

Rowan Williams's remarks on Islamic law spark furor: "Misleading choice of words"

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Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams triggered a storm of controversy by suggesting that Britain should adopt some aspects of Islam's tough Shari'a laws into its legal system. He later apologized for any "misleading choice of words" that caused misunderstanding, and received thunderous applause February 11 when he opened the Church of England's synod gathering.

In a BBC radio interview February 7, Williams said that the 1.6 million Muslims now living in Britain make legal changes all but "unavoidable" and that "as a matter of fact, certain conditions of Shari'a are already recognized in our society."

He suggested that parts of Shari'a dealing with marital disputes and financial affairs could be incorporated into British law. But he pointedly rejected draconian punishments, such as the public beheading or hanging of murderers and drug traffickers, that are practiced in some Islamic societies.

"Nobody in their right mind, I think, would want to see in this country a kind of inhumanity that sometimes appears to be associated with the practice of law in some Islamic states [with] the extreme punishments, the attitude toward women as well," he said.

But Britain has to "face up to the fact" that thousands of its citizens do not relate to its legal system, Williams said, and what is needed is a "constructive accommodation" with some Muslim practices just as some forms of dispute resolution are allowed under English law for Orthodox Jews. For instance, he proposed a "plural jurisdiction" under which Muslims would be allowed to choose whether some legal disputes could be dealt with by secular or Shari'a courts.

But the archbishop's remarks on the radio brought furious protests across the country. Trevor Phillips, chair of the government's Equality and Human Rights Commission, called them "muddled and unhelpful." No action was taken on calls for an emergency synod debate on the issue. Though Williams apologized to more than 400 bishops, clergy and laity present for "however clumsily" he might have addressed Muslim needs, concern remained over the position of Anglicans outside Britain.

Chris Sugden, of the Anglican Mainstream community, an evangelical group which has opposed Williams's leadership on several issues, told the gathering that he had received e-mails from concerned clergy in Sudan, Nigeria and Pakistan. He said they had warned him that Islam would not allow Shari'a to remain a subservient legal system and that it could not be applied on a piecemeal basis.

Alison Ruoff, a synod member who has called for the archbishop to resign, told the *Independent* newspaper, "There are Christians overseas who cannot believe their archbishop, who is not only head of the Church of England, but of the Anglican Communion, has said such a thing when they are suffering from massive persecution in Islamic countries."

Prime Minister Gordon Brown's office said in a statement that Shari'a law "cannot be used as justification for committing breaches of English law." His culture secretary, Andy Burnham, described the archbishop's proposals as "a recipe for chaos."

Khalid Mahmood, a Muslim member of Britain's Parliament, insisted that "the vast majority of UK Muslims oppose any such move to introduce Shari'a here" and that "British law is the envy of the world." -*Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*