

Rowan Williams: sharia furore, Anglican future

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The fuss surrounding the Archbishop of Canterbury and *sharia* law, sparked by his lecture at London's Royal Courts of Justice on 7 February 2008, is not easy to analyse. This is partly because the angry media reaction is also a component of the story. It is also partly because the theological vision [1] that underlies Rowan Williams's reflections needs to be considered.

It is important in itself, and since much of the waterfall of comment and opinion in the days since his speech has neglected this, to register what Williams actually said in his address on "Civil and Religious Law in England: a Religious Perspective [2]". He questioned the idea that "to be a citizen is essentially and simply to be under the rule of the uniform law of a sovereign state, in such a way that any other relations, commitments or protocols of behaviour belong exclusively to the realm of the private and of individual choice." In other words, he challenged the narrative of the absolute authority of secular law; the idea that acceptance of secular law is the foundation of a citizen's identity. Actually the secular law is just one part of a religious believer's identity – the believer has other rules of engagement in public life.

What happens when secular law comes into conflict with these other rules? There is of course no simple answer, but Williams's [5] concern was to warn against an arrogant secularism that demands the subordination of religious law to secular law: "Where this has been enforced, it has proved a weak vehicle for the life of a society and has often brought violent injustice in its wake (think of the various attempts to reduce citizenship to rational equality in the France of the 1790s or the China of the 1970s)."

The principle of universal secular law can be used to bully religious minorities, whose subcultures are deemed backward. Such subcultures are likely to turn into ghettos, rather than to form part of civil society: "Societies that are in fact ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse are societies in which identity is formed, as we have noted by different modes and contexts of belonging, 'multiple affiliation'. The danger is in acting as if the authority that managed the abstract level of equal citizenship represented a sovereign order which then allowed other levels to exist."

What the archbishop [9] wants to question is the assumption that universal secular law is the master-builder of civil society, and that religious ideas of law are a nuisance that might or might not be tolerated. Instead, religious forms of corporate life are a key part of civil society, and their particular rules are therefore worthy of respect. For example (my example not

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Williams's), a local parish church might refuse to recognise the right of a homosexual to be its youth worker. But this (small-scale) resistance of secularism is not the whole story: the church is also running soup-kitchens, protesting against the arms trade, inviting the local member of parliament to speak, or organising a fair. It is helping to form civil society, or public culture – despite its partial dissent from universal secular law. Williams is warning against the tendency to dismiss [9] this church's contribution to public life, to say that its partial dissent from secular liberalism makes it a force for social bad. The stronger such secularist hostility [10] becomes, the more likely it is that this church will turn inward, stop engaging with the culture around it, become a ghetto.

A torn fabric

This is the background to Rowan Williams's partial sympathy with sharia law [11]. The Muslim community should not be despised as a nuisance for having, or seeking, particular legal arrangements. For the bigger picture is that religious communities contribute to overall civil life, and must be encouraged to strengthen their engagement.

On one level this is fairly uncontentious. Religious bodies already have certain exemptions from secular law (they can choose whether or not to employ women and homosexuals as priests, for example). Williams was just saying that we should extend such tolerance of difference to Muslims.

So why the critical [12] furore - which, whether fair to Rowan Williams or not, does reflect huge popular unease? Because Britain [13] (and in particular its largest constituent nation, England [13]) is in the midst of a deepening identity crisis. We want to know who we are. We want to know whether we are basically Christian, or secular, or maybe multi-faith. True, this uncertainty is not new, but it has recently become painful.

British national identity used to hold Christianity and secular liberalism together. Of course there were tensions, but they didn't seem to matter much. Thanks to the liberal established [14] church, British people felt fairly confident that they belonged to a liberal society with a Christian basis [15]. In the last couple of decades, and especially since 9/11 and the London bomb attacks of 7 July 2005 [15], this confidence has collapsed. Religion and secular liberalism seem to be at odds. It's become fairly normal to think that all forms of religion threaten secular liberal values. And in response the churches seem to have become more defensive, more ready to rail against secularism. The old unity of religion and liberalism has come apart.

The problem with Rowan Williams's lecture lies behind the actual text. The problem is that he has contributed to the debate about national identity in a disturbing [16] rather than reassuring way. He has signalled that he doesn't want to hold Christianity and liberalism together. Instead, he wants to oppose secular liberalism, and to defend the rights of all faith communities to resist it. This is what has shocked so many commentators: Williams has shown that he rejects the vague liberal Protestantism of the majority of the British people: the idea that Christianity and secularism are pretty much compatible. No, he says, his role is not to prop up this dated ideology, but to fight the corner of faith communities, and to cast doubt on the very idea of liberalism.

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