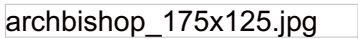


# Bash the Bish: Sharia Law and Rowan Williams

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2008-2-8

Why has [Archbishop Rowan Williams](#) chosen to open up a public debate on S [haria](#) law? The argument has provoked the usual heated [comments](#) that arise whenever Islam hits the headlines, so he must have had a good reason to stir things up. 

There's no doubt that Williams intended this row. He made a long legalistic speech but he also chose to go on the [BBC](#) to put his intellectual case in to plain English. Muslims, he said, "are faced with the stark alternatives of cultural loyalty or state loyalty".

He is not suggesting that the more infamous components of some versions of Sharia law should be adopted. And it is true that there are already dispensations in English law and general social rules for religious beliefs. But he seems to be suggesting that this should be extended to the point where it does challenge universal application of fundamental UK legislation. That doesn't make me feel comfortable, to put it mildly. Here's the [extract](#) which has been ignored in all the fuss about Muslims:

*now that principle that there's one law for everybody is an important pillar of our social identity as a Western liberal democracy, but I think it's a misunderstanding to suppose that that means people don't have other affiliations, other loyalties which shape and dictate how they behave in society and that the law needs to take some account of that. An approach to law which simply said, 'There is one law for everybody and that is all there is to be said'. I think that's a bit of a danger.*

He makes a reasonable case which you can read in full [here](#), but I disagree. Once again, Williams is using his position to make political faith points which he disguises as 'technical language' or 'intellectual inquiry'. Personally speaking, it worries me is the way that the agenda for debate around cultural issues is in danger of being set by faith politics. It is rather odd for Williams to be speaking on behalf of Muslims. His real point seems to be that he feels that religion *per se* should have legal privileges. I think that is an important challenge to our fundamentally secular society. That is where the argument against Williams lies, not in over-blown fears that somehow we are going to introduce legal polygamy and public stonings.

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