

BRIEF  BOOKS

# CAN WE TALK ABOUT ISLAM?

TONY PAYNE



**F**or many of us, it doesn't seem so long ago that Islam was a remote subject, barely touching our lives. Now hardly a day goes past when someone isn't talking about it in the media, or in our parliaments, or over the water cooler at work.

Much of that talk goes in one of two directions. Some want to blame Islam in general for the violence and atrocities being committed in its name (which hardly seems fair). Others insist that Islamic State and other Islamic terrorist groups have nothing whatsoever to do with Islam (which strikes many as being implausible).

Are these our only two options in talking about Islam—to blame it or to absolve it?

In this short book written from a Christian viewpoint, Tony Payne argues that there is an honest and constructive way to talk together about Islam. It begins with a better understanding not only of Islam, but also of the modern secular worldview that makes talking about any sort of faith so difficult.

ISBN 978-1-922206-91-6



9 781922 206916

BRIEF  BOOKS

# CAN WE TALK ABOUT ISLAM?

TONY PAYNE

 matthiasmedia  
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

*Can We Talk About Islam?*

© Matthias Media 2016

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher.

Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

Email: [info@matthiasmedia.com.au](mailto:info@matthiasmedia.com.au)

Internet: [www.matthiasmedia.com.au](http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au)

Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.

Matthias Media (USA)

Email: [sales@matthiasmedia.com](mailto:sales@matthiasmedia.com)

Internet: [www.matthiasmedia.com](http://www.matthiasmedia.com)

Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.

All Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ISBN 978 1 922206 91 6

Cover design and typesetting by Lankshear Design.

Series design by affiniT Design.

# CONTENTS

1. Rash words .....	5
2. Why don't secular humanists want to talk? .....	11
3. Understanding Islam .....	23
4. How to talk about Islam .....	43

# 1. RASH WORDS

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts,  
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.  
(Prov 12:18)

**N**ever has the wisdom of this proverb been more urgently needed than in our society's current conversation about Islam.

Tensions are running high. The threat of Islamic terrorism is now a real and daily reality in the West. In the Middle East, the deadly conflicts involving Islamic fighters in Syria and Iraq drag on with no end in sight. Atrocities against Christians and other non-Islamic minorities are now so common that they don't even move the needle in our 24-hour news cycle.

How can we have a conversation about this as

## CAN WE TALK ABOUT ISLAM?

a society in a way that is truthful and constructive? How can we talk about Islam with our neighbours and work colleagues and friends in a way that brings life and healing rather than division and conflict?

At present, we seem to find ourselves caught between two dissatisfying alternatives.

On the one hand, we have no wish to speak with rash words that damn all Muslims for the violent actions of those who act in the name of Islam. The last thing we want is to see the large majority of moderate Muslims who live in the West alienated or mistreated as a result of sweeping inflammatory statements about Islam—such as comedian Bill Maher’s recent comments, where he described Islam as “the only religion that acts like the mafia—that will f\*\*\*ing kill you if you say the wrong thing, draw the wrong picture, or write the wrong book”.<sup>1</sup>

As a Christian, I know how that kind of rude, sweeping generalization feels. I feel it keenly when the name of Christ is dragged through the mud because of the actions of some who bear his name—

---

1 ‘Ben Affleck blasts “racist” comments about Islam during US talk show appearance’, ABC News, 7 October 2014 (viewed 5 November 2015): <http://abc.net.au/news/2014-10-06/ben-affleck-blasts-so-called-racist-comments-about-islam/5793664>.

## 1. RASH WORDS

like the corrupt televangelist fleecing the gullible, or the Christian protest group wielding ‘God Hates Fags’ signs at a soldier’s funeral, or the horrendous sexual abuse in church institutions.

“Please don’t blame or judge me because of what some ‘Christians’ do!” I want to protest. “And don’t draw your conclusions about Christ from the lunatics who sometimes claim to act in his name.”

So as a Christian, I should be slow to speak rashly, such as by using the atrocities perpetrated by ISIS as a blunt instrument to beat Islam with.

And yet, on the other hand, I’m sure I’m not alone in feeling that the political leaders and opinion shapers of the West are protesting rather too much when they claim that there’s nothing *remotely Islamic* about Islamic State. This has been the steady refrain, ever since 9/11. It is vigorously stated that the rising tide of terrorism and military action and violence committed in the name of Islam has *nothing whatsoever* to do with Islam, despite the repeated, explicit and coherent statements of those involved to invoke the Qur’an and the example of Muhammad to justify their actions. “They are really just criminals, extremists and madmen”, say Western leaders, “who are playing on widespread resentment at Western



## CAN WE TALK ABOUT ISLAM?

foreign policy, and political and economic alienation, for their own purposes”.

“No religion is responsible for terrorism—people are responsible for violence and terrorism”, said President Obama at a White House summit on combating terrorism.<sup>2</sup> David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, has said much the same: “These people in Iraq and Syria doing these appalling things, they have nothing to do with the great religion of Islam, a religion of peace, a religion that inspires daily acts of kindness and generosity.”<sup>3</sup>

This repeated insistence that Islam is in essence a religion of sweetness and light, with no connection whatsoever to war and violent jihad, has the smell of spin about it—especially if you compare that spin with the mainstream teaching and practice of Islam over the past 13 centuries.

So where does that leave us? It seems hard to know how to talk constructively in our communities

---

2 D Jackson, ‘Obama: No religion responsible for terrorism’, *USA Today*, 18 February 2015 (viewed 5 November 2015): [http://usa today.com/story/news/nation/2015/02/18/obama-white-house-summit-on-counterering-violent-extremism-speech/23631625/](http://usa.today.com/story/news/nation/2015/02/18/obama-white-house-summit-on-counterering-violent-extremism-speech/23631625/).

3 D Cameron, ‘2014 Eid al-Adha reception speech’, transcript from the UK Prime Minister’s Office, London, 8 October 2014 (viewed 5 November 2015): <https://gov.uk/government/speeches/david-camersons-2014-eid-al-adha-reception-speech>.

## 1. RASH WORDS

about Islam if these seem to be our only options:

- to blame Islam for the militancy and violence committed in its name, and run the risk of not only being unfair to most actual Muslims in the West, but of stirring up ethnic tensions in our community
- to not talk about Islam at all except as a sanitized religion of peace; to insist that the current tensions have no connection with Islam.

In the pages that follow, I want to suggest that these aren't the only options. There is, I believe, an honest and constructive way to talk about Islam—whether that conversation is with Muslim friends or with our neighbours or in the public square.

I also want to suggest that Christians have a particularly important role to play in these conversations, for reasons I'll get to soon.

However, the place to start a rethink of how to engage with Islam is by understanding *who we're talking with*. And there are two groups or conversation partners that will comprise the vast bulk of people we talk to: Muslims and secular humanists.

If we're going to talk about Islam, we need to understand both.

## 2. WHY DON'T SECULAR HUMANISTS WANT TO TALK?

It's particularly important to understand how secular humanists approach conversations about Islam, and about religion generally, because secular humanism is the dominant belief system in our society. It is so dominant, in fact, that it is rarely even identified as a belief system or worldview. It is simply the default, accepted framework or set of assumptions for virtually every news bulletin, TV show, newspaper article, blog post and tweet that we consume. It's the air that we breathe. And it would be remarkable if it did not form at least part of the way you view the world.

We need to understand secular humanism because it provides the ground rules for all discuss-

## CAN WE TALK ABOUT ISLAM?

ions in the public square and for the conversations we will have with other people, many of whom are secular humanists even if they don't know what those words mean.

Secular humanism is very different from both Christianity and Islam, and yet in its own way is as universalistic and all-encompassing as both Christianity and Islam claim to be.

### **The disappearing staircase**

Secular humanism (and we could give it other names) has an intellectual history going back to the Enlightenment of the 18th century. It has been brewing and growing for 250 years in Western culture, and arrived at its current dominant position sometime in the 20th century.

Secular humanism is not fundamentally an atheistic worldview—some secular humanists believe in God or spirituality of different kinds, while others are agnostic or more aggressively atheist. But all secular humanists share the view that whatever religious belief you may have is a matter of *personally chosen faith and values and opinion*, and not something that can be rationally or openly discussed, and certainly not something that would

## 2. WHY DON'T SECULAR HUMANISTS WANT TO TALK?

be open to the claim of being objectively true.

Why does secular humanism have this view of religion?

The answer lies in a decisive change that has occurred in the way we think about the world and God and reality, and this change is at the heart of secular humanist thinking.

To understand this change, let us imagine that all of reality is like a large house, with an upstairs and a downstairs and a broad staircase connecting them.<sup>4</sup>

Upstairs is where we find the realities of God and the world of spirit, along with the true meaning of beauty, truth, goodness, love, justice, and so on.

Downstairs is the everyday world in which we live: the world of sense and matter, of physicality and observable phenomena, of what we might call 'nature' or (more recently) 'science'.

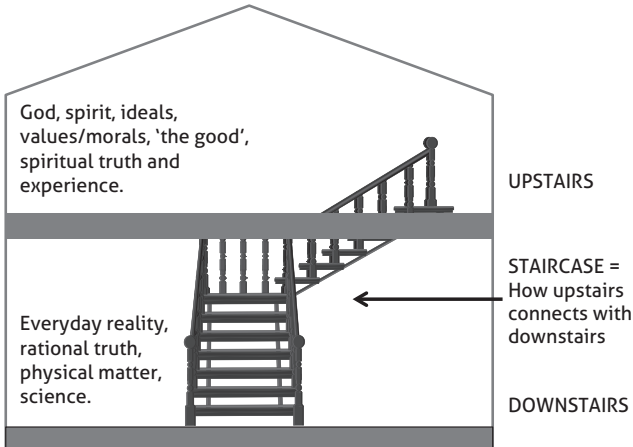
Between the two is some form of connection; some staircase by which the world of upstairs relates to and informs the downstairs, and also by which the downstairs can have some contact with upstairs.

---

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Francis Schaeffer for the 'upstairs/downstairs' metaphor to describe the turn of thought that the Enlightenment took. See particularly his *Escape from Reason* (IVP, Downers Grove, 2007).

## CAN WE TALK ABOUT ISLAM?

This is the way humanity has thought about reality for millennia. Different philosophies and religions have had quite widely varying views of exactly what was upstairs and what was downstairs, and what the staircase really was and how it worked. But that there *was* a staircase—some way of relating upstairs to downstairs and vice versa—nobody much questioned.



In the theistic view, God created the downstairs. He gave it its character and nature based on what was upstairs—that is, on his own character and person—and he continued to act downstairs by his Spirit to sustain all that he made, and to communicate with downstairs in various times and different ways.

## 2. WHY DON'T SECULAR HUMANISTS WANT TO TALK?

In Islam, the Qur'an and Muhammad are the key elements of the communicative staircase.

In Christianity, the staircase is Jesus Christ—God's own Son in the flesh—whose word and will are revealed in the words of the Bible.

However, dating from the 18th century, the thinkers of the Enlightenment (and those that followed them) began to doubt whether there really was anything or anyone upstairs, *and in particular whether there was any reliable staircase*. They decided to stop using the staircase—which for them meant the Christian staircase of an authoritative Bible—and to try to work everything out from what they could see and experience and think about downstairs.

They started to operate on the assumption that even if there was an eternal creator God, we had no access to him. The only true and reliable knowledge was what we had access to here and now in this world and this age (which is what the word 'secular' means). Rather than looking to the Church or the Bible for authoritative answers, it was up to us to figure it out. Humanity was in charge of the quest for true knowledge, not God or some religious authority (and so, 'humanism').

For the emerging secular humanists, this world

## **CAN WE TALK ABOUT ISLAM?**

and ourselves were all that we had.

This shift in thinking had massive consequences. It meant, for example, that morality and ‘values’ (or ‘virtues’, as they would have put it) were no longer given to us from upstairs but were things we had to work out for ourselves based on rational thought, or intuition, or perhaps on what produced the best results.

And, of course, it had a huge impact on how people viewed religious belief.

### **The leap of faith**

Without a staircase—that is, without any reliable or trustworthy means of really knowing what was upstairs—the only way to make any move in an upstairs direction was through a non-rational ‘leap of faith’. You could only get upstairs (or attempt to) through personal mystical experience, or through accepting purely on trust (without evidence) the words of a priest or prophet or holy book.