

Sightings 2/25/08

On Rowan Williams
-- Martin E. Marty

The Church of England today is a weak institution with a strong leader. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, though given few official powers, uses his office and voice in efforts to hold together the polarized eighty-million-member Anglican Communion. He is also a first-rate theologian and respected moral philosopher. So when he speaks, many pay attention. He spoke this month and many listened and reacted. As is well known, on February 7 he made a statement which some found outrageous, others merely provocative, still others realistic, and still *still* others a well-intended effort to reduce religious tensions in Britain. Was he "throwing in the towel" in the face of a growing and sometimes militant Islamic presence there, or reaching out as people in the biblical tradition should to "the stranger in their midst"?

Williams appraised the current inter-religious and legal situation in Britain and assessed that if there was to be social cohesion there, the nation must adopt some elements of Islamic *sharia*. What he evidently thought was a judicious proposal was very widely heard as injudicious. Just as Pope Benedict XVI roused furies when some seasons ago he quoted a figure from long-ago to the effect that the prophet Muhammad fostered conversion through violence, now Archbishop Williams fuels a different set of furies. Mention friendliness to minority Islam in majority secular Britain and you face a nation that is on edge, bewildered about how to live with its pluralism, and hostage to firebrands who use Williams-type comments and proposals to exploit the fears and befuddlement.

I decided to do my sighting this week in the British secular press, namely in the *Economist*, a London- and Washington-based weekly which naturally reflects British viewpoints. Editors of the February 16 issue were not as spooked out as many in Britain (and the U.S.) were about the prospects of *sharia* law having a say. Given the record of such law in many nations, there is reason to be spooked out. The *Economist* reflects secular Britain's nervousness about accommodations already made in England to policies that erode lines between "church" and "state", especially because privilege to the Church of England still exists. Why, the editors ask, show favor to one body? "Faced with this anomaly, the archbishop proposes to expand the privileges of all religions;" but, editors write, he should instead rethink the situation of his own faith. "Nor does it make sense in a largely secular country, to give special status to all faiths."

The editors then look our way: "Even in determinedly secular states like...the United States, the political authorities often find that they are obliged, in various ways, to cope with the social reality of religious belief." They cite exceptions to existing law made for the Amish or others in matters of family law, where quasi-courts of the faiths share rule. Next the editors notice Canada, which they cite as a place "where fear of Islam has made religious arbitration untenable." Here's an interesting closing note: The presence of Islam is changing habits, rules of the game, and perspective. "Defining the relationship between religion and the state was certainly easier when it could be assumed that religion's hold over people's lives and behavior

was in long-term decline." Now with Islam on the rise and Christians more defensive, things are more tense. "On that point at least, Archbishop Williams was quite correct."

Martin E. Marty's biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at www.illuminos.com.