

## Debate: Religion has a place in the 21st century.

Richard Dawkins attacks 'irrelevant' religion in Rowan Williams debate. But he lost the debate.

Prominent atheist Prof Richard Dawkins last night attacked religion as "redundant and irrelevant" during a debate against the former Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams.



Former Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams with Prof Richard Dawkins. Photo: PA

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Dr Williams offered a counter argument, saying that religion undoubtedly had a place in the 21st century and that the issue was not whether it should exist, but what our attitude towards it should be.

He added that modern attitudes towards human rights had their foundations in religious traditions.

The pair were part of a debate on the proposition "religion has no place in the 21st Century" in front of an audience of about 800, who packed the famous 200-year-old university debating club's chambers.

Early in his address, Prof Dawkins made a provocative comparison between Christian and Islamic

traditions, describing himself as a "cultural Anglican".

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"If I were a cultural Muslim, I would have something to say about that faith's appalling attitude to women and various other moral points."

Stressing that his central concern was simply whether religion was true, he summed up his argument, by describing religion as a "cop-out".

"It is a betrayal of the intellect, a betrayal of all that's best about what makes us human," he said.

"It's a phony substitute for an explanation, which seems to answer the question until you examine it and realise that it does no such thing." He added that in the scientific world, religion was a "pernicious charlatan".

"It peddles false explanations where real explanations could have been offered, false explanations that get in the way of the enterprise of discovering real explanations," he said.

In his address, Lord Williams said: "Religion has always been a matter of community building, a matter of building relations of compassion, fellow-feeling and, dare I say it, inclusion.

"The notion that religious commitment can be purely a private matter is one that runs against the grain of religious history."

Lord Williams added that respect for human life and equality was inherent in all organised religion. "The very concept of human rights has profound religious roots," he added.

"The convention of human rights would not be what it is were it not for the history of philosophical religious debate."

Philosopher professor Tariq Ramadan, Andrew Copson, chief executive of the British Humanist Association and Douglas Murray, founder of the Centre for Social Cohesion, also took part.

At the end of the debate the house voted to reject the proposition, stating that they do believe religion has a place in the 21st century.

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