

Coexistence: What Rowan Williams meant

From the Editors in the [March 25, 2008](#) issue

Summarizing for a TV reporter the point of a long, technical address to the Royal Courts of Justice on the relationship between religious communities and the British judicial system, the archbishop of Canterbury said that some accommodation with shari'a law "seems unavoidable, and indeed as a matter of fact certain provisions of shari'a are already recognized in our society and under our law." No sooner had the word *unavoidable* left Rowan Williams's lips than the media and the cultural and religious right went into fits of hysteria. The head of the Church of England was calling for shari'a law!

Williams's remark particularly incensed those who see Islam as a kind of Trojan horse and think that Muslims who have moved to Western countries in search of political and economic freedom really intend, through high birth rates and eventual political muscle, to turn a religiously open London into a fundamentalist Muslim Londonistan. Williams's speech was widely ridiculed as the words of a weak-minded liberal who doesn't properly understand the Muslim threat. The *Weekly Standard*, for example, ran a cartoon showing Williams with a turban, looking like Ayatollah Khomeini, alongside an article contending that Williams's view of Islam is naive.

In fact, Williams made it clear in his speech that he rejects Islam's "extreme punishments" and its discrimination against women. His main concern was to offer a vision of a society that is neither at odds with religion nor insulated from it—one in which faith communities obey the law of the land but can argue about the shape of that law and also have some limited space to adjudicate matters pertaining directly to their faith. Williams was making an argument for religion's legitimate place in public life—an argument against the "naked public square"—much like the one that religious and social conservatives in the U.S. have been making for two decades.

If liberalism means that everyone must be similarly irreligious, it is not very liberal. Williams was applying this insight to Britain's legal system in the face of its large

and growing Muslim population. On some family and religious matters, he suggested, Muslims should have a sphere in which to apply their own laws, much the way Jews have authority over certain marriage, family and dietary concerns.

Critics have said that it's not the archbishop's job to make arguments on behalf of Islam. But it is his job as head of England's state church to open a dialogue about how best a pluralistic country can respect the claims of religion and also recognize the rule of civil authorities. He assumed that the West has the wisdom and the cultural resources to undertake such a discussion.

Williams was arguing that Christians can be faithful to their religious identity and also allow others, in this case Muslims, to be faithful to their identity, and that all can coexist in a pluralistic democracy. Militants on all sides—Christians, Muslims and secularists—are convinced he's wrong. Let us hope, for the sake of civic peace and religious fidelity, that he's not.