

Archbishop Rowan Williams and Sharia law

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The hysteria that has greeted the comments of Archbishop Rowan Williams about a limited accommodation between some aspects of Sharia law and English law reveals something profoundly disturbing about how we regard the Moslem Other.

There is a deep unease here which pervades many European societies – it includes the secular left, the radical right (who have swapped scapegoats from Jews to Moslems), and many Christians. Rowan Williams' comments were the occasion for this unease to detonate in an English context. Enlightenment rationalism and Christian civilisation meets the murderous, irrational and barbarous Other. Whatever the merits of the Archbishop's proposals some people protest too much.

How we handle positively the diversity that is now so much part of many European countries is one of the key issues of our time. We should not delude ourselves about the deep unease and explosive reactions that are around it – particularly, but not exclusively, in relation to the Moslem presence. Rowan Williams went boldly – or naively – into the minefield. May he survive to tell the tale – and may we start to have difficult conversations on the issues facing us.

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