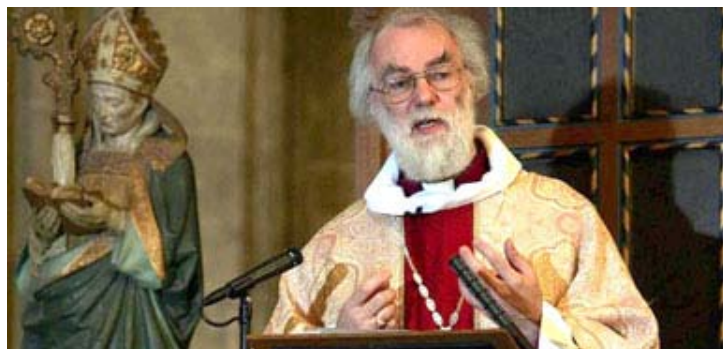


From The Times

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Archbishop of Canterbury argues for Islamic law in Britain



(Cathal McNaughton)

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, in Canterbury Cathedral where he issued a green plea in his Christmas sermon today (Cathal McNaughton/PA)

Ruth Gledhill and Philip Webster

[Comment Central: why the Archbishop is wrong](#)

The Archbishop of Canterbury came under fierce attack last night from the Government, his own Church and other religions after he advocated the adoption of parts of Sharia, or Islamic law, in Britain.

Leaders of all the main political parties made clear that they did not accept Dr Rowan Williams's assertion that the incorporation of some aspects of Sharia was "unavoidable".

Trevor Phillips, chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, condemned his comments as "muddled and unhelpful" and one senior bishop said that he was "surprised and concerned" by Dr Williams's remarks.

Even the Muslim Council of Britain insisted that most members of the community did not want Sharia and emphasised that it had not discussed the issue.

Dr Williams argued, in a speech at the Royal Courts of Justice in London, for a "plural jurisdiction" that would allow Muslims to choose whether some legal disputes were resolved in secular or Sharia courts. He called for "constructive accommodation" over such issues as resolving marriage disputes.

Earlier, he told BBC Radio 4 that people should approach Islamic law with an open mind.

Although emphasising that there was no place for "extreme punishments" and discrimination against women, Dr Williams stressed the importance of making all communities "part of the public process" in order to limit any oppression.

There are nearly 1.6 million Muslims in Britain, representing 2.7 per cent of the total population. Sharia courts do exist, but they have no legal standing and their decisions are not binding.

Dr Williams said: "It seems unavoidable and, as a matter of fact, certain conditions of Sharia are already recognised in our society."

However, a spokesman for the Prime Minister said that British law must be based on British values. "Sharia cannot be used as a justification for committing breaches of English law, nor should the principles of Sharia be included in a civil court for resolving contractual disputes," he said.

Gordon Brown's spokesman added that concessions had been made in specific instances — such as a relaxation of the law on stamp duty to avoid it being paid twice when Sharia-compliant mortgages were used by Muslims.

They involve two transfers of property, so in theory stamp duty would be payable twice, but is in fact paid only once.

The Conservative response was even stronger. Baroness Warsi, Shadow Minister for Community Cohesion and Social Action said: "The Archbishop's comments are unhelpful and may add to the confusion that already exists in our

communities . . . All British citizens must be subject to British laws developed through Parliament and the courts.”

Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat leader, said: “Equality before the law is part of the glue that binds our society together. We cannot have a situation where there is one law for one person and different laws for another.”

The Bishop of Rochester, Dr Michael Nazir-Ali, who claimed recently that parts of Britain were no-go areas for non-Muslims, was one of the first to criticise Dr Williams. Dr Nazir-Ali, the country’s only Asian bishop, said: “English law is rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and our notions of human freedoms derive from that tradition. It would be impossible to introduce a tradition like Sharia into this corpus without fundamentally affecting its integrity.”

Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra, a Leicester imam and an expert in interfaith issues for the Muslim Council of Britain, said his fear was that Islamophobic and racist groups would use the Archbishop’s remarks to attack Islam.

He added: “I welcome debate on this issue but my personal feeling is that the vast majority of Muslims do not want to see a parallel or separate system for Muslims in our society.”

Rabbi Danny Rich, chief executive of Liberal Judaism, said: “I am staggered he has said this. The Jewish community has learnt the value both of participating in the British legal system but at the same time, in certain matters where the State gives it the right, to sort out those matters with its own rabbinic authorities. But we accept that British law has priority.”

The Archbishop’s lecture was one in a series of discussions Islam in English Law, part of the Temple Festival.

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