

The Paris Peace Conference 1919 Remembered... 100 Years on

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The Soul of the Nation

1. During the recent General Election campaign, the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth had a Comment published in The Times (26 November 2019) entitled 'Be in no doubt, the soul of the nation is at stake'. In it he raised his concerns about anti-Jewish racism in the Labour Party and, after a brief summary of his evidence, concluded on the party leadership's lack of understanding: '... It is a failure to see this as a human problem rather than a political one. It is a failure of culture. It is a failure of leadership. A new poison – sanctioned from the top – has taken root in the Labour Party.' The Chief Rabbi went on to ask: 'How complicit in prejudice would a leader of Her Majesty's opposition have to be to be considered unfit for office?' Without telling anyone how to vote, he asked '... every person to vote with their conscience. Be in no doubt, the very soul of our nation is at stake.'
2. In response, the Archbishop of Canterbury issued a statement on social media, as reported in the Church Times, which backed the Chief Rabbi in terms of us all being alert to 'the deep sense of insecurity and fear felt by many British Jews'. He did not, though, explicitly single out the Labour Party or its leader. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) also issued a statement acknowledging this point, '... regarding the unacceptable presence of anti-semitism in Britain and in politics today.' However, the MCB then went on to use the Chief Rabbi's remarks to highlight '... the importance of speaking out on the racism we face, whilst maintaining our non-partisan stance.' This meant 'As a faith community, we commonly are threatened by Islamophobia. This an issue [sic] that is particularly acute in the Conservative Party who have approached Islamophobia with denial, dismissal and deceit.'
3. The secular principle for determining whether the intervention of these leaders of the three Abrahamic religions in the General Election campaign, as detailed above, was justified is that of public benefit. (This is analogous to the process for determining the charitable status of a body with religious purposes.) Two questions must be asked in each case:
 - i. Was the intervention self-evidently for the public benefit? If not,
 - ii. Was the public benefit of their intervention capable of proof?

My Purpose:

To forewarn the public one more time that the world is heading for another Great Power war.

As in 1919, the reason is the failure of political institutions to apply 'an irenic perspective' even-handedly. Post-Cold War, the term was first defined in English charity law on 9 October 1998, drawing on a United States case of 1917, and affirmed by the Court of Appeal on 28 June 2000.

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4. However, the theological basis for testing the appropriateness of the intervention by these three religious leaders is of even greater relevance for them – although none of them offered one. That they chose not to do so does not alter their belief that the higher obligations of God’s law as revealed in Judaism, Christianity or Islam are decisive to their purposes and chosen methods. Three aspects of their respective religions may be said to be held in common arising, as they do, from belief in the absolute supremacy of the one, true and only God:
- i. *Dependence on God alone and His revealed Word.* All the true Jewish prophets (including Jesus) are at one on this. Isaiah, for example, constantly warned his own people and those of other lands of the consequences of self-reliance and worldly alliances. The very word Islam means submission to God and His law.
 - ii. *Subordination of politics to religion.* Most prophets have not exercised political power but those that did – notably Moses and Muhammad – upheld this principle with success. Jesus Christ neither sought nor exercised political power in His earthly ministry. For three centuries His Church spread without the benefit of legal recognition.
 - iii. *The sovereignty of God and, therefore, His control over history.* Human rebellion against His will cannot ultimately frustrate His purpose of peace, justice and mercy on earth.
5. At the secular level, by applying the principle at para. 3 to the facts at paras 1 and 2 above, I arrive at the following conclusions:
- i. The Chief Rabbi’s intervention is not self-evidently for the public benefit because it has led to controversy, even within the Jewish community. Moreover, while expressing the fears of the Jewish community about antisemitism is clearly legitimate in the context of a General Election, singling out the Labour Party and its leader reflects a partisan, though sincere, view because the public benefit of the effect on voting intentions is not provable. To treat antisemitism as a ‘human problem’ could be an educational purpose.
 - ii. The Archbishop of Canterbury’s intervention might be thought to be for the public benefit, but it is not. In giving his support to the Chief Rabbi, the Archbishop has extracted out that part of what the Chief Rabbi wrote concerning the fears of the Jewish community, as though the rest did not exist. It does and, therefore, the Archbishop is implicated in giving a stamp of approval to the Chief Rabbi’s *modus operandi* as a whole, though he has not separated what is potentially for the public benefit from what is not.
 - iii. The Muslim Council of Britain’s intervention highlighted the importance of maintaining their ‘non-partisan stance’. This took the form of a critique of Islamophobia in the Conservative Party in particular. However, from a public benefit perspective, this does not ‘balance’ the Chief Rabbi’s critique of the Labour Party since two wrongs do not prove a right to political intervention by religious leaders in a General Election campaign.
6. At the theological level, that the ‘soul of the nation is at stake’ is undoubtedly true in the United Kingdom but what does it mean? It expresses, as para. 4 above makes clear, the relationship of humanity (or any part thereof) to God which is a spiritual and moral question. It is, therefore, unanswerable and indeterminable by a General Election although the result may be indicative. From the perspective of God’s Kingdom (or Reign) on earth, racism of any and all types cannot be the only or decisive factor in assessing the moral and spiritual state of the nation. For example, H.M. the Queen being led into illegality on 27 or 28 August 2019 affects, in varying degrees, the oath or affirmation of allegiance of every member of Parliament – yet there was no reference to ensuring this cannot happen again in the Queen’s Speech of 19 December ‘19. Political significance is no guide to divine importance. The descent into worldliness by the leaders of these Abrahamic religions cannot be defended on secular or theological grounds. Yet there is no regulator, except the Court of history, to which complaint or appeal can be made.

7. **Recommendation:** To turn back to God and away from self-centredness in the relationship between religion, politics and the law – secular and divine – as the foundation for securing peace and prosperity ('shalom'). Practical expression for this will be given in the third and final Closing Bulletin later in January 2020, on the 100th anniversary of the month the League of Nations began work, when the failings of war studies, peace studies and international politics (compared to the light mediated by the Abrahamic prophets) will be illustrated and the foundation laid for the Education of Nations. Join the Peace Games 2020... for the soul of all nations is at stake.

Notes and References

- Para. 1 The quotations are from the abbreviated version of the Chief Rabbi's Comment on 26 November 2019. The full version is available online to subscribers of The Times. However, it was also published in The Jewish Chronicle (29 November 2019). Alongside this article, see 'Rabbis side with the Chief' which notes a few exceptions in the Jewish community.
- Para. 2 'Chief Rabbi attacks Labour's Jewish record', Church Times (26 November 2019); 'Faith leaders back Chief Rabbi's warning on antisemitism', The Times (27 November 2019); and 'Muslim Council of Britain responds to Chief Rabbi's comments' (26 November 2019) at <https://mcb.org.uk/press-releases/muslim-council-of-britain-responds-to-chief-rabbis-comments/>
- Para. 3 The principle of public benefit is derived from Slade J. in McGovern v Attorney General [1982] Ch 321 at 333G-334B.
- Para. 4 The three aspects of the three Abrahamic religions held to be in common are derived from the author's knowledge and experience and not from specific religious scholars. Their appropriateness or otherwise rests entirely on the integration of faith and work such that the public benefit of the faith in question can be demonstrated or not in paragraphs 6 and 7.
- Para. 5 A further key point, with respect to their role in peace-making, is that maintaining political neutrality is, or may be, an essential pre-condition for religious leaders' intervention in a conflict scenario.
- Para. 6 On the oath or affirmation of allegiance to H.M. The Queen see the *de facto* Law Officer's (LawPB's) Closing Bulletin no. 1 'The Queen and the Law' (31 October 2019) and the accompanying Closing Article no. 1 at: www.directionofconflict.org/closing-bulletins In addition see the *de facto* LawPB's open letter to the Speaker of the House of Commons of 13 December 2019 concerning the swearing-in of members of Parliament on 17 December. As to a regulator of charity and leaders of charity in England and Wales, the Charity Commission exists: see letters and articles nos 2 and 5 in the Paris Peace Conference Remembered series; and the Chair of the Charity Commission's Foreword to the Inquiry Report: Summary Findings and Conclusions: Oxfam (11 June 2019). If the words 'and/or charity regulation' are added in then, subject to minor editing, no more damning indictment has ever been penned.
- Para. 7 The League of Nations was officially established on 10 January 1920. For an explanation of the Peace Games see letter and article no. 7 'Forecasting Peace or War: A Layperson's Guide' (28 June 2019) at: <https://www.directionofconflict.org/what-we-do>

The Author

Peter M. Southwood writes here in a personal capacity and is solely responsible for the contents of this Bulletin. He acknowledges that he is also a Reader (or Licensed Lay Minister) in the Church of England but sees no conflict in this Bulletin with his declaration of canonical obedience to his bishop.