

ISLAM IN OUR BACKYARD

A novel argument

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Dedication

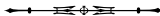
This book is for Michael next door,
whose name is not really Michael and
who doesn't really live next door.
'Michael', and my conversation with
him, are fictions formed from the
dust of conversations over many
years with neighbours, friends and
complete strangers.

1

EARLY ON THE MORNING of September 11, 2001, two hijacked passenger jets, bearing 157 passengers and crew between them, rammed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City.

The force of the explosions did not initially destroy the towers, which were built to withstand the horizontal impact of a large commercial aircraft. It was the fire that killed the buildings. The fire, fuelled by 91,000 litres of aviation fluid, and a forest's worth of office paper, reached temperatures in excess of 800 degrees centigrade. At these temperatures, the steel core of the buildings, and the steel members that supported the concrete floors, began to melt and buckle. Eventually, they collapsed under the massive load above, bringing a sudden catastrophic force to bear on the floors beneath, which were never designed to carry such a load. From this point on, the implosion of the buildings was inevitable, as each new collapsing floor added to the enormous downward force.

At 10:05 am, the north tower of the World Trade Centre, collapsed; the south tower followed at 10:28 am. Approximately 3000 office workers, firemen and policemen lost their lives.



I woke up on that morning to the red blinking lights of the clock-radio, and to the sombre tones of the news announcer. We stumbled downstairs and watched the images being repeated with ghastly regularity on the TV.

I walked out into the back yard. I wanted to see that the world was still there.

It was a clear, dry spring morning, bathed in bright, blue-tinted Australian light. The grass in the vacant block next door, the debris piled in the corner of our yard, the trampoline sitting at a probably unsafe angle near the back door—it was all still there. The clarity of it almost hurt the eyes.

A plane roared overhead, looming out of the block of red-brick flats, on its approach to the East-West runway at Kingsford-Smith. The sound it made was a shock.

I noticed Michael, our neighbour from across the back lane, packing something in the boot of his car. He stopped and looked up at the plane, as I did, and caught my eye.

“You heard what happened?” he said.

“Yes, unbelievable”, I said.

“They reckon that it was Muslim fundamentalists”, Michael said. There was a pause. “Don’t know much about Muslims, but I don’t trust the bastards.”

I was surprised at the hardness in his voice. I was just as surprised at the mention of religion. Following the great Australian tradition, it wasn’t something we ever talked about. In all our back lane chats over the previous 18 months, the topic of religion had entered the conversation only once, and only briefly, before making a rapid exit.

It was after my son had asked Michael’s boy, Connor, whether he wanted to go to Sunday School. We were leaning against his Tarago, in the way that men do when they talk with

each other, both facing out. I had asked Michael what he thought of Christianity. He had frowned and said nothing for about 10 seconds, and I thought that I had offended him, or that he was about to break into a tirade and was trying to hold himself back.

Finally he said, “Religion’s a personal thing. I think people’s faith is something for them”. And after a pause, “My mum sent me to the local Methodist Sunday School for a while, when I was 7. But I don’t know whether I want my kids to hear just one religious point of view. Maybe they need a Sunday School where they get taught values and the spiritual side of life, but without it being any one religion. I mean they all teach the same values deep down.”

“Well you could send him to the Ba’hai”, I suggested with just a hint of sarcasm. “That’s basically what they teach. Although I’m not sure their Sunday Schools are bursting at the seams.”

“Yeah, well that’s because they’re a bunch of weirdos”, said Michael, laughing.

I was about to follow up with a jovial “well what does that make you”, when Michael’s daughter Kelly called out from the back verandah. “I’m off now Dad. Back later tonight. Bye.”

The joviality left Michael’s face immediately. “Off where?” he shouted at the now vacant verandah.

But there was no answer, except the bang of the front door in the distance.

Michael attempted a half-smile. “Maybe I should’ve sent her to Sunday School.”

“She giving you trouble?” I asked.

“Not really. She’s a good kid. But I just don’t like who she’s hanging around with at the moment.”

And so the conversation moved into one of those ‘young people of today’ modes, and the question of Sunday School and religion was left behind.

Until today, when Michael had mentioned Islam, as we stood together on the morning of the tragedy, hands in pockets, kicking around the gravel in the back lane, trying to find something meaningful to say.

“So what do you know about Islam?” I asked him.

“Not much. They worship Allah, don’t they? They keep saying it’s a religion of peace, but look at the Middle-East. I mean, I’m not a racist, but what about those gang rapes in Bankstown? And my sister-in-law who works for the Department of Community Services says that they systematically rip off the welfare system. In her area they’re about 10% of the population, but they make 40% of the claims.”

I was surprised to say the least. My fairly easy-going tolerant neighbour was turning into a red-neck racist before my eyes. It was probably the wrong thing to do, but I decided to play devil’s advocate.

“But Michael, you once told that me you thought that all religions were much the same deep down.”

A troubled look clouded his face for a moment. “Did I? I don’t know. Maybe the Muslims I’m talking about aren’t true Muslims. You know, fanatics and fundamentalists... But you’re the religious one, what do you think?”

“Well, I don’t know a lot about Islam either. One obscure fact I know, which I find fascinating, is that the Qur’an denies that Jesus was ever crucified. Somehow he was whisked away before the deed was done.”

There was a longish pause. It was one thing for religion to make a brief foray into our back lane, but I wasn’t sure Michael

wanted it to hang around for too long.

But then he said, “Seriously? Is that what they say?”

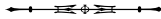
“I’m pretty sure it is. I couldn’t quote the Qur’an chapter and verse for you or anything, but I could check it out.”

Another silence.

“What else do they teach?”

“Well, I only know in general terms. The five pillars of Islam, believing that Allah is the only God, and that Muhammad is his prophet. That sort of stuff. I’ve always meant to read more about it, but haven’t gotten round to it.”

“Look, if you do, let me know what you find out. I wouldn’t mind reading something myself. But anyway, I’d better keep going.”



In the weeks that followed, as my reading on Islam turned into the idea of a short book about Islam, I kept thinking about Michael. It was really for the Michaels I knew that I wanted to write. I not only wanted to fill in the gaps in people’s basic knowledge about Islam; I wanted to explore the problems that Islam posed for the Practical Secularist. Because that’s what Michael was, although he never would have given it such a label.

Practical Secularists are close cousins to the much rarer Theoretical Secularists. A Theoretical Secularist is committed, at an intellectual level, to ‘secularism’. He believes that this world and this age (Latin, *saeculum*) are all that exists, and that the consolations and false dreams of religion should have no place in a modern society. In the stadium where the Theoretical Secularist plays, the roof is always closed. There is nothing and no-one upstairs. It’s a closed system. There is

not—and cannot be—any outside authority or ‘god’ to tell us what to do, or how to live together in society.

And so the Theoretical Secularist wants the church to stay well out of politics, and in fact out of life in general. If the deluded wish to continue to practise religion within the privacy of their homes, or within the hallowed walls of their antique buildings, that is their business. But believers must not be allowed to impose their morality on the rest of us. They should keep their superstitions to themselves. And if there comes a point where these religious beliefs transgress the laws and values that we as a secular society have come to hold dear, then the believers must adapt or suffer the consequences. The Theoretical Secularist tolerates religion, as one might tolerate people who believe they were abducted by aliens. “I regard religion as a disease born of fear and as a source of untold misery to the human race”, wrote Bertrand Russell, one of the grand-daddies of modern Theoretical Secularism.

Michael would never say such a thing. It would be rude, and a little too hard-edged for his taste. He is not at all ‘religious’ himself, but he would not criticise someone who was. He may even have a vague sense of ‘spirituality’ in his quieter moments, and wonder whether there is indeed some ‘god’ or ‘spiritual force’ that animates the universe.

Yet for all practical purposes, Michael is still a secularist (a ‘Practical Secularist’). The world he lives in is a secular, godless world. Despite superficial differences, all religions are much the same, and probably have a core of truth in them somewhere (something to do with peace and love and being kind to one another). They are something of an embarrassment in the modern world, a throwback to a simpler age. They belong in private where they cannot do too much harm.

But now some people claiming to act in the name of their religion had done a great deal of harm. Someone had forgotten to tell them that religion was a private matter, and shouldn't be allowed in the public arena.

It seemed to me that in the face of a militant Islam, the idea that religion is fundamentally private and not political, and that religions are all much the same, simply could not continue to stand. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more worried I became that unless our society could find a better basis on which to build than Practical (or Theoretical) Secularism, we were in big trouble.

With these thoughts in my head, I ran into Michael again one afternoon, as our boys rode their scooters in the lane.

"Listen, Michael, I've got an unusual request to make."

"Sure, what is it?"

"I've been doing a fair bit of reading about Islam, and I've decided to write something about it. And in fact, the reader that I'm aiming at is someone exactly like you."

"Not sure what you mean."

"Someone who isn't really religious, who doesn't know much about Islam, is disturbed about recent events, and is having a bit of a post-September 11 think about religion."

"Well, yes, I guess that's me."

"So my request is: Will you help me write the book? I'd like to show you what I'm writing as I go, and get your reactions and comments. I'd show you a draft of some stuff, and we could chat about it. It would help me enormously, and I thought you might find it interesting too."

Michael looked a little stunned. But with a half-smile he said, "Yeah, that might be good. I wouldn't mind that. But do I get half the royalties?"

“Sure”, I said. “I’ll also put your name on the cover, and send a copy to the local Al-Qaeda network.”

Michael laughed, and Connor, right on cue, came careering out of the carport and slammed into his leg. Michael howled first in shock, and then in exaggerated mock pain. He teetered stiffly like a tree, and fell over.