

Offence in the eye of the beholder

Thought for the Day

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One of last week's more forgettable news stories was the publication of a new set of "Ten Commandments" to reflect contemporary society. Of course it's a daft idea anyway: the point of the original Commandments wasn't to describe how the ancient Israelites lived 4000 years ago, but to serve as a rule book for how people ought to live.

That said, I was surprised that the new list didn't include "thou shalt not allow offence to be taken". I know that's a bit clumsy, but there's a reason: if they just said "thou shalt not give offence", the offender could always claim that the offeree was being hypersensitive. But it has become axiomatic in recent years that "if offence is taken, then offence was given".

I have to say I am less than convinced that this is correct, mainly because it considers only one side's subjective view - something that cannot be verified - and so it deprives the accused of any possible defence. There's an old wise-crack that the fact that you're paranoid doesn't mean people aren't out to get you! - but it doesn't follow either that they are!

I was thinking of this yesterday at a meeting in London which heard a very upbeat report from the British ambassador to Israel about the current progress towards peace. But instead of celebrating this unaccustomed good news, discussion was dominated by the Mayor of London's outrageous remarks, comparing a Jewish journalist with a concentration camp guard. It's rumoured he might express some regret today, but after a week of unanimous criticism that's hardly a fulsome apology!

Isn't it strange that someone so politically correct can't see how much offence he has given, not just to one man, but to all the victims of the Nazis? And this while the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz is still being marked by harrowing footage in the media.

Ken Livingstone isn't Prince Harry; he can't be excused by his youth or political inexperience. If someone so prominent can belittle the Holocaust and its victims in this way, should we be surprised that we now have the highest figures for antisemitic incidents since records began?

If this is paranoia, so be it - but the unfortunate fact is that the Jewish and other minority communities still have much to be paranoid about!