

Islam in our Backyard. A Novel Argument

by Tony Payne

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reviewed by Johan D.Tangelder.

The aftermath of the Islamists terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has filled the Western world with deep anxieties, while it remains extraordinarily confused and ignorant about this major development in Islam. The media was full of impassioned pleas urging us to realize that "Islam is a tolerant religion of peace being misrepresented by a tiny minority of crazed fundamentalists." But author Tony Payne persuasively argues that violent military means have always been central to the progress of Islam in the world, and it is simply dishonest to pretend otherwise. In his readily accessible short introduction to Islam, Payne explains the problem Islam poses for secularists. He explores the questions raised by the conflict between Islam and "the Christian West." He does it via a series of conversations with his fictional neighbor, Michael. He discusses the vast theological chasm between Islam and Christianity. He notes that Allah is transcendent, unapproachable and ultimately unknowable. He is to be feared and obeyed, rather than befriended.

Keeping the law (or shari'ha) is at the heart of the life of obedience. Submission to God means submission to his law, and law intends to govern each and every part of a person's life, from the cradle to the grave, and to deal with everything from political, economic and social affairs, how one should pray, fast, and even sneeze and drink water. The Christ of the Scripture is not the same as the Christ in the Koran. Muhammad found the cross offensive. No prophet of God could die such a humiliating death, he reasoned. "It surely could not be God's plan to see a holy man crucified. And so it could never have happened."

Payne shows that by nature Islam is intolerant toward other religions. He says that the idea of an open, tolerant free expression of ideas, in which there is freedom of religion, seems quite foreign to the structures of Islamic thought. There seems to be something deeply incompatible between Islam and what we call "democracy." An Islamic state is in principle a theocracy, that is, a state ruled by God, according to his law. Payne also refers to the rise of the Taliban and terrorists such as Osama bin Laden's attempt to drive American presence and influence out of the Islamic world.

Payne does not only explain the basics of Islam, he also points to the intolerance of our relativistic-secular society. In such a society the statement "You are wrong" is not allowed. Payne states that Western relativist belief that it is impossible ever to assert that one religion might be wrong and another right – is the most patronizing and arrogant stance imaginable. After September 11, it is also illogical and unsustainable. Payne concludes his well-written and responsible exposition of Islam with this message for Christians: "The challenge of Islam for us Westerners is to reconsider why we've abandoned our Christian heritage – not only in the big political sense, but also personally. Because in abandoning it we find ourselves in a terrible mess, intellectually and morally."