

Rowan Williams has acquired a backbone – but it's all too late

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The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams is demob-happy.

It seems that since he announced his resignation he feels he can now say what he wants, rather than what the "Anglican Communion" demands. And in the process he seems to be demonstrating an extraordinary sympathy for some of the arguments the National Secular Society has been making for years.

He started off the week with a full-scale attack on the Government. Leaked extracts from Dr Williams' forthcoming book in the *Observer* reveal that he thinks the Prime Minister's flagship idea for a Big Society is 'threadbare' and 'aspirational waffle'.

He wrote: "Big Society rhetoric is all too often heard by many therefore as aspirational waffle designed to conceal a deeply damaging withdrawal of the state from its responsibilities to the most vulnerable."

He said that ministers had fuelled cynicism over the initiative by failing to set out the role of citizens in the Big Society."

Dr Williams did not mention that many of his fellow "faith leaders" have actively encouraged this development, seeing it as their door into the influence over the lives of individuals that they can't manage through their churches.

In the same leaked extracts, Dr Williams says that the Government was wrong to bring in the Racial and Religious Hatred Act in 2006 to make incitement to religious hatred a criminal offence.

Who was on the front line of opposing it at the time? Why, the NSS was.

The Archbishop said that sometimes making anti-Muslim statements could show courage. He said: "The creation under British law of a criminal offence of incitement to religious hatred has provoked bitter and sustained controversy. Disproportionate attention has been given to a hypersensitive minority.

"Some anti-Muslim images or words (foolish and insulting as they may be) may well exhibit courage in a world where terrorist violence reaches across every national boundary."

He also calls for greater integration of Muslims living in Britain and insists they make their loyalty to "the nation state" rather than "the international Muslim community". "To suggest that the Muslim owes an overriding loyalty to the International Muslim Community [the Umma] is extremely worrying," he writes. "Muslims must make clear that their loyalty is straightforward modern political loyalty to the nation state."

Again, the NSS has been saying this for years.

Later in the week, Rowan Williams was reported to have spoken to a group of young people about same-sex marriage. He told them that Christians who oppose gay relationships need to tackle any feelings of embarrassment, shame and disgust they feel. In other words, homophobia.

He said "Many of our friends may be – indeed we may be – wrestling with that issue ourselves, and the Church is scratching its head and trying to work out where it is on all that, and what to think about it.

"What's frustrating is that we still have Christian people whose feelings about it are so strong, and sometimes so embarrassed and ashamed and disgusted, that that just sends out a message of unwelcome, of lack of understanding, of lack of patience. So whatever we think about it, we need, as a Church, to be tackling what we feel about it."

Again, the Archbishop is belatedly catching up with the thinking of the NSS.

He also echoed the opinion of many of our members – indeed, many people in our society – when he said there was a widespread perception that Christians involved in the church were "weird".

In a speech to a group of 80 young people in Lambeth Palace entitled "Help, my friends think I'm mad!" Dr Williams asked: "Why is it that other people think you're weird if you're involved in the Church?"

He said he believed there were three reasons:

"Science, because so many people take it for granted that there's absolutely nothing to be said any longer in favour of religion because something mysterious called 'science' has taken over.

"Sex, because that seems to be the only thing the Church is interested in sometimes, if you read the papers, and it all looks very weird.

"And common sense, because religious people walk around dressed in strange clothes, they say strange things, and some of them even have weird eyebrows. That's a bit of what I call 'the market challenge'."

He said he was aware that people thought him "weird", adding: "It's very frustrating at times."

It's always good when people's thinking develops and their opinions progress. But Rowan Williams has left it all too late. There is now a widespread perception that he did not have the courage to live by his convictions when he was in office, he didn't have the backbone to push through these ideas in the face of a Church that is swinging inexorably towards the extremists.

In fact, he has actually made the situation worse by making excuses for those in the Church who do not want it to progress. That not only hurts the institution itself, it hurts people outside the Church as well.

One thing Dr Williams has achieved though is to bring disestablishment just a few steps closer.

Terry Sanderson

Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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