

## **Integrating Islam into the West**

**By Phillip Blond and Adrian Pabst**

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### **LONDON:**

The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Reverend Rowan Williams - the titular head of the 77-million strong worldwide Anglican Church - ignited a huge controversy last week when he suggested in a lecture in the Royal Courts of Law that Britain should adopt certain aspects of Shariah law. This was done with the benign intention of integrating into British law the practices and beliefs of Britain's 1.8 million Muslims.

However, the archbishop's apparent suggestion that Muslims could opt out of secular common law for separate arbitration and judgement in Islamic religious courts created the impression of one law for Muslims and another for everybody else.

This incendiary idea (subsequently corrected by the archbishop) provoked a furor about states within states and a widespread fear that any license granted to Shariah law would also license its more extreme aspects. Unfortunately, the media storm masked the real message of the speech, which concerned the authority of the secular state and its impact on religious minorities in general and Muslims in particular.

For the genuine target of the archbishop's lecture is the increasingly authoritarian and anti-religious nature of the modern liberal state. Militant secularism has forbidden head scarves and wall-mounted crucifixes in France. It has also banned Roman Catholic adoption agencies in Britain for not selecting same-sex couples as potential foster parents. Under the banner of free speech, secular Italian leftists recently prevented Pope Benedict XVI from addressing La Sapienza University in Rome on the subject of rational enquiry.

Williams' legitimate religious concerns with freedom of conscience tie in with wider Western worries about the consequences of failing to integrate a growing, devout and alienated Islamic minority within a relativistic and increasingly aggressive secular culture.

However, the solution proposed by the archbishop repeats the errors of 1960s liberal multiculturalism. In conjuring up the idea of communities sharing the same space but leading separate lives, he unwittingly endorses a scenario that entrenches segregation and fractures any conception of a common good binding all citizens. Despite this, Williams at least recognizes that Britain is struggling to find a way of accommodating its increasingly ghettoized and radicalized Muslim population.

Clearly, the integration of Islam into secular democracies is a challenge that confronts the Western world as a whole and Europe in particular. Regrettably, there are problems with all the existing secular models of integration. British and Dutch versions of multiculturalism hoped to ensure the equal rights of all citizens, but both countries - in abandoning the cultural cohesion based around religion - lost the very medium in which majorities and minorities could share.

Germany eschewed its own Christian legacy in favor of an ethnic account of its identity. Though it grants generous socio-economic rights, the German model still refuses Muslim "guest workers" citizenship and thus participation in civic life.

In France, the Republican ideal appeals to immigrants, but its secular reality denies the primary religious form of their identity. Moreover, the Muslim population is discriminated against in the labor market and tends to be confined to the banlieues. The French model's refusal to accommodate religion prevents France from broadening its concept of French identity.

The trouble with all the European models is that they enshrine the primacy of secular law over and against religious principles. Far from ensuring neutrality and tolerance, the secular European state arrogates to itself the right to control and legislate all spheres of life; state constraints apply especially to religion and its civic influence. Legally, secularism outlaws any rival source of sovereignty or legitimacy. Politically, secularism denies religion any import in public debate and decision-making. Culturally, secularism enforces its own norms and standards upon all other belief systems. In consequence, the liberal promise of equality amounts to little more than the secular imposition of

sameness. As such, contemporary liberalism is unable to recognize religions in their own right or grant them their proper autonomy.

By contrast, the United States offers a strong integrated vision that allows for the public expression of religion under the auspices of a state that guarantees not just individual rights but also the autonomy of religious communities. Even though minorities in the United States have suffered discrimination, the American model of religious integration explicitly shields religion from excessive state interference. Thus loyalty to the state is not necessarily in conflict with loyalty to one's faith. Perhaps this explains why American Muslims appear more integrated and less alienated than their European counterparts. In part, this is because the European Enlightenment sought to protect the state from religion, whereas the American settlement aimed to protect religion from the state.

Thus, the real reason for Europe's failure to integrate Islam is the European commitment to secularism. Only a new settlement with religion can successfully incorporate the growing religious minorities in Western Europe. Secular liberalism is simply incapable of achieving this outcome. Paradoxically, what other faiths require for their proper recognition is the recovery of the indigenous European religious tradition - Christianity. Only Christianity can integrate other religions into a shared European project by acknowledging what secular ideologies cannot: a transcendent objective truth that exceeds human assertion but is open to rational discernment and debate. As such, Christianity outlines a non-secular model of the common good in which all can participate.

Rather than trying to defend religion through the guise of secular multiculturalism, the Archbishop of Canterbury should have been defending religious pluralism through Christianity. What Muslims most object to is not a difference of belief but its absence from European consciousness. Thus the recovery of Christianity in Europe is not a sectarian project but rather the only basis for the political integration of Muslims and peaceful religious coexistence.

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