



The Archbishop's Remarks through Muslim Eyes



When the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, suggested that portions of the *Shari'a* pertaining to family issues should be incorporated into the British legal system for the benefit of British Muslims, the general reaction in Britain was condemnation. [PI Online](#) examines the more mixed reaction by three Muslim Islamist writers: the Tunisian *Rached al-Ghannouchi*¹, the Iranian *Ata'ollah Mohajerani*² and the Egyptian *Zeinab AbdelAziz*³.



Al-Ghannouchi's article examines the Archbishop's remarks from a philosophical perspective on Muslims' integration in Europe. He stresses that a Muslim presence in Britain and the West is no longer transitory. As Muslims establish a permanent presence, they must not be either solely molded by, or live at the margins of society. Rather, Muslims should be full-fledged participants in the community by bringing with them and sharing the best of what their culture has to offer. *Al-Ghannouchi* explains that he would like Muslims to emulate the Jews who, after being discriminated against and marginalized for centuries in Europe, were able within the past half century to be recognized as partners and contributors in shaping Western culture, which, he notes, is now labeled Judeo-Christian. He sees the Archbishop's remarks as helping to achieve a similar status for Islam.

Al-Ghannouchi notes that criticism of the Archbishop was not confined to westerners. European Muslims were critical as well. Like *Tariq Ramadan*, who expressed his concern over the fear of Islam that the Archbishop's remarks could generate among British citizens. *Al-Ghannouchi* also noted that some British writers saw the Archbishop's words as a challenge to the entire secularist system. Noting that secularism has been unable to solve the daily problems of the people, he argued that if the Archbishop's approach leads to integration of Islam as an adaptable and acceptable system, he welcomes the initiative. He also considers the possibility that, in their discovery of Islam, the West will contribute to the much needed reform and application of the *Shari'a*, something Muslims have been unable to do until now in their own backyard. He cautions, however, that those who are seeking this kind of integration and recognition in Europe will continue to be threatened by Islamic radicals and terrorists from within and by Zionist lobbies and secular and racist extremists from without.



Ata' Ollah Mohajerani contends that those who attacked the Archbishop did not grasp the scope of his message and have not absorbed his entire speech. He considers the statement made by the Archbishop to be part of a much wider positive plan of inter-faith discourse, initiated by the Church of England, which preceded Williams' leadership. He quotes the

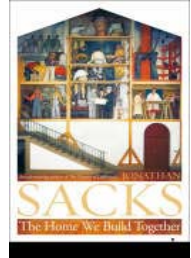
¹ *Rached al-Ghannouchi* is considered the intellectual fundamentalist leader of the Tunisian Islamist *Nahda* movement.

² *Ata'ollah Mohajerani* was minister of Culture under *Khatami*. He resigned because of his liberal policies and presently lives in England. He shares a website with his wife Jamilah Kadivar - www.maktoub.ir

³ *Zeinab AbdelAziz* is a professor of French civilization at Menofia University in Egypt

British Grand Rabbi Jonathan Sacks making reference to the Declaration of Alexandria,⁴ signed in 2002, as one of the most important documents in modern times. The declaration commits all three monotheistic religions to peacefully resolve their interfaith differences. *Mohajerani* also points out that Williams, like many modern Muslim scholars, questions the traditional static nature of the *Shari'a*. By doing so, *Mohajerani* contends, the Archbishop moves the debate in the direction of independent interpretation or re-interpretation of different portions of the *Shari* by Islamic authorities.

Mohajerani would like people to understand Archbishop Williams' message within the larger context of his general philosophical approach to society. To explain what he perceives as the Archbishop's message, the writer refers to Rabbi Sacks' newest book "The House We Build Together."⁵ Sacks recognizes that societies have become fragmented because of globalism and multiculturalism and calls for a new approach to national identity. He proposes that responsibilities must be shouldered by all, with each group bringing to the table its distinctive contribution for the common good and the home they build together. *Mohajerani* sees a common bond between Williams and Sacks in describing a commendable way of integrating the diversity of groups within a framework of shared values. He contends that the Archbishop understands that all denominations must participate in the building of the nation. He sees the Archbishop's message as an invitation for all to partake in the country's building. This integration, according to *Mohajerani*, is accomplished by addressing specific issues that are treated differently in Islamic law (e.g., divorce, inheritance and usury) and establishing a balanced relationship between Islam and Britain's secular laws.



Like *Al-Ghannouchi*, *Zeinab AbdelAziz* also sees behind the Archbishop's remarks as part of a larger plan. But there the similarity between the two authors ends. Contrary to *Al-Ghannouchi*'s positive assessment of Williams' intentions, *AbdelAziz* believes the grand plan is to extend to Muslims the illusion of an offer and a dialogue while hiding the true objective, which is to Christianize the world – an ironic criticism given that it is the goal of Islamists to convert the world to Islam.

AbdelAziz's condemnation seems to be based on guilt by association. She has a long history of grievances against the Vatican, particularly the present Pope Benedict the XVI for his earlier attack on Islam. As she sees it, the Archbishop was seeking a rapprochement with the Catholic Church. Thus, she views Pope Benedict and the Archbishop as one and the same, joined in a conspiracy. To support her conspiracy theory, *AbdelAziz* points to a minor event this month. She alleges that the Pope accelerated his meeting with Muslim scholars deliberately to coincide with the Archbishop's speech. She also alludes to earlier remarks she had made on Saudi TV and in other articles that the plot to Christianize the world was conceived under Vatican II in 1965. She states that Vatican failed to reach its goal by the second millennium, as planned, and has set 2010 as the new target. *AbdelAziz* labeled the alleged papal plot as an "obsessive hysteria." Although *AbdelAziz* has never been taken seriously by either Western or Arab intellectuals, she nevertheless commands some attention by true believers and those in the Arab population who have come to have faith in this kind of conspiracy propaganda. True to her constituency, she concluded her article by sounding the alarm – "Wake-up Muslims" before it is too late.

The World Council of Muslim Scholars mildly condemned those in the West who attacked Williams, without elaborating on the value of the Archbishop's remarks. The only significant statement from Islamic authorities, however, came from the *Shi'a*. Ayatollah *Muhammad Hussayn Fadlallah* portrayed

⁴ The seven-point declaration was the result of an interfaith summit held in Alexandria, Egypt on January 21st, 2002 between leaders from the three monotheistic religions under the auspices of the previous Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey.

⁵ *The Home we Build Together: Recreating Society*, Jonathan Sacks, Continuum International Publishing Group [1/7/2008]

the Archbishop's remarks as a sign of "intellectual rational openness" while insisting that "Muslims must integrate within their communities" and "invited governments particularly in the West to a scientific dialogue with Islamic communities in order to reduce the effect of differences which exist between religions and allow Muslims to harmonize with the rest of society." Sunni scholars like *al-Qaradawi* and *al-'Awdah* and major Sunni institutions like *Al-Azhar* have remained until now silent.

Sources:

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