

Rowan Williams and his ilk are not the people to decide where religion sits in public life

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The Woolf Institute has convened a commission to consider the place and role of religion and belief in contemporary Britain, and to "make recommendations for public life and policy." David Voas questions whether this review can reach a conclusion that reflects the priorities of the general public, rather than just people of faith.

A high-level [commission](#) has been convened to consider the place of religion in British public life. But the way this commission has been put together makes it part of the problem rather than promising real solutions.

Its four patrons are drawn from the great and the good, though it is hard not to smile at the earnestness with which all religious bases have been covered. We have philosopher Bhikhu Parekh; Iqbal Sacranie, the former secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain; Rowan Williams, until recently Archbishop of Canterbury; and Harry Woolf, formerly Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales.

When they gather, do they tell jokes that start "A priest, a rabbi and an imam walk into a bar ..."?

The issue is whether this review can reach a conclusion that reflects the priorities of the general public, rather than just people of faith.

Religion is never out of the news and most of the stories out there do nothing to enhance its reputation in Britain, where an overwhelming majority of respondents to the [British Social Attitudes Survey](#) agree that religion is more likely to produce conflict than peace.

Most British people see religion as a private matter and oppose religious influence on public policy. Many have beliefs that could be described as religious, but those beliefs have little influence on their lives. Although a large number of people – particularly from ethnic minority groups – do see religion as important, the majority of the population is profoundly indifferent to the claims of traditional faith.

There is a common view that religion has made the world a more troubled place. And the highly religious are frequently depicted as ridiculous, creepy, moralising, intolerant, potentially dangerous and generally weird.

For their part, religious groups increasingly come together to make common cause against outside disdain. The Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life gives every appearance of being one such effort by an inter-faith organisation. It has 20 members: only great-ish and good-ish, but distinguished and serious people. Once again, though, the inter-faith theologians have created the world in their own image.

Nearly half of the members are religious professionals and nearly all of them have strong religious identities, if not beliefs. The chief executive of the British Humanist Association plays his customary part as the token free thinker, but it's hard to shake the dispiriting sense that we are

dealing with an assembly of, by and for the religiously committed.

It is completely appropriate for people whose business is faith to prepare a report on the role of religion and belief in British public life, just as it is appropriate for people who work in the pub trade to write about the role of alcohol in British life. What they cannot expect, though, is for their findings to be treated as anything other than the product of a special interest group. The commission is condemned from its conception to producing a minority report.

One of the questions posed for the commission's public consultation is "Does Britain show equal respect for religious and non-religious beliefs and identities?" The answer is that Britain might, but the conveners of the commission clearly do not.

The composition of the panel makes it plain that they have minimal respect for indifference to religion – which is precisely what characterises a majority of the population. There is as much chance of the commission proposing to reduce the role of religion in public life as there is of the National Secular Society proposing to increase it.

Where's the science?

Apart from its built-in partisanship, the commission also suffers from the hubris of the humanities. Practically everyone on it comes from theology, philosophy, religious studies, history or law. Expertise in the empirical social scientific study of British society is conspicuous by its near-absence.

The causes and consequences of prejudice, discrimination, inequality and injustice are critical issues that are constantly being investigated by secular scholars in sociology, politics and economics. So why is the panel so weak in these fields? The recommendations made are likely to suffer from this absence.

The commission was born in a bubble: the encapsulated community of people involved in religion. Its instigators will grumble if their report is ignored, but when that happens, they are going to have to accept a large share of the blame.

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