

EAST MEETS WEST

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Earlier this year, comments by Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams caused tremendous controversy in the UK, when he suggested that some recognition of Islamic sharia law should be accommodated within the British legal system. His intervention provoked fierce criticism, with other church leaders, Government and Opposition MPs all uniting to condemn the idea that any system of religious law could co-exist within the British legal system.

In Ireland, we have lived for a long time with an uneasy relationship between religious doctrine and civil law. Many provisions in the 1937 Constitution derive from Catholic teaching; our judges have referred to Papal Encyclicals as a helpful source in interpreting law. Our education and healthcare systems are still inextricably bound up with religious affiliation, to the extent that the vast majority of State-funded national schools are Catholic denominational institutions, entitled by law to give priority to pupils baptised into the Catholic faith over all others.

Indeed, apart from the small but increasing number of multi-denominational schools run by Educate Together, our schooling system continues to be based on sectarianism. Parents in many parts of Ireland, no matter what their own religious beliefs, have no choice in practice but to send their children to a school in which Catholic religious doctrine is taught as part of the basic school curriculum.

So we have never achieved a truly secular state in Ireland. We have, however, yet to grapple with the question addressed by Archbishop Williams; that is, how to integrate religious minorities into our society, while preserving their cultural identities.

The RTE programme ‘West of Mecca,’ broadcast on Monday night, explored the experiences of Muslim families living in Ireland, and emphasised how important this issue is becoming here.

One of those featured on the programme was Dr. Shaheed Satardien, Chair of the European Muslim Council for Justice, Peace and Equality. Dr. Satardien has taken a stance against Islamic extremism in Ireland, having fled South Africa following death threats from Islamic radicals there. The support for his moderate perspective on Islam shows that, despite the words of Archbishop Williams, very few individuals from the Muslim community wish to see sharia law become enforceable in Ireland.

Indeed, in most Western countries, religious or cultural minorities live in harmony with their neighbours, and integration occurs gradually and peacefully. The question is, what policies should be adopted to ensure that the process of integration takes place in a harmonious way? A debate is taking place across Europe at present about the benefits and drawbacks of the multicultural model of integration, seeking to answer whether countries with high levels of immigration should accommodate a variety of languages and cultural practices, or whether immigrants should rather be expected to adapt to the conventions of their adopted country.

The multicultural ideal, which is well worth striving for, is that members of many diverse cultures should be able to live together, respecting each others' views and practices, free from racism or intolerance. Diversity is celebrated, different cultural values are accommodated. A difficulty however becomes apparent when the practices of one culture impinge upon the freedoms of others. The question then arises, to what extent should intolerance be tolerated?

The danger with the multicultural model is that it can lead to the oppression of minority members of ethnic or cultural minorities – women, children or gay people, for example, whose individual freedoms may be compromised by cultural practices of their group. Rather than excuse such practices as expressions of cultural identity, they should be condemned where they have the effect of oppressing vulnerable members of particular groups. It is not culturally imperialist to argue that certain universal values or rights, particularly the recognition of the equality norm, should prevail across all the cultural groups present in a particular society.

In 1997, American feminist author Susan Moller Okin wrote a powerful article addressing this issue, entitled 'Is multiculturalism bad for women?' She argued that those who advocate group rights for cultural minorities within a liberal state, as Archbishop Williams did, often overlook the rights of minorities within those cultural groups. She suggested that 'none of the prominent defenders of multicultural group rights has adequately or even directly addressed the troubling connections between gender and culture, or the conflicts that arise so commonly between multiculturalism and feminism.'

These conflicts are particularly apparent in debates about cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, forced marriage or polygamy. While these are extreme examples of practices which are clearly oppressive of women, and are universally condemned in Western democracies, other practices such as the wearing of the hijab or headscarf may engender more complex responses. Should such practices be tolerated as valid expressions of religion or culture, or should they be condemned as discriminatory towards women?

These and other issues will be debated at the Burren Law School in Ballyvaughan, Co. Clare on 2nd – 4th May (www.burrenlawschool.org). Taking its theme as 'East meets West', the School will hear speakers including Dr. Satardien, John Hume, Lara Marlowe, Conor O'Clery and Dr. Maurice Hayes debate the complex questions around the uneasy relationship between different cultures; between religion and law, Christianity and Islam, and men and women.