

Islam in our Backyard

Author: Tony Payne

This book is written for “Michael”, “the bloke next door.” For Payne this ordinary Aussie is not a scornfully tolerant Theoretical Secularist but a more acceptingly tolerant, intellectually vaguer Practical Secularist. Ongoing interaction with the fictitious Michael (hence the subtitle “A novel argument”) underscores the relevance of the issues raised in the book for contemporary Australians. Indeed, this is a book you might consider using with your next door neighbour or non-Christian friend.

The predictable September 11 opening is more than an attention grabber, because one of Payne’s key questions concerns whether Muslims like Osama bin Laden and the Taliban should be regarded as a small lunatic fringe or as genuine, representative Muslims. “Michael” is used to voice typical Aussie reactions to September 11. Michael doesn’t trust Muslims. Yet he is also confused because his intolerant attitude to Islam does not sit well with his belief that religion is a personal thing and it doesn’t really matter which religion you follow because they all teach the same thing. He automatically associates Muslims with the infamous gang rapes in Bankstown and welfare rorts.

This book attempts to be fair-minded about Islam, recognizing how offensive it is when Christianity is wrongly represented in the media. Payne looks at various essential dimensions of Islam: (1) Islamic belief - the historical origins of Muhammad and the Qur’an; Muhammad’s message concerning Allah, Unity, Submission and Law and the 5 Pillars of Islam; (2) the diversity of Islam as indicated not only by the fundamental difference between Sunnis and Shi’ites, but also by the range of Islamic tendencies comprising mystics (the Sufis), secularists (mainly found in the West), conservatives (a vast number of Muslims) and syncretistic folk Islamists; (3) Islam and militancy; (4) Islam and the issue of Church and State; (5) a critique of Islam based on the standards of internal consistency and external verifiability. Payne’s critique goes beyond pointing out contradictory statements in the Qur’an, noting the problem Islam faces in squaring the justice and mercy of God. Islamic denial of the death of Christ, rooted in the Qur’an, is historically improbable and undermines the credibility of Islam. Payne deliberately avoids addressing the issue of Islam and women.

Payne’s ongoing conversations with Michael involve comparing and contrasting the Bible and the Qur’an, the Church and the Mosque. Repeatedly Payne stresses Islam’s uniqueness among major religions for the way in which it refuses to recognize any distinction between religion (Islam) and the state. Islam, by its very nature, can never allow that the citizens of an Islamic state should have freedom to adopt the religion of their choice. Islam and democracy are intrinsically incompatible. It is the essentially political nature of Islam that provides Payne with the opportunity to critique the simplistic, historically indefensible claim that Islam is a religion of peace (even allowing for Islamic diversity). He rightly comments: “...to place the adjective ‘militant’ in front of Islam, as if there is an essential Islam that is not militant, is to misunderstand Islam. Theologically, philosophically, politically and historically, Islam is militant.” Payne also

uses this reality to critique the naïve view of religion as a private matter, excluded from the public arena and associated with relative truth. However, he also critiques the hypocritical arrogance of those secularists who treat religion as ethically irrelevant (e.g., Senator Vanstone) or who denounce aspects of Islam as “morally unacceptable.” In this respect the book is more than an appraisal of Islam. It is also a critique of practical and, indeed, theoretical secularism and, indeed, of secular multiculturalism for failing to grant to religions the freedom to be wrong.

Payne considers the options facing a modern society in determining how to live with Islam. The options of banning it, censoring it, oppressing Muslims or keeping them out of the country are not acceptable. The only viable path is to critique Islam just as we must critique Atheism and even Christianity itself. At one point Michael says, “I can’t see how telling people that their religion is basically wrong is going to do much for the relationship.” Payne replies, “As a matter of fact, I think it’s the only way we can peacefully co-exist in the long-term...*we must love and respect other persons enough to argue with them about the truth.*”

Payne is careful to stress that the militancy of Islam does not mean that all Muslims are bent on killing Westerners. He further uses Michael to illustrate that violence and destructive selfishness are problems all sinners share.

How could this excellent book be improved? The book is great for helping us to understand how to put Islam in context for our fellow non-Christian Aussie, especially the “Practical Secularist”, the ordinary “bloke next door” who is very accepting of people having their own religion. However, this book needs a sequel – a book that models how to go about doing the very thing Payne commends, arguing with Muslims themselves about the truth and appropriately critiquing Islam in this context. We need another “novel argument”, an ongoing conversation with a dedicated Muslim. As it stands the license Payne gives Christians to criticize Islam might easily be abused. Christians need some guidelines on how to go about arguing with Muslims about the truth. For example, Christians should be very wary of launching direct attacks on Muhammad, something that Payne himself avoids in this book.