17th September 2007 | Draft

Begetting

challenges and responsibilities of overpopulation

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This overview has been produced partially in support of the proposed
Universal Declaration of Responsibilities of Human Intercourse (2007).

Introduction

The world is currently tortured by a wide range of problems. Most have been profiled in the *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*. This deliberately avoids positioning any single problem as the ultimate cause of the other major problems. Traditionally religions have however focused on a limited set of problematic behaviours, values and attitudes -- possibly termed sins -- as generative of the plethora of social problems.

There is however a case for exploring the extent to which a significant proportion of the problems facing the world is the result of a certain attitude promoted by religions themselves. What follows is not intended as a criticism of religion or spirituality -- although a number of new studies of this matter have recently been published (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 2006; Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: how religion poisons everything*, 2007). The focus is rather on the attitude promoted by religion to the unconstrained increase in the human population -- and its fairly direct exacerbation of many major problems. Deliberate efforts by organized religion to associate spiritual aspiration with this agenda is part of the problem.

Irresponsible avoidance of the overpopulation challenge

Of particular interest in this respect is the manner in which the very question of overpopulation has been very effectively designed off the international debating table in relation to feasible action. Even though the Earth's population doubled from three billion to six billion people between 1960 and 1999, the last United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), at which such matters could be directly addressed, was in Cairo in 1994. This was however followed by a modest "Cairo+5" review conference in 1999 (The Hague Forum) -- also known as ICPD+5 [more]. The "ICPD+10" anniversary confirms the trend towards periodic production of review documents -- avoiding any conference.

A significant document of the time is the *Declaration on the Decrease of Fertility in the World* (27 February 1998) by the Pontifical Council for the Family had as its preamble:

> The truth about current demographic trends cannot be denied any longer. It is increasingly evident and ever more widely acknowledged that the world is engaged in a marked demographic decline, which started around the year 1968. I**n 51 countries, fertility is already below replacement level. The number of deaths per year is even higher than the number of births in 15 of these countries.** It is urgent to increase the general knowledge of these trends. A true solidarity must be forged without delay, boldly facing the future and mindful of the Declaration of Human Rights whose 50th anniversary is commemorated this year.

The quarrelsome dynamics of the Cairo conference, strongly influenced by religious agendas, ensured that reproductive liberty was affirmed as a human right (William McGurn, *The Population Problem: the Pope undermines the case against population control by accepting leftist economic assumptions*, *National Review*, Sept 1994). The debate successfully shifted development efforts from population programmes to women's reproductive health. As a consequence, the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002) agreed on many proposals to achieve sustainable economic growth but without a single mention of the challenge of sustainable population levels.

In a major review of future security threats (Michael E. Brown (Ed), *Grave New World: Security Challenges in the Twenty-First Century*, Georgetown University Press, 2003) issues of population are presented under the technical title of "*Demographic Developments and Security*", where it is only concluded that "*migration, not fertility or mortality, is the factor most likely to exacerbate security concerns*". Currently, however, the key to the challenging issue of carbon emissions (and their consequence for climate change) -- presumably of no security significance -- is being reframed as primarily the responsibility of the countries with the lasgest, fastest growing populations, namely India and China. However it is those countries with far smaller populations which have so successfully lobbied to preclude reasoned discussion of population issues.

The population issue has been successfully confused with the abortion issue to ensure the total opposition of the "pro-life" movement -- whose abhorence of this form of "murder" is curiously dissociated from willingness to support the killing of others, especially if they can be framed as a threat to a way of life. The issue has been further successfully confused with opposition to family planning as an unnatural constraint on the natural propagation of the species -- and a God-given right. Ironically it might be argued that this consensus amongst mutually antagonistic religions is one of the very few instances of successful inter-faith dialogue with practical consequences -- however aberrant the result may be considered (cf *Emergence of a Global Misleadership Council: misleading as vital to governance of the future?* 2007).

How is it that, lacking any trace of humility, each religion positions itself on the moral high ground -- above any reasonable moral reproach -- and yet perceives other religions to be misguided, problematic or "sinful" in the extreme? Like any commercial enterprise, each promotes itself as having a monopoly of spirituality and questions the merits of competing products.

Most curiously is that any arguments for "population reduction" have been successfully confused with various "New World Order" conspiracy theories -- such as *The Club of Rome and Population Reduction* (2007), *Ruppert Endorses 4 Billion World Population Reduction?*, *Top Scientist Advocates Mass Culling 90% Of Human Population* (2006), *Depopulation of a Planet: thinning out the useless eaters* (1995), *The Depopulation Bomb* (2007), *Population Control is Evil!*.

Even more curiously is the avoidance of the overpopulation issue by environmentalists, as noted by Madeleine Bunting (*Greens need to grasp the nettle: aren't there just too many people?* *Guardian*, 10 September 2007):

> It's the one issue no environmentalist organisation wants to talk about. Population. Thirty years ago, when international concern first began to mobilise about the planet's future, it was the pre-eminent question, but now you're hard put to get a straight answer. Does the UK need population management? Does the world need it?
>
> This is one of those issues that is regarded by many privately as common sense but rarely gets a public airing. Of the environmental organisations I managed to contact, all acknowledged that it was frequently brought up by the public in meetings and letters. Yet all said they did not campaign on the subject and had no position on it....
>
> It's not surprising that environmental organisations fight shy of getting into this subject. It embroils them in a host of deeply emotive and difficult debates.... Population management is just as emotive. People quickly bristle at the idea of any government telling them how many children they can have.

The concern in what follows is with the complete lack of social responsibility associated with these self-righteous attitudes -- and the indifference to the suffering and death they directly engender through the exacerbation of problems that lead inexorably to such suffering and death.

Propagation of children as an inalienable individual right -- reproductive rights

Of particular interest is the manner in which propagation of children is promoted as an inalienable individual right -- irrespective of the capacity of the individual, the family, the community, the nation or the world to care for those children -- or for those they in turn engender.

Such an argument against what has been termed "**reproductive rights**" is countered by emphasizing:

- that the individual, the family, the community, the nation or **the world should organize itself** so as to provide such care -- irrespective of whether any are prepared to do so, or would do so if they could
- that the innovative capacity of the world is such that **resources could be made available** to provide such care -- in the near futre -- irrespective of whether people or collectivities are prepared to sacrifice other priorities to this end
- that, from a religious perspective, collective failure to respond to any resulting global disaster will trigger some form of **prophesied remedial divine intervention** that is desirable beyond the suffering necessary to evoke it -- a suffering that is perceived as "worth the price"

Any corresponding notion of "**reproductive obligations**" or "**reproductive responsibilities**" is readily framed as the obligation or

responsibility to reproduce -- **not** the obligation to act responsibly with regard to the possibility of reproduction and its consequences.

This is consistent with the enthusiasm with which the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is promoted as a standard by the United Nations -- matched by the failure of various modest (but fruitless) efforts to advocate and articulate a corresponding *Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities* (cf InterAction Council, *Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities*, 1997) [more | more]. The UN might be said to have responded defensively by approving a *Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (1999).

Subsequently, in a statement by the Consultative Council of Jewish Organisations (*Statement on the Codification of Human Duties and Responsibilities* to the 54th Session of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, 2002) it was argued that:

> To create a declaration of human responsibilities to stand alongside the UDHR could weaken the Universal Declaration [on Human Rights] since it would necessarily by implication brand the Universal Declaration as incomplete and unable to stand by itself.

It might be argued that, however unfortunately, it has been fully demonstrated by the level of individual and collective irresponsibility over past decades that the Declaration is indeed unable to stand by itself. It is in fact highly irresponsible to deny that on the assumption that some may be persuaded to act responsibly in respecting its provisions. Such a position is typical of the naive attitude of each religion to its own adequacy as a response to the needs of a complex world -- whose problems, it is assumed, would be resolved if only everyone were to subscribe to its own wise injunctions.

Cultivating a mannered response to a fundamental issue

UNESCO has also avoided further consideration of the issue by focusing on its less contentious *Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations* (12 November 1997) and its *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights* (19 October 2005) -- "taking into account the responsibility of the present generation towards future generations."

These skillfully avoid any mention of the challenge of overpopulation, despite stressing the need to address the problems to which it gives rise (as argued below). Almost nothing is said about responsibility, and yet the declarations purport to be indications of global ethical responsibility. Indeed UNESCO does have a Global Ethics Observatory, which contrives to frame ethics in carefully selected areas in diffident, sanitized terms that might be considered a mannered approach to international etiquette reminiscent of an era past. This timidly avoids any direct reference to responsibilities or to challenging behaviour in which the ill-mannered might possibly engage -- then calling for a response. It must necessarily avoid offence to any member state or approved interest group and is therefore profoundly inoffensive.

These are the ethics of the "lowest common denominator" rather than, in mathematical terms, those of the "highest common multiple" -- as notably expressed in the final declaration of the Citizens' European Congress (Liège, 2001) *Another Europe for Another Globalisation* :

> Finally, we back the alliances between European social movements and citizens' associations which aims to prevent the process of European integration from reducing social rights to their lowest common denominator. We demand on the contrary that the aim be a Europe of social rights organised around the highest common multiple.

This approach has been described by Noel Wilson (*Educational Standards and the Problem of Error*, *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 6, 10, 1998) in the following terms:

> The lowest common factor of agreement is replaced by the highest common multiple of difference. The subject of assessment is no longer reduced to an object by the limiting reductionism of a single number, but is expanded by the hopefully helpful feedback of diverse and stimulating and expansive response.

The UNESCO approach contrasts completely with the initiative of the Human Values Project of the Union of International Associations within the framework of the online *Encylopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*. This identified thousands of "constructive" or "destructive" values and related them to the thousands of recognized problems and strategies -- whether unpleasant or not (see overview; detailed commentary). Problems emerge when there is value conflict -- whether or not the values are distinguished within a global ethical framework of acceptable values.

It would seem that "global ethics" has become a vast exercise in mannerly behaviour to which it is expected that those of good taste will subscribe -- especially in their more responsible years. Such a critique might be applied to other international initiatives like sustainable development. As in polite society, issues of religion --- and other unpleasant matters of conscience and human passion -- are to be avoided whatever their unmentionable consequences in practice. This attitude typically sustained the slave owning practices of cultures of centuries past in which religions were so complicit.

Despite arguments to the contrary, an indication of the recognized inadequacy of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is evident in the UN's promulgation of a *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1990). This focuses the argument regarding the lack of recognition of any sense of responsibility and obligation required of those to whom rights are accorded. Conventions on "rights" alone could be caricatured as "Dr Spock" exercises in the unconstrained promotion of permissiveness -- following recognition that "the U.S. was paying the price of two generations that followed the Dr. Spock baby plan of instant gratification of needs." There are as yet unrecognized contraints on the capacity to "have one's cake and eat it too".

The situation has been further confused by debate setting the reproductive rights of women against the reproductive responsibilities of men, and by the issues of gender choice in those cultures favouring male progeny.

The challenge of overpopulation is however a problem that is very patient -- as patient as that of the problem of climate change which it engenders. As with the classical tale of the frog in gradually heated water -- that fails to jump out in time -- recognition of the fatal consequences need never trigger any response before the frog is finally cooked.

Problems arising more or less directly from overpopulation

Examples of interconnected problems ensuring suffering and death include:

- **Starvation resulting from lack of food**: The starvation of millions is a matter of daily record. Pathetic statements are made that food resources are available, although it is only too evident that such resources are not delivered where they are needed. Religions blame others for this failure.

- **Shortage of water**: Again this is a matter of daily record. Many walk for hours to replenish necessary supplies. Shortage of water is predicted to be a major future provocation for violence. Religions blame others for this situation.

- **Illness resulting from lack of health care**: The poor health conditions of millions, and the death of children, is a matter of daily record. Again it is argued that health care (including vital medication) is potentially available. Again it is only too evident that such services are only made available in a tokenistic manner. Religions blame others for this situation -- notably despite the deaths of millions directly resulting from their resistance to use of contraceptives in Africa.

- **Environmental degradation**: Increasing numbers are progressively degrading the environment in a manner that is only too evident -- whether in terms of waste disposal (notably marine pollution), construction in "green zones", forest "clearing", extinction of species, pollution (air, water, noise, etc). Religions blame others for this situation.

- **Shortage of arable land**: Millions are unable to obtain land on which to grow food for their daily need. Religions blame others for this situation.

- **Overcrowded settlements and slums**: Notably due to lack of land, millions aggregate in settlements that are monuments to insalubrity and degrading living conditions. Religions blame others for this situation.

- **Global warming**: As a result of increasing impacts of human activity, notably in the form of fuel combustion, flooding is experienced and sea levels are rising. Religions blame others for this situation.

- **Overexploitation of non-renewable resources**: This phenomenon has been widely documented, notably with respect to depletion of energy resources and groundwater reserves. Religions blame others for this situation.

- **Inequality of access to resources**: Whilst a limited proportion of the population live lives unaffected by accumulating problems, millions have increasingly limited possibility of access to resources -- even the minimum resources for subsistence. Religions blame others for this situation.

- **Unemployment**: Millions have no opportunity of earning a living and feeding their families. Religions blame others for this situation.

- **Ignorance**: Millions live lives that offer them no opportunity to educate their children to even a minimum standard. Religions blame others for this situation.

- **Injustice**: In a world of increasing inequality and ignorance, millions suffer from a variety of forms of injustice. Religions blame others for this situation.

- **Violence**: In a world of increasing injustice, inequality and ignorance, violence proliferates within the family, in the streets, between communities and between nations -- notably over matters of territory and resources. Religions blame others for this situation -- whilst actively or tacitly promoting crusades, jihads, blessing of weaponry by military chaplains -- *Gott Mit Uns*.

Advocates of particular religions readily obscure their responsibility for any such matters by embedding their opposition in discussion on the politics of economic development -- whose inequalities and injustices are indeed partially a consequence of some of the above. With fewer people these challenges would however be easier to resolve. With more they become more difficult. It is however strategically easier to focus on consequential issues rather than on the underlying causes of those issues for which religions have a responsibility.

It might be asked whether there is a fundamentally hypocritical contradiction between the advocacy of unconstrained procreation on the part of followers by priests that in some religions are required to commit to celibacy. This commitment is variously seen as fundamental to the avoidance of suffering and to enhancement of spiritual development. This then implies a cynical lack of consideration for the spiritual development of their followers to whom they minister as exemplars.

Religions have developed considerable skill in blaming others for difficulties for which they themselves have some responsibility. These strategic positioning games are of trivial significance in comparison with the suffering sustained by the underlying negligence -- in which

religions are complicit.

How directly or indirectly dependent the above causes of suffering are on religion is a matter that merits detailed analysis. This could benefit from insights from technical studies of the small world hypothesis, root cause analysis, and dependency graphing. In the light of the injunction common to the Abrahamic religions, to "Go Forth and Multiply" (*Genesis 1:28*), it might even be asked whether the interpretation of "multiply" should not be more correctly understood in the qualitative terms of the "highest common multiple" (noted above) rather than in the quantitative terms of which the world has become an unfortunate victim (cf *"Be Fruitful and Multiply": the most tragic translation error?* 1995).

Illusory promotion of technical solutions -- whether available or to come

In this context, political and religious leaders point to the potential of technical solutions -- engendered by the continuing "inventiveness of the human spirit" -- to alleviate the above conditions in the near future. These technical "fixes" take three main forms:

- **better delivery systems**: here reliance is placed on the capacity to deliver resources and remedial skills. This argument is fundamentally flawed as is evident from the failure of such delivery mechanisms through a series of UN "development decades" (a concept now notably abandoned). Any improvements made to the capacity of such systems have been rapidly overwhelmed by the rising population placing extra loads on the systems
- **better organization**: here reliance is placed on improvements to the management of local and regional areas, notably when faced with disaster. This argument is fundamentally flawed as is evident in recent extreme disaster recovery situations: the effects of the tsunami in the Bengal Sea on coastal areas and the condition of New Orleans long after the Katrina hurricane. Arguably the latter is an indication of the flawed logic so evident in the "reconstruction" of Baghdad.
- **technical innovation**: here reliance is placed on innovations in energy systems (fusion, hydrogen, renewable, etc), desalination, nanotechnology, medication, etc. However, as with "better delivery systems", it is only too evident that each such improvement raises issues of access to such facilities (eg HIV medication) and their unforeseen side effects (as with the introduction of species). [Hope is notably placed on such innovation because it avoids the messy challenge of complex psychosocial problems that technicians are only able to "address" with more destructive weaponry.]

Evidence is also presented for the declining birth rate in many industrialized. Ironically this is seen as a justification for subsidizing couples to produce children -- in countries that are endeavouring to prevent immigration from impoverished parts of the world (like Australia, Germany and Spain).

A faith-based world culture in denial?

There are numerous studies of the collapse of empires and cultures over recorded history. Most striking in recent times is that of Jared Diamond (*Collapse: how societies choose to fail or succeed*, 2005). In the case of the Roman Empire, one such study argues that it was the failure of the capacity to move financial resources around the empire that was the catalyst for collapse. As with financial resources today, these may be understood as tokens of confidence. By analogy, discussion of the "clash of civilizations" might be then understood as an inability to communicate values around a global civilization, despite telecommunication and transportation facilities.

Diamond raises the question as to whether modern global civilization is cultivating the conditions for some such collapse. The faith-based commitment to intervention in Iraq in response to a faith-based act of terrorism is indicative of such a process. The inability of both electorates and leadership -- after that debacle -- to question faith-based commitment to indiscriminate violence in a timely manner suggests that this process will continue to escalate unchecked.

Religions avoid any such recognition -- except to the extent that they enthusiastically anticipate increasing pressures towards the prophesied end-times scenarios, namely the eschatological ideas promoted by the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). There is a curious parallel between the anticipation of such end-times collective rapture -- consequent upon what amounts to collective planetary suicide -- and the mindset of suicide bombers sustained by their own belief in a form of rapture. Both ensure a degree of terror in others. The parallel would be denied. Which might be considered the grosser act of terrorism?

An example of such denial, which challenges the documented concerns regarding such pressure, is that E. Calvin Beisner (*Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate*, 1997) -- as more recently with climate change. On the other hand, for some faiths, the suffering of particular lives in the present time can be conveniently framed to their followers as an illusion in anticipation of better lives to come.

It is in this sense that religions, whether consciously or unconsciously, use their injunctions to increase the population as a device to increase the pressure in a "pressure cooker" -- in anticipation of the welcome day when it will burst. Again there is total denial of any such framing of the situation -- irrespective of any evidence to the contrary.

> "If we are honest there is only one root cause of the disaster facing the planet, and that is the appalling rate at which our human species has increased its population in recent centuries.... Who is to blame for the crisis we face?
> First and foremost, I accuse the religious leaders of the world. They have fed mankind with the dangerous myth that humanity is somehow above nature and that it is our god-given right to hold dominion over the Earth and subdue it. In many cases, they have actively encouraged over-population and have gone out of their way to prevent family-planning schemes. They are a disgrace.
> Secondly, I accuse political leaders, almost all of whom follow a policy of national growth, regardless of the consequences.... But we are not designed as a high-quantity species. We are a high-quality species, and all our social thinking should be directed to this thought" Desmond Morris

Religious responsibility -- relevance of a gun control metaphor?

To avert suffering, death and cultural collapse, is there not a case for religions to qualify their currently unconditional approval of unchecked human propagation?

There is a curiously perverse analogy to the gun control debate in the USA -- whose regime is so resistant to any form of family planning and any form of gun control, and so influential in ensuring that neither matter is meaningfully debated internationally.

As with the right to reproduce, it is argued that every citizen has an inalienable right to bear arms -- a right enshrined in the Second Amendment to the US Constitution but curiously absent from efforts to spread the values of democracy around the world (cf *Arming Civil Society Worldwide: getting democracy to work in the emergent American Empire?* 2003). The degree to which a person is competent in the use of arms -- and whether this is a criterion for their possession -- is a matter of vigorous debate which has not curtailed their proliferation. Risks associated with their inappropriate use, including "accidents" (even on a large scale), are rejected as significant arguments for curtailing their proliferation and use. Responsibility for the consequences of their inappropriate use is rejected by those promoting the right to bear arms and by those supplying those arms.

Curiously, from a Freudian perspective, a gun and a penis are of closely related significance, especially for a man. This is reflected in slang references to "shooting off". Within such a framework, one dimension of the resistance to any curtailment of the right of a man to use his penis for the purposes of propagation is clear. In the USA, for example, religions are for the most part as complicit in unrestrained access to small arms (and their proliferation) as they are in unrestrained reproduction (and the proliferation of the human species).

The missing element in the case of engendering children is some indication to society as to whether there is understanding of the longer-term responsibility and the necessary resources to care for them. Most other activities (including acquisition of small arms in many countries) require a licence and some indication of responsibility. In the case of the right to drive a vehicle, a licence is typically only acquired after testing for competence (and in some countries the capacity to repair the vehicle). The licence may be revoked when lack of such competence is evident. This is only exceptionally the case with respect to child bearing and childrearing. It is assumed that, if resources are lacking, society will in some way provide such care.

Religions support this view but only exhibit token willingness to provide such care -- typically restricted, if available, to those of their faith. Those of other faiths, or without any designated faith, are notably left to fend for themselves. Religions freely call upon others to provide such care -- when they exhibit any concern for the suffering their policy engenders. This attitude, whether on the part of the prospective parents or their religion may be understood as a form of conscious or unconscious blackmail. It is a means of triggering the conscience of the collective in support of an essentially irresponsible selfish view.

More generally, a more appropriate attitude, and a more sustainable one (to employ that resource-sensitive framework), is **only to recommend behaviour when responsibility for its consequences has been assured**. A striking example in this respect has been the manner in which enthusiastic advocates of nuclear power have framed their case -- completing neglecting decommissioning costs, later to be made a charge of society and the taxpayer.

Environmentalists have made a strong case for preparing for unforeseen consequences -- the precautionary principle. No such thinking has been advocated by religions in relation to the proliferation of humans on the planet. It might even be argued that the reverse applies. Cynically it might be said that just as the impoverished are obliged to produce children as a resource, knowing that some may die, so religions have bought into a similar logic in seeking proliferation as a safeguard against disasters resulting from the strain on resources.

> **Understanding of Responsibility in the Business World -- as an Example to Religions?**
> Note in the Report of the Special Advisor to the Secretary General
> on the Global Compact of the United Nations:
> *On Corporate Responsibility for Human Rights* (2006)
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> The fact that there remains a 'metaphysical' guilt, which lies beyond criminal, political, or moral guilt, is discussed by Karl Jaspers in *Die Schuldfrage* (Heidelberg: 1949). Jaspers sees the existence of a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge.
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> > *If I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty. If I was present at the murder of others without risking my life to prevent it, I feel guilty in a way not adequately conceivable either legally, politically or morally.... jurisdiction rests with God alone* (p. 63).
>
> On a somewhat lower scale, but nonetheless 'guilt' is what human rights advocates define as 'silent complicity' -- that is, the failure by a company to raise the question of systematic or continuous human rights violations in its interactions.
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> **Irresponsibility of the Business World -- Typical of Religions?**
> *Global Compact Fails to Stop Corporate Human Rights Violations* (2007)
> *NGOs Criticize "Blue Washing" by the Global Compact* (2007)

Assessing the responsibility of religions for suffering and death

Curiously responsibility for death associated with problems, such as those cited above, is presented in terms of proximate causes. These are carefully disassociated from the position taken by religions in ensuring that the population continues to grow unchecked -- thus exacerbating those problems and guaranteeing further deaths. There is little consideration of non-fatal suffering (cf *Varieties of Terrorism: extended to the experience of the terrorized*, 2004). The efforts of the International Society for Panetics to measure this (using

the *dukkha* as the measure of a unit of suffering) are exceptional and hardly known (see also scientific algonomy).

Religions have thus been able to position themselves strategically as emblematic of the struggle against suffering and unnecessary death -- whilst at the same time effectively doing more than any other sector of society to ensure a maximum amount of suffering and unnecessary death.

Religions have been successfully able to claim total innocence in this respect -- both to other sectors of society and to their own followers. Whilst promoting the need for their followers to recognize their individual sins, they have successfully rendered nonsensical any need for collective self-criticism. It is a fact that many of the bloody conflicts raging around the world are in some measure associated with religion -- or receive their inspiration from it. This has also been true in centuries past. Religions claim innocence in this respect -- or glory self-righteously in their capacity to sustain crusades and jihads under a doctrine of "just war".

Religions continue to campaign for recognition of their essential role with respect to secular affairs. This is evident in debate relating to the proposed European Constitution -- and by their documented role with respect to the United Nations in the report by the international group Religion Counts (*Religion and Public Policy at the UN*, 2002), whose cover bears the following quotation by Kofi Annan as Secretary-General:

> The politics of nations... can never ignore the transcendent, spiritual dimension of human experience.

It is appropriate to ask whether organized religion can indeed "count" (rather than exemplify innumeracy) and to what degree such appeals to the highest spiritual values, to disguise a fatal overpopulation agenda, represent the height of hypocritical perversity -- on whose disastrous final outcome religion is indeed "counting".

In contrast, as Kofi Annan's statement correctly implies, "spirituality counts" -- notably in its capacity to count the numbers who suffer as a consequence of the indifference of religion in practice. However the question remains as to the quality of spirituality of the "men of faith" -- counting on religion for their mandate -- who have caused such suffering in Iraq, whether in their leadership of the Coalition of the Willing (in questionable fulfillment of UN Security Council resolutions) or in opposing that occupation thereafter.

In the case of the Christian religion, there is a potentially highly perverse etymological relationship between the Pope as "Pontiff" of Rome (inheriting the pre-Christian pagan title of Pontifex Maximus) and "Pontius" Pilate as the Roman governor of Judea. The latter figures in the Creed as "suffered under Pontius Pilate". He has long been recognized as a symbol of ambivalence who found no fault with Jesus as defendant and washed his hands of the affair by referring it back to the Jewish mob -- but who signed the final death warrant (*Pontius Pilate: Man behind the myth*, *BBC*, 13 April, 2001).

Given the complicity of Christianity, and notably Catholicism, in the death and suffering of hundreds of millions of individuals down the centuries (as argued above), it might be asked whether Pontius Pilate was not effectively the first Roman Pope in a continuing pattern of ambivalence to the suffering of which Jesus is held to be the alleviation. **To what extent, it might be asked, do religions continue to sign the final death warrant of the millions who will continue to die as a result of their failure to respond to the suffering they claim to address?** Does unctuous hand-ringing at the unwillingness of others to act ensure absolution for what may be considered by history as crimes against humanity?

Those indicted for crimes against humanity on the largest scale have not necessarily personally harmed anyone; it is their incitement of others, their official endorsement, and their failure to use their powers otherwise, that have been the measure of their complicity.

Given the activities of the Inquisition, the 4-century procrastination over the Galileo affair, the complicity in the slave trade, and the systematic cover up of sex abuse by priests, how do religions apologize for their failings and to whom do they confess their collective sins of omission and commission -- for which they are held to account over centuries by other religions? Given the misplaced certitudes expressed regarding these and other issues at the time, is there any case for re-examining the current complicity of religions in the death of millions past -- and of those to come?

Given the current complicity of religions in the early death of children -- that a community cannot or will not support and whose birth has been knowingly and irresponsibly facilitated by religion -- how will history compare the religions of today with the pagan religons of the past which engaged in deliberate human sacrifice on a grand scale? Will the present process be seen as tearing out the beating hearts of people at the top of a pyramid of dogma -- rather than a pyramid of stone?

How does a religion continue to claim moral superiority when obliged by courts to settle claims of $2 billion, in the USA alone, for a systematic pattern of sexual abuse by its clergy? In such problematic circumstances should the religions, in full belief in their innocence, welcome a class action suit before the international Permanent Peoples' Tribunal (PPT) -- if no other international court is competent -- in order to "clear their name" of any possible complicity in larger crimes against humanity?

World population clocks: Huntington | Levine | Stevenson | PRB | Princeton | US Census

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