

# ENQUIRE WITHIN

**Question:** *Was the Archbishop of Canterbury right and wise to suggest that certain parts of Sharia law should be accepted into our nation's official legal system?*

**Answer:** And, what a major fuss it caused! The tabloids had a field day. I read that model of continent authority, The Guardian, but even there, Andrew Brown, the Religious Affairs correspondent, wrote what can only be described as a tirade against poor old Rowan! He got a hammering and even some senior people in the C of E called for his resignation.

So, was it wise? Well, no for two reasons. Was it the right thing to do? Yes.

The first of my two reasons for thinking it unwise concerns the media reaction. I was very surprised to read that the Archbishop was taken aback by the reaction. How unprepared is that! The issue is important and ought to be discussed but this was a mistaken way of raising the matter and should have been handled better so as to permit a logical and supportive discussion allowing Muslims and others to make a calm contribution. The Archbishop's press advisers got this one badly wrong.

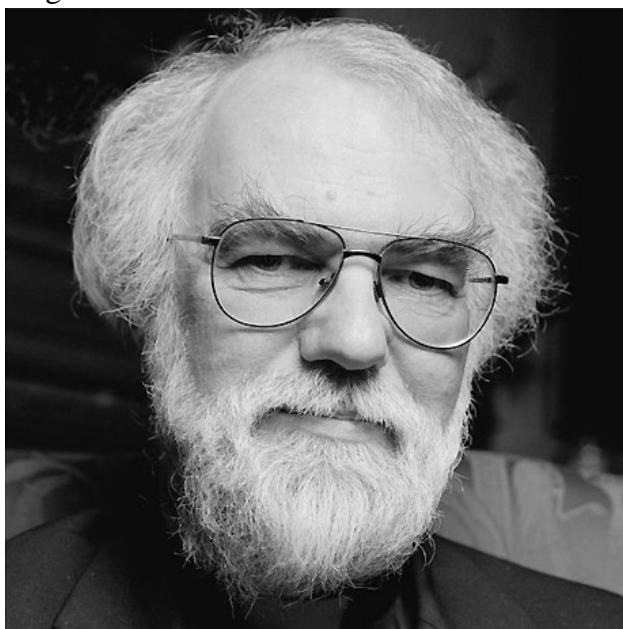
My second reason for thinking it unwise is that the approach to the subject is deeply imbued with liberal western thinking, which I share in common with Rowan Williams. What irritates evangelical Christians about liberal thinking is the "take some, choose a bit here and there, and leave the things you don't like behind" approach. They say, "Don't pick and choose, just accept it all, or reject it all, because it is all God's Word."

My feeling is that Islamic authorities would also reject an approach which selects the nice

or convenient bits of Sharia law and discards the bits we don't like. What happened to Rowan is an extreme example of liberal thinking versus traditional thinking. Sharia law is a whole concept and if you accept some bits, then why not others?

However, having said this, it is right to point out some facts.

- already, Muslim communities in Britain are operating Sharia courts alongside the national legal system;
- the Jewish Community also has its own legal system (Beth Din) operating in the same way as the Sharia courts;
- the same applies in the Roman Catholic Church which, for example, doesn't accept divorce but insists on the Pope annulling marriages through the church's own legal system of Canon Law;
- The Church of England also has its own legal system based on Canon law and even has its own courts, such as the Consistory Court and the Court of Arches to settle ecclesiastical disputes, although these are set up by Parliament as part of our legal system.



What the Archbishop's comments have done is to open our eyes to what is actually happening and hopefully, the heated and silly headlines will go away and we can have a proper debate. What we need is a debate in which Muslims don't feel demonised and others don't feel intimidated by talk of stoning to death and public beheadings. Then

perhaps we can move forward to a sensible conclusion.

Or am I just being a silly woolly liberal?

Neil Richardson