

'Sexuality, Sexual Health and Religion Today': a presentation for the Royal Society of Medicine by Dr Rowan Williams, Lord Oystermouth and former Archbishop of Canterbury, London, UK, 21 July 2015

The impetus for this presentation began in 2014 when, during the annual seminar of the Sexuality & Sexual Health Section of the Royal Society of Medicine (RSM), a passionate speaker from the floor raised the crucial issue: "But where does religion come into all this?"

The long-term response of the Sexuality & Sexual Health Section Committee will be to invite representatives of many religions to address the issue. The immediate response was an invitation to Dr Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury and Head of the Anglican Church, to do so.

Happily, Dr Williams accepted. Equally happily, audience members turned up in droves, from a wide variety of faiths, opinions and medical backgrounds, including many members and staff from the Faculty of Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare. As Dr Williams began to speak the mood was positive, yet a little wary. Would a churchman understand our medical world view? Would his religious beliefs clash uncomfortably with our ethical perspective?

We needn't have worried. Dr Williams was informed on both biblical and ecclesiastical sources, staunch in his own Christianity, clear in his morality:

adultery, for example, is 'out'. But he was also knowledgeable about the historical and current approaches of other major religions, courageously critical of his own, deeply supportive of a wider range of sexual mores and behaviour. He was also very entertaining – quietly-spoken but clear, serious but often with a twinkle in his eye.

His presentation and the questions that followed were wide-ranging, and a short summary cannot do them justice; RSM members can access a video of Dr Williams' presentation via the E-Learning Update section of the RSM website (<https://videos.rsm.ac.uk/video/sexuality-sexual-health-and-religion-today->). Dr Williams began by examining various religious definitions of sexuality and sexual health, acknowledging the fear that surrounds sex and suggesting that Christianity is perhaps the most anxious of all religions in this regard. Perhaps, he said, the best and most ethical sexuality is coupled with integrity: "We should mean what we do ... and do what we mean ... when we are sexual", which somehow magically seemed to sidestep both doubts and arguments about how sex and religion interact.

Dr Williams then went on to explore more political arenas. First, the way so many religions deliver not only the best but also the worst when it comes to gender equality, both promoting women's rights while at the same time reinforcing sexual exploitation. He spoke too of the Anglican Church's schism around gay sexuality and the issues of 'colonialism' this raises, describing a fraught dinner conversation with a certain African President about the acceptance of gay sex as being "perhaps the most uncomfortable evening of my life".

As to the future, Dr Williams is passionate about the importance of ethical awareness in the training of medical

staff, about the urgency of offering protection through contraception, and about sex education. In his role as Master of Magdalen College Cambridge he organises workshops on consent for new students.

Finally, perhaps the most resonant concept he presented, and one which the entire audience seemed to approve, even though many clearly held no formal faith, was that at the heart of all sexuality and all sexual health is the idea of having "the body in the soul's keeping".

The impact of Dr Williams' words was obvious from the high level of questions from the audience – all of which were answered fully and thoughtfully – as well as from the queue of participants waiting to speak to him after his presentation. This had been no God Squad tub-thumping. Rather, it had been a carefully reasoned, highly insightful analysis of how religion, sexuality and sexual health often fail to coexist in the modern world, but how they should do so precisely because of what each offers the other. While Dr Williams may not have converted the audience to religious faith, he certainly restored their faith in the relevance of religion to the medical profession.

Reviewed by **Susan Quilliam**

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Author's note Seminars hosted by the Sexuality & Sexual Health Section of the RSM are open to all, are free to RSM members and reasonably priced to others, and usually carry continuing professional development (CPD) credits.

