

Who said Sharia!?

Thought for the Day
9th February 2008

Good morning

Judging by the events of the last few days, if you're an academic thinking out loud can be a very dangerous thing to do in public spaces: particularly if you are an Archbishop. Or a Pope.

So the Archbishop's recent lecture in the Royal Courts of Justice has turned out to be an incendiary device which ironically united secularists, religious leaders and politicians of all persuasion in widespread condemnation.

The Archbishop's apparent idea of what he called 'constructive accommodation' of elements of Sharia law within British jurisprudence was like a matchstick in a petrol tanker.

And the media has used words like 'opaque' and 'naïve' quite a lot to describe his lecture. Frankly I don't think that his notion that Sharia law is 'unavoidable' was a helpful forecast in the debate.

But having heard the Archbishop's response this morning I would love a deeper dialogue with him to make sure that I hadn't missed precisely what he was driving at. And if in fact he was setting out to explore (in his words) 'some of the broader issues around the rights of religious groups within the secular state,' I'm not convinced that we have yet grasped that nettle.

Perhaps we're all opaque.

For the challenges we face together in our emerging Britain are indeed unprecedented in their cultural and political complexities. How will a 21st century Britain birth a Britishness which honours both religious convictions as well as a secular version of diversity? And it must: because for at least 6 million people, faith is not a fad: it is the core of our being which determines our relationship with the State and our responsibility to our neighbours.

And we can't overlook the fact that Orthodox Jews already have Beth Din procedures, Sikhs don't wear crash helmets and Sharia Councils now exist in Britain exercising real authority over marriages and arbitration. No one committed to community cohesion wants a two tier jurisprudence or draconian laws. But then, how might we discuss such complicated things?

It's all quite opaque.

But I find some of Jesus' statements on similar matters pretty opaque. What on earth did he really mean by 'Render to Caesar the things which are Caesar's and to God the things which belong to God'? And what on earth would that have meant to a Jewish community who enjoyed Pax Romana - religious freedoms under Roman Law?

And anyway was that the sort of thing a rabbi like Jesus should be saying in public? The Jewish Council didn't seem to think so. But he said it anyway.

So maybe what the Archbishop meant was this: "How do we do Pax Romana in the 21st century?"

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