

# Religion and the Public Realm

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REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON RELIGION  
AND BELIEF IN BRITISH PUBLIC LIFE

## LIVING WITH DIFFERENCE

community, diversity and the common good

Chair: The Rt Hon Baroness Elizabeth Butler-Sloss GBE

Convened by The Woolf Institute, Cambridge

# The changing religious landscape

‘Over the past half century, Britain’s landscape in terms of religion and belief has been transformed beyond recognition. There are three striking trends:

- **The first is the increase in the number of people with non-religious beliefs and identities.** Almost a half of the population today describes itself as non-religious, as compared with an eighth in England and a third in Scotland in 2001.
- **The second is the general decline in Christian affiliation, belief and practice.** Thirty years ago, two-thirds of the population would have identified as Christians. Today, that figure is four in ten, and at the same time there has been a shift away from mainstream denominations and a growth in evangelical and Pentecostal churches.
- **The third is the increased diversity amongst people who have a religious faith.** Fifty years ago Judaism – at one in 150 – was the largest non-Christian tradition in the UK. Now it is the fourth largest behind Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism. Although still comprising less than one in ten of the population, faith traditions other than Christian have younger age profiles and are therefore growing faster’ (p. 7)

# The Commission's Vision

'The commission's vision is of a society at ease with itself in which all individuals, groups and communities feel at home, and in whose flourishing all wish to take part. In such a society all:

- **feel a positive part of an ongoing national story** – what it means to be British is not fixed and final, for people in the past understood the concept differently from the way it is seen today and all must be able to participate in shaping its meaning for the future
- **are treated with equal respect and concern** by the law, the state and public authorities
- **know that their culture, religion and beliefs are embraced** as part of a continuing process of mutual enrichment, and that their contributions to the texture of the nation's common life are valued
- **are free to express and practise their beliefs, religious or otherwise**, providing they do not constrict the rights and freedoms of others
- **are confident in helping to shape public policy**
- **feel challenged** to respond to the many manifest ills in wider society' (p. 8)

# Recommendations

- **A national conversation should be launched across the UK by leaders of faith communities and ethical traditions to create a shared understanding of the fundamental values underlying public life (...)**
- **Much greater religion and belief literacy is needed in every section of society, and at all levels (...)**
- **The pluralist character of modern society should be reflected in national and civic events (...)**
- **Relevant public bodies and voluntary organisations should promote opportunities for interreligious and inter-worldview encounter and dialogue (...)**
- **Where a religious organisation is best placed to deliver a social good, it should not be disadvantaged (...)**
- **The Ministry of Justice should issue guidance on compliance with UK standards of gender equality and judicial independence by religious and cultural tribunals (...)' (p. 8-9)**

# The Challenge of Pluralism



*Church and State in Six Democracies*  
*Third Edition*

J. Christopher Soper  
Kevin R. den Dulk  
Stephen V. Monsma

# Governmental neutrality

- ‘We define neutrality as government neither favoring nor burdening any particular religion, nor favoring or burdening religion as a whole or secular systems of belief as a whole. This neutrality is attained when government does not influence its citizens’ choices for or against certain religious or secular systems of belief, either by imposing burdens on them or by granting advantages to them. Instead, government is neutral when it is evenhanded toward people of all faiths and of none’ (loc. 248);
- ‘This basic goal of governmental neutrality on matters of belief and practice – whether religiously or secularly based – is largely in keeping with the liberal tradition in society (...) That tradition emerged on the western scene in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, received a concrete manifestation in the French Revolution, was a strong social and political movement in the nineteenth century, and is a very active force down to today (...). In fact, in a generalized way one can say that virtually all of western society today is liberal’ (loc. 263)

# Enlightenment liberalism

- ‘Liberalism can, however, also be seen as a more specific philosophical theory or movement associated with the Enlightenment. (...) Enlightenment liberals believed religion in its particular manifestations should be banned from the public realm as a dangerous, divisive force; it saw religion in its rational, consensual manifestation as having the potential to unify the public realm’ (loc. 277);
- ‘Enlightenment liberals, therefore, typically called for a strict separation of church and state. They believed such a separation would spare the state from the dangerous divisions particularistic religion posed, yet would not harm particularistic religion, since it would continue to flourish in the private realm. Citizens would be free to express their faith in their private lives, but it would have no relevance to the state. The state would thereby be neutral on matters of religion’ (loc. 277)

# Three basic models of church-state relations

- ‘One model is the strict church-state separation model. Under this model – which traces its roots to the Enlightenment liberal view of society and politics – religion and politics are clearly distinct areas of human endeavor that should be kept separate from each other’ (loc. 307)
- ‘A second model – at the opposite end of the continuum from the church-state separation model – is the established church model. Under this model the state and the church form a partnership in advancing the cause of religion and the state. Church and state are seen as two pillars on which a stable, prosperous society rests. The state provides the church with recognition, accommodation, and often financial support; the church provides the state with an aura of legitimacy and tradition, recognition, and a sense of national unity and purpose’ (loc. 319);
- ‘The third church-state model is the pluralist or structural pluralist model’ (loc. 326)

# The United States: Strict Separation under Fire

- ‘The United States is currently wavering between two conflicting church-state approaches: the strict separation, no-aid-to-religion model, with its roots in the liberal Enlightenment, and the neutrality or equal treatment model. The basic terms of the strict separation model are still in place, while the American public and the Supreme Court have been increasingly willing to make decisions on the equal treatment model. When Congress or the Supreme Court approves government-sponsored religious displays, government funding of educational or social services, and other forms of government cooperation with religion, they seek to do so in such a way that their actions can be defended on strict separation grounds that are strained at best and disingenuous at worst’ (loc. 1001);
- ‘it is not simply neutral to eschew any sponsorship or recognition of religion. As A. James Reichley has written, “Banishment of religion does not represent neutrality between religion and secularism; conduct of public institutions without any acknowledgment of religion *is* secularism”’ (loc. 775)

# France: Separation from the Public Square

- ‘French political culture places a high premium on a national unity rooted in Republican values inherited from the French revolution of the late eighteenth century. These values include what came to be called *laïcité*, a separation of religion from the public sphere’ (loc. 1254)
- ‘We define *laïcité* as a separation of religion from influence over a secularized public sphere. In this sense *laïcité* introduces a distinction between public and private with profound implications for both institutions and individuals. In institutional terms, *laïcité* requires that organized religion remain, as Bowen puts it, “bounded, orderly, constrained in its buildings and defined by worship practices in those buildings”. Spiritual practices – the lived experience of faith – should stay in the private domain. To bring religious faith out of these private spaces into public life is an affront to the Republican vision of unity around common, not particular values. Nicolas Sarkozy, serving as interior minister in 2003, put it this way: “freedom is the rule in the private sphere; Republican conformity is the rule in the public sphere”’ (loc. 1489)

# England: Restrained Establishment

- ‘England is the only country in our study with a formally established church, the Church of England, which has been the recognized church since the middle of the sixteenth century’ (loc. 3806);
- ‘It is restrained in the sense that virtually all of the disabilities associated with membership outside of the Church of England have been eliminated, while most (but not all) of the privileges given to the established church now apply to other faiths as well (loc. 3813);
- Yet England retains its religious establishment and that model in turn helps to sustain a cultural assumption that religion has a public function to perform, that it is appropriate for the state and religious groups to cooperate in achieving common goals, and that political and religious authorities can and should negotiate on key policy issues of interest to both of them’ (loc. 3813);

# Germany: Church-State Partnership

- ‘Germany has an extensive system of public funding of a wide variety of religiously based social service and health care associations. The strong German commitment to providing basic services, not through centralized bureaucracies but through private nonprofit associations, and its commitment to religious pluralism implied by the principles of neutrality and positive religious freedom, come together to support this system. The Evangelical and Catholic churches, with their large, well-established social and health ministries, share fully in this partnership, as does the Jewish community. But the few Muslim nonprofit service organizations that there are have largely not been incorporated into this funding scheme’ (loc. 5261);
- ‘It does not relegate religion to the private sphere as Enlightenment liberalism would do, but has created a public role, a public space for religion, and at the same time it allows for a plurality of religious and secular belief systems. This is what the liberal Enlightenment tradition in the United States has said cannot be done, which makes the fact that Germany has been largely successful in doing so all the more impressive’ (loc. 5331)

# The Netherlands: Principled Pluralism

- ‘The Dutch seek to attain governmental neutrality on matters of religion, not by a strict church-state separation that sees all aid to religion as a violation of the norm of neutrality, but by a pluralism that welcomes and supports all religious and secular structures of belief on an equal, evenhanded basis. This is a system of principled pluralism (...) in that the Netherlands’ pluralist approach to church and state is rooted in certain self-consciously held beliefs’ (loc. 2662);
- ‘this perspective has been seriously tested in recent years due to debates over the role of immigrant Muslim groups in Dutch society’ (loc. 2671);
- ‘the Netherlands stands as a testimony to the possibility of combining genuine governmental religious neutrality, a broad system of recognition and support for religious and secular private schools and social service organizations, and national purpose and unity. There is much to learn from the Dutch experience’ (loc. 2732)



# Conclusion

- **‘Learning to understand and live with differences** is the recurring theme throughout the report. It argues that religion and belief are a combination both of conscious choice and of the circumstances of birth, community and public perception. Whether or not we might want to, we cannot ignore or escape the differences that religious traditions make to our sense of personal identity, narrative, relationships and isolation. Religious and belief identities, the report points out, can serve as forces both for good and for ill’ (p. 8);
- ‘And so the challenge for policy-makers is to create an environment in which differences enrich society rather than cause anxiety, and in which they contribute to its common good’