protect freedoms, and provide mechanisms

for redress. This value is crucial for maintaining order and safeguarding human rights globally so this value should be something that humans aspire to.

Individual Liberty

Individual liberty refers to the freedom to make personal choices, express oneself, and pursue one's own path. It is central to human development and autonomy. Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke and modern scholars such as Amartya Sen have argued that liberty is essential for personal growth and societal progress (Locke, 1689; Sen, 1999).

For example, the U.S. Bill of Rights enshrines liberties such as freedom of speech and religion, which have empowered civil rights movements and fostered innovation (U.S. National Archives, 1791). Liberty encourages creativity and self-expression but must be balanced with responsibility—respecting others' freedoms. It is a value that supports both individual fulfillment and collective well-being so it should be a value that humans aspire to uphold.

Mutual Respect

Mutual respect involves valuing others regardless of differences in background, beliefs, or identity. It is vital for trust, cooperation, and social harmony. Psychological research shows that respect enhances self-esteem, social engagement, and group cohesion (Tyler & Blader, 2003).

For example, in workplaces that promote mutual respect—such as inclusive companies like Google—employees report higher job satisfaction and productivity (Google Diversity Annual Report, 2022). Respect is a social currency that strengthens relationships and reduces conflict. In families, schools, and communities, it fosters inclusive environments where everyone feels valued.

My advocacy for young carers stems from personal experience. Since 2013, I have cared for three vulnerable adults, including my late grandmother with dementia and blindness, my late aunt with neurological disabilities, and my grandfather with epilepsy. This role has instilled in me a deep understanding of responsibility and empathy, reinforcing the importance of individual liberty and mutual respect.

Tolerance of Different Faiths and Beliefs

Tolerance is the acceptance of diversity in religion, culture, and opinion. It enables peaceful coexistence and global citizenship. Historical examples like Al-Andalus in medieval Spain show how tolerance can lead to cultural flourishing and intellectual exchange (Menocal, 2002).

For example, the Indian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and secularism, allowing diverse faiths to coexist in one of the world's most pluralistic societies (Government of India, 1950). Tolerance counters prejudice and extremism, promoting understanding and empathy. It is essential in multicultural societies and globalized communities where diversity is the norm.

As someone who attended a Sikh faith school, I was raised with values of equality, service, and respect for all—principles that align closely with British values such as mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs (Singh, 2015). These teachings have shaped my worldview and commitment to social justice. As the President of Coventry University Law Society and Placement Secretary for Sikhs in Law, I have organised events that promote diversity and inclusion, including hosting delegations from the Delhi High Court Bar Association. These roles exemplify the value of tolerance and mutual respect in professional and academic settings and appear to support society positively so humans should aspire to maintain this value.

However

While British values such as democracy, the rule of law, and tolerance are often presented as universal ideals, critics argue that their framing as "fundamental British values" can be exclusionary and problematic in multicultural contexts. Scholars have highlighted that the term itself lacks clarity and risks marginalising minority communities by promoting a narrow, nationalistic interpretation of civic identity. For example, Crawford (2017) argues that the government's emphasis on a "muscular promotion" of British values in schools has led to the securitisation of education, where teachers are positioned as gatekeepers against extremism, particularly targeting Muslim students.

This approach conflates national identity with democratic principles, potentially alienating those whose cultural or religious values differ from the dominant narrative. Moreover, the introduction of British values in response to the Trojan Horse affair has been criticised for reinforcing stereotypes and undermining genuine multicultural education (Crawford, 2017; Jerome & Elwick, 2019). These critiques suggest that while the values themselves may be aspirational, their politicised implementation can hinder inclusivity and fail to reflect the diverse realities of British society therefore humans can aspire to them but may not be able to achieve them.

Conclusion

Each British value—democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance—contributes to a vision of society that is just, inclusive, and peaceful. While rooted in British civic identity, these values reflect universal ideals that transcend national boundaries. They address fundamental human needs for freedom, dignity, and belonging. By embodying these principles in daily life, individuals and societies can work toward a more equitable and harmonious world therefore the British values including

democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs are the best values for humans to aspire to and they can try their best to achieve them.

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