Root Irresponsibility for Major World Problems
the unexamined role of Abrahamic faiths in sustaining unrestrained population growth

Introduction

A document with the above title calls for a number of preliminary comments:

- many problems confronted by policy-makers would clearly be of considerably less catastrophic implication if the global population was:
  - at a much lower level
  - increasing at a much lower rate
- the standard response is that:
  - humanity has the ingenuity to respond to its major policy challenges
  - resources are, in principle, more than sufficient -- provided they are appropriately distributed
- unfortunately there is considerable evidence over many decades that in practice
  - institutions of global scope are not capable of mobilizing, focusing or implementing any consensus policy for effective (rather than tokenistic) redistribution of resources
  - the willingness to reduce any disparity in resource dissemination is very low, notably in the lifestyles of those associated with such institutions, and in any by which they are replaced
- considerable reliance is placed on arguments that procreation:
  - is effectively a fundamental right of individuals in secular society
  - is specifically encouraged by scriptural authority (eg "go forth and multiply", Genesis 1:22)
  - is a natural manifestation of "human nature" over which it is not to be expected that credible policy constraints can be exerted, even if desirable
- politically it is argued that:
  - any constraints on procreation are political suicide for those considering or recommending them; efforts to do so have been extremely unpopular and have encouraged processes to subvert them (China's "one child policy")
the issue can be avoided by focusing on more immediate problems (irrespective of whether they continue to be aggravated by the population issue)
- the issue is of longer term (rather than shorter term) significance and may therefore be left to the responsibility of subsequent political authorities
- efforts to encourage family planning on an individual level are politically more viable and are satisfactory where they are acceptable
- economically and politically it is argued that:
  - the working population, notably required to finance social security and pension schemes for the elderly, is in decline
  - there is an increasing shortage of workers for essential functions in society
  - an increasing population is vital to sustain consumption levels on which healthy economic growth (and government fiscal income) is dependent
  - national populations functioning below the "replacement level" constitute a major threat to the future of national culture and identity
  - any worldwide efforts to restrain population growth, in the light of whatever rationalization, are seen as a covert means for ensuring the political or economic advantage of one nation or ethnic group over another -- to which "competitive breeding" is typically seen as a legitimate means of ensuring that faith-based values are passed on through the progeny

Within this context, however, it is important to recognize the manner in which:
- scientific analysis of population-related issues and policies is inhibited and restricted (except with respect to their secondary consequences: immigration, etc)
- discussion of policy options of population-related issues is inhibited and restricted (except with respect to their secondary consequences: climate change, etc)
- analyses and discussion of the previous two points is itself inhibited and restricted
- to the extent that such discussion takes place, it is characterized by processes of argument that could be challenged in the light of disciplines and standards of critical thinking (notably tendencies to shift the basis of argument in a manner which would otherwise be described as devious). Some examples notably focus on overpopulation (George H Hanford, How To Save the World: Through Critical Thinking, Paper presented at the Annual International Conference on Critical Thinking and Educational Reform (13th, Rohner Park, CA, August 1-4, 1993); Barry Richmond, Systems thinking: critical thinking skills for the 1990s and beyond, 1993; Richard W Paul, Critical Thinking: what every person needs to survive in a rapidly changing world, 1990). Of interest in how such skills are reframed in a faith-based context is the work of the Thinking Catholic Strategic Center (Thinking Catholic Strategic Center for the return to Critical Thinking). Also of interest is the degree to which the academic community, notably in the USA, perceives a need to defend the right to critical thinking and dissent in relation to faith-based issues (see National Project to Defend Dissent and Critical Thinking in Academia).

To the extent that the matter is discussed, however, it is argued that:
- the set of problems by which humanity is confronted is so complex that it is methodologically inappropriate to seek to identify causative factors, especially root causative factors
- any cause-effect analysis seeking to isolate causes susceptible of strategic intervention is itself inappropriate as a methodology

This leads to a situation in which:
- the increasing challenges of society are accepted fatalistically as a fact of life, whatever the predictable outcome
- considerable attention is given to highlighting isolated examples of fruitful small-scale initiative as instances of hope, despite the manner in which hope-mongering is used to obscure the rate at which the scale of problems is increasing and the factors inhibiting replication of such initiatives on a larger scale
- the tendency to frame the challenge for humanity simplistically, avoiding any effective use whatsoever of the analytical tools considered essential to the strategic deployment and management of technical projects that frequently contribute to the exacerbation of the current condition, ignore its seriousness, or exploit the policy hubris associated with it

Given the doctrinal position of the Abrahamic faiths, in practice, with regard to population issues, the questions raised in what follows are to what extent these religions are specifically responsible for:
- inhibiting effective discussion of these issues
- inhibiting formulation of appropriate and effective strategic responses
- effectively increasing the degree of suffering in the world under conditions where redistribution of resources has proven in practice to be unrealistic in the short term
- effectively increasing ensuring the death of people, possibly of other faiths, as a consequence of failure to address these issues

The purpose of this document is to focus attention on these issues and the questions they raise, and to clarify the responsibility of the Abrahamic faiths in this matter, if any. If, as such faiths may claim, they have no responsibility in the matter, then they should neither fear the raising of such questions nor any analysis that might justify their perspective.

This argument may appear to be inappropriate:
- in raising issues associated with profound beliefs and centuries-old traditions that deserve every respect
- in framing the question in terms of responsibility and therefore culpability
- in being inadequately substantiated (irrespective of any inhibition of relevant analysis)
- in evoking the potential significance of a founding myth common to the Abrahamic faith (the Binding of Isaac), seemingly irrelevant to any analytically substantiated policy argument (despite the increasing role of faith-based governance)
Nevertheless, however, the case would appear to merit careful consideration, given:

- the gravity of the situation in which humanity finds itself
- the commitment, or complicity, of the Abrahamic faiths in the early provocation of "end-times" scenarios through which it is believed that the difficulties of humanity will be resolved by divine intervention

It should be stressed, as noted above, that the following argument is formulated in the light of work (partly managed by the author) over 30 years in profiling thousands of problems, remedial strategies and human values (and their many interdependencies) as recognized by many international constituencies of every belief system. This included appreciative recognition of the variety of understanding of human and spiritual development associated with those belief systems. The material associated with the resulting Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential is maintained in archival form for open web access -- with associated tools for visual exploration of independencies. The work has been substantially funded by the European Commission (Ecolynx - Information Context for Biodiversity Conservation, 1997-2000) and positively assessed for further funding by the World Bank (Interactive Conceptual Environmental Planning Tool for Developing Countries, 1998-1999).

Table: Assessment of faith-based death warrants effectively authorized

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Consequence</th>
<th>Aggravated directly by increasing population?</th>
<th>Suffering and death reduced with fewer people?</th>
<th>Primary opponents of population restraint?</th>
<th>Faith-engendered suffering (megadukkhas per year)</th>
<th>Associated &quot;mortality&quot; (per year)</th>
<th>Faith-based death warrants effectively authorized (per day)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary shortages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>hunger (850 mill.), malnutrition, starvation, death</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>15 mill. (children)</td>
<td>24,000 [1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>safe drinking water, thirst, crop failure, disease</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>5.3 mill. [2]</td>
<td>14,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care, sanitation</td>
<td>disease, death</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter, homelessness</td>
<td>exposure, disease, death</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Secondary&quot; shortages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land (agriculture)</td>
<td>inability to grow food</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land (infrastructure)</td>
<td>inability to build shelter</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>inability to purchase essential goods</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-renewable resources (energy)</td>
<td>wood burning (deforestation), inaccessibility of essential utilities</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-renewable resources (materials)</td>
<td>rising cost of goods, inaccessibility of essential utilities</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Tertiary&quot; problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td>pressure on facilities</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence (faith-based)</td>
<td>suffering, death</td>
<td>consequllarily</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence (resource-based)</td>
<td>suffering, death</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment (pollution)</td>
<td>global warming, disease, flooding</td>
<td>consequllarily</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment (degradation)</td>
<td>extinction of species</td>
<td>consequllarily</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
<td>disease, death</td>
<td>consequllarily</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination, injustice</td>
<td>suffering, violence</td>
<td>consequllarily</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
comment

The above table is designed to give focus to an earlier argument presented in *Begetting: challenges and responsibilities of overpopulation* (2007). This was associated with a draft proposal for a *Universal Declaration of Responsibilities of Human Intercourse* (2007).

As indicated in the press release of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), presenting its *Global Environmental Outlook* (2007):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exploitation</th>
<th>Population increase, abortion, HIV/AIDS (40 mil.), death</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Abrahamic faiths</th>
<th>?</th>
<th>?</th>
<th>?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate education</td>
<td>Inappropriate (collective) response, suffering</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolonged terminal incapacity</td>
<td>Maximal suffering and family expense (prior to death)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Abrahamic faiths</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comment**

The human population is now so large that "the amount of resources needed to sustain it exceeds what is available... humanity's footprint [its environmental demand] is 21.9 hectares per person while the Earth's biological capacity is, on average, only 15.7 ha/person... the well-being of billions of people in the developing world is at risk, because of a failure to remedy the relatively simple problems which have been successfully tackled elsewhere.

In reporting on that document, in the light of an interview with the Executive Director of UNEP, James Kanter (*UN issues 'final wake-up call' on population and environment. International Herald Tribune, 25 October 2007*) notes:

Over the past two decades the world population has increased by almost 34 percent to 6.7 billion from 5 billion; similarly, the financial wealth of the planet has soared by about a third. But the land available to each person on earth had shrunk by 2005 to 2.02 hectares, or 5 acres, from 7.91 hectares in 1900 and was projected to drop to 1.63 hectares for each person by 2050, the report said.

The result of that population growth combined with unsustainable consumption has resulted in an increasingly stressed planet where natural disasters and environmental degradation endanger millions of humans, as well as plant and animal species, the report said....

"Life would be easier if we didn't have the kind of population growth rates that we have at the moment," Steiner said. "But to force people to stop having children would be a simplistic answer. The more realistic, ethical and practical issue is to accelerate human well-being and make more rational use of the resources we have on this planet."

The report "prepared by about 390 experts and reviewed by more than 1,000 others across the world", acknowledges the recognition by the Brundtland Commission (20 years previously) of the range of environmental and other "problems driven by growing human numbers". Unfortunately it focuses narrowly on the problems it selectively identifies without focusing on the underlying issue of how to restrain the growing human numbers that it implicitly acknowledges can thereby only continue to aggravate those problems -- as previously recognized by the Club of Rome *Limits to Growth* analysis in 1972. This reflects the long-term fundamental flaw in international strategic thinking -- responding with the greatest expertise on secondary and tertiary issues without appropriately analyzing means of addressing their continuing cause. It is a shameful exercise in strategic evasion -- achieved by strategic tunnel vision on issues -- such climate change -- that are politically more acceptable and supposedly susceptible of technical solutions (with unpredictable consequences).

It is curious that in an otherwise remarkable recent synthesis of the "tectonic stresses" accumulating "deep underneath the surface of our societies", Thomas Homer-Dixon (*The Upside of Down: catastrophe, creativity and the renewal of civilization, 2006*) indeed identifies "population stress" as one of these stresses. However he does this, not in terms of overpopulation, but solely as "arising from differences in the population growth rates between rich and poor societies, and from spiraling growth of megacities in poor countries".

And yet his other four "stresses" (energy, environment, climate and economic) are directly dependent on unrestrained population growth. Each would be significantly reduced if population growth was addressed -- an issue he avoids in considering possible responses to imminent catastrophe. If anything is "tectonic", it is the unconsciousness with which the population issue is recognized by our current global civilization (cf John Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilization*, 1995).

Global policy making has become a vast exercise in envisaging "credible" strategies -- as with the response to climate change -- that avoid addressing the unpleasantness of the increasingly high probability of imminent mega-deaths and civilizational collapse -- as a direct consequence of population capacity overshoot. The fabrication of that credibility recalls the persuasive tale of *The Emperor's New Clothes*.

Whereas campaigns worldwide are now focusing on collective and individual behaviour patterns (sorting household waste, etc) to reduce
environmental problems, no attention is given to the fact that every additional birth significantly undermines any progress thereby made -- by further increasing demands on the environment.

Which constituency ensures that root causes are not meaningfully discussed? A systemic analysis of dependencies would establish the degree to which the Abrahamic faiths are at the root of the challenge. Why is that analysis not undertaken?

"The causal chain of the deterioration is easily followed to its source. Too many cars, too many factories, too much detergent, too much pesticides ... too little water; too much CO2 - all can be traced easily to TOO MANY PEOPLE."

"All species expand as much as resources allow and predators, parasites, and physical conditions permit. When a species is introduced into a new habitat with abundant resources that accumulated before its arrival, the population expands rapidly until all the resources are used up."

**Problem displacement**

A recent issue of a newsletter of the Global Footprint Network (*Why the Number of Feet Matters*, 1, 12) indicated that:

A recent feature on population in the *Economist* discusses economic challenges when a nation's population falls. In this feature, *How to deal with a falling population*, 28 July 2007, the *Economist* tries to minimize concerns about world population by saying that we are 'hardly near the point of [resource] exhaustion'.

The *Economist* received a flood of letters insisting that rising world population and resource depletion are indeed serious problems. So many comments were sent in that the *Economist* published a follow-up piece, *Population and its discontents: lighten the footprint but keep the feet*. This too highlighted deep misunderstandings about the relationship between population and humanity's demand on our biosphere, and in particular, confusing population growth rates and population size.

A comparison can be fruitfully made between the forms of displacement in the case four patterns of denial variously relevant to threats to human life:

- overpopulation has long been denied as a significant factor for policy consideration, despite dramatically increasing numbers and an accumulation of consequent issues (Rosamund McDougall, *Overpopulation denial is a fatal game*, Biologist, 53, 3, June 2006; Russ Finley, *Overpopulation: the modern denial* In: *Poison Darts: protecting the biodiversity of the world*, 2004)
- climate change denial, previously characteristic of the majority of policy-makers and experts, has gone through a number of stages in which the evidence has been variously interpreted. However it could be inferred that it has not been rational argument but rather increasingly disastrous weather conditions that have been most convincing.
- concerns relating to the nature of the denial of the Holocaust, namely the dangerous inappropriateness of questioning the evidence as presented, have become such a highly charged political issue that "denial" has been criminalized in some political countries and extraordinary proposals, considered reasonable, have been made at the highest level to ban it across Europe (*EU aims to criminalise Holocaust denial*, *Financial Times*, 17 April 2007)
- a curiously contrasting case is provided by efforts in various countries towards suppressing dissent, even criminalising dissent, most recently as part of the "war on terror". With respect to the UK, for example, it has been argued that the new crime of "glorifying terrorism", recently introduced under the Terrorism Act 2006, would lead to the suppression of legitimate debate on the causes of terror (Arun Kundnani, *Criminalising dissent in the 'war on terror'*, Institute of Race Relations, 2 May 2006) (see also *Warping the Judgement of Dissenting Opinion towards a general framework for comparing distortion in rules of evidence*, 2002; William Norman Grigg, *Criminalizing Dissent*, New American, 6 December 1999)

The Holocaust example raises the question as to the appropriateness of criminalising denial of a past phenomenon whilst failing to consider the criminalisation of phenomena for which evidence of comparable quality and weight exists for the probability of much higher suffering and fatalities. The question is especially relevant in that a prime purpose of criminalising Holocaust denial -- a phenomenon of the past -- is to counter potential distortions of evidence that might obscure the risk of such an event being repeated in the future. Curiously this argument does not apply to the consequences of numerous fatal conflicts induced by the Abrahamic faiths -- despite the bagged evidence of bodies (where these have not been bulldozed into mass graves or incinerated).

On the other hand, it might presumably be argued, following the twisted logic of the last example, that evasion of the threat of overpopulation should itself be criminalised -- to avoid inducing terror in the population as to the accumulating impacts of its consequences. This logic was evident at a certain stage of the climate change debate in cases of penalisation of advocates of recognition of the phenomenon -- a process even more evident with regard to advocates of "family planning".

**Misleading focus on proximate causes**

There are both tragic and curious examples of the focus on proximate causes:

- in the Ukraine in 1932-33 an estimated 7-10 million people died in what in the West is termed the Great Famine (known to Ukrainians as the *Holodomor*), and explained by Soviet authorities as a bad harvest. The current president of Ukraine indicates that
"Their intention was to exonerate themselves of responsibility and to suppress knowledge of both the human causes and human consequences of this tragedy... To talk of the Holodomor was a crime against the state... The Holodomor was an act of genocide designed to suppress the Ukrainian nation." (Viktor Yuschchenko, The Holodomor, Wall Street Journal, 27 November 2007). Most modern historians agree that the famine was caused by the policies of the Soviet government, rather than by natural causes; and is held to have been deliberately engineered by the Soviet leadership.

- an incident in which a passenger vessel sank in the Antarctic as a result of a collision with an iceberg was described under a heading "iceberg blamed for holing MV Explorer" (Guardian, 24 November 2007).
- roadside trees are readily blamed as a cause of accidents when struck by vehicles -- irrespective of consideration of the speed of the vehicle or the condition of the driver. Authorities may then face considerable pressure to remove the trees. Similar arguments may be used with respect to wild animals.

The mortality data collected globally by the World Health Organization on "causes of death" focuses systematically on proximate causes. It avoids any indication of the conditions that brought about the indicated cause of death, relying as it does on the categories of the International Classification of Diseases -- not on what caused the "disease". The "cause of death" is therefore systematically obscured by authoritative data that purports to indicate it. For example, the data obscures the fact that:

- of the 11 million children younger than 5 (dying yearly worldwide), more than half die from hunger-related causes. But, according to Freedom from Hunger (Hunger Information, 2007), few of these deaths are the direct consequence of starvation but rather of common illnesses (like diarrhea, acute respiratory illness, malaria and measles) that move in on vulnerable children whose bodies have been weakened by hunger -- the prior cause of their death. Not the root cause however.
- about 40 percent of deaths worldwide are estimated to be caused by water, air and soil pollution; such environmental degradation, coupled with the growth in world population, are major causes behind the rapid increase in human diseases, which the World Health Organization has recently reported. Both factors contribute to the malnourishment and disease susceptibility of 3.7 billion people [more]. Not the root cause however.

Despite this avoidance of any focus on root causes, when it comes to natural disaster, however, it would appear that there is a form of recognition of a root cause that is consistent with the worldview of the Abrahamic faiths -- since such crises are known to the insurance industry as "Acts of God". And, curiously, under those conditions, the World Health Organization (Responding to health aspects of crises, 2004) then recognizes that:

Most of the morbidity and mortality associated with such crises stems from people lacking the essentials they need for life.

Systems at local level that normally provide people with accessible food, water, shelter and sanitation, ensure personal security and protection from harm, and deliver healthcare, do not function, and national systems are unable to compensate.

The point could be emphasized even more strongly by exploring the "cause of death" declared by mortality statistics on the occasion of massacres. Clearly the proximate cause of death may indeed be failure of body physiology -- irrespective of whether this was due to weaponry, gas or radiation. The question that is so poorly addressed is the degree of religious responsibility for the intentional process resulting in the massacres of which such "causes" are then merely consequential symptoms. Why the focus on "symptoms" and not on the nature of the "disease"?

Whilst it is recognized that the slaughter of the 20th century, often in the form of massacre (whether genocidal or not), has been the bloodiest in recorded history (Matthew White, Death Tolls for the Man-made Megadeaths of the Twentieth Century, 2005; List of Massacres, Wikipedia), almost no attention is given statistically to the religious responsibility for such massacres, or the assessment of the degree of religious complicity in them. Exceptions include efforts to document Zionist massacres of Arabs (List of Massacres) that of indigenous peoples (List of massacres by Christians and Jews of Indigenous Australians), especially under the mandate of "pacification" and "in the Name of God" as in the Americas (American Indian Holocaust). Striking recent examples include:

- The philosopher Bertrand Russell denounced WWI as wholly Christian in origin as "the three Emperors were devout, and so were the more warlike of the British Cabinet". In 1957 he claimed that the Christian Church "has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world".
- Adolf Hitler announced in a 1922 speech: "My feelings as a Christian point me to my Lord and Saviour as a fighter". 6,000,000 Jews die under his orders in human catastrophe allegedly inspired by Martin Luther's pamphlet, Jews and Their Lies.
- 60,000 Orthodox Christians, Jews and Muslims were massacred in the period 1941-5 by fanatical Catholic "Ustashi" soldiers under Croatian leader Ante Pavelic.

- The genocidal massacre in Rwanda in 1994, through which hundreds of thousand were killed, took place in what has been considered the most Christian country in Africa, with both perpetrators and victims sharing the same faith

Like Hitler, instigators of some major massacres (Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, etc), have had a poorly recognized degree of relationship with religion, such as through attendance at Christian religious educational establishments. The influence of Christianity has however been much debated in specific cases such as Rwanda, for example (The Church and the Rwandan Genocide, Wikipedia). The role of religion is now debated with regard to the cultivation of what is specifically framed as terrorism (Religious Terrorism, Wikipedia), especially in the case of Islam (Islamic Violence, Wikipedia). Such non-proximate influences are of course not recognized medically as a "cause of death". Is it a "forensic" perspective that is lacking in examining the role of religion in such deaths?

The question might be fruitfully asked as to whether the degree of slaughter engendered by the Abrahamic faiths over centuries is in some way a perverted corrective response to their unconscious collective recognition of the consequences of their thoughtless population policies over that same period (cf John Ralston Saul, The Unconscious Civilization, 1995). Are these faiths also complicit in the process whereby the religious underpinnings of the many bloody conflicts are erased from collective memory -- as is now the case with the
It remains curious that every possible argument is otherwise advanced to avoid any recognition (or discussion) whatsoever of the accumulating consequences of unrestrained population increase. This notably accords with two undeclared agendas:

- dependence of essentially unsustainable economies and business models on increasing numbers of people as consumers of products and services, effectively a vast exercise in pyramid selling, on which governments are dependent for tax income, associated with complicity with
- dependence of Abrahamic faiths on early global catastrophe and system failure, beyond the capacity of humanity to resolve, that will thereby trigger the intervention of a variously prophesied saviour.

Despite the concerns expressed by the Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme, the *Global Environmental Outlook* seemingly contains no reference to "religions" or "faiths" -- historically the prime political influence on the failure of UN Conferences to address the population issue effectively, as discussed separately (*Begetting: challenges and responsibilities of overpopulation*, 2007). It is to be expected that when the matter is finally discussed, the narrow focus on proximate causes will highlight population growth in India and China -- as with climate changing emissions -- obscuring the cumulative responsibility for failure to act (as with climate change).

There is considerable irony to the possibility that the future will see the newly accepted reality of climate change -- as a strategic "fig leaf" concealing the underlying challenge of overpopulation -- even more ironic given the latter's original significance in the book of *Genesis* as the source of the founding myth of the Abrahamic faiths (as discussed below). The "fig leaf" from the *Tree of Knowledge*, whereby Adam and Eve "covered their nakedness" (*Genesis 3:7*), remains an important symbol for those faiths (see *Fig Leaf Forum*). Is there indeed some collective form of prudery, or Freudian inhibition, that prevents such discussion and focuses on "climate" and warming? In a world of euphemism, a fig leaf of course promotes the illusion that there is "nothing" underneath worthy of conscious consideration.

The new UN Secretary General has repeatedly declared climate change to be urgent, as big a threat as world war -- and a cause to be the primary mark of his office (*Climate change is our top priority, says UN chief*, Guardian, 2 March 2007; *Gateway to the United Nations System's Work on Climate Change*). Definitively an urgently threatening fig leaf then. One wonders why he does not consider population overshoot to be threatening -- at least as threatening as a world war.

It has unfortunately been claimed that the previous UN Secretary-General, who was head of UN Peacekeeping Operations at the time of the Rwandan genocidal massacre of 1994, held back troops from intervening to prevent that massacre (*Roméo Dallaire, Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*, 2003). In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as many as five million have died since 1994 in overlapping convulsions of ethnic and state-sponsored massacre; possibly a quarter of a million have lost their lives in Darfur (*Glen Ford, A Tale Of Two Genocides, Congo And Darfur*, CounterCurrents.org, 18 July, 2007; *Conflict in Congo has killed 4.7m*, Guardian, 8 April 2003). These events have aroused little protest and even less action -- in contrast with the intervention in Iraq.

Euphemisms and spurious rationalizations

There is considerable irony to the possibility that the future will see the newly accepted reality of climate change -- as a strategic "fig leaf" concealing the underlying challenge of overpopulation -- even more ironic given the latter's original significance in the book of *Genesis* as the source of the founding myth of the Abrahamic faiths (as discussed below). The "fig leaf" from the *Tree of Knowledge*, whereby Adam and Eve "covered their nakedness" (*Genesis 3:7*), remains an important symbol for those faiths (see *Fig Leaf Forum*). Is there indeed some collective form of prudery, or Freudian inhibition, that prevents such discussion and focuses on "climate" and warming? In a world of euphemism, a fig leaf of course promotes the illusion that there is "nothing" underneath worthy of conscious consideration.

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These horrendous events significantly overlapped his two-term period of office (from the beginning of 1997 to the end of 2006) as Secretary-General of an organization that had been established to ensure that slaughter on the scale of World War II was not repeated. As a Christian he credited his religious teachers and scripture with instilling in him the principles that guide his life and work. Such principles would appear to contrast curiously with those that often led *Mahatma Gandhi* to risk his own life and career in protest against injustice -- notably in the form of hunger strikes in response to the condition of the untouchables and to the bloodshed at the time of partition of India and Pakistan. There is never any implication that a holder of institutional high office should endanger a career by threatening to resign, or engage in a hunger strike, to focus disapproval of international inaction. With the UN as a body, the Secretary-General was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001; it was awarded in 2007 to Al Gore with the UN International Panel on Climate Change.

It is profoundly ironic that humanity is currently deeply challenged by systemic destabilization due to what might be fruitfully termed a *confluence of unrestrained emissions*. Especially as a consequence of their combined impact, there is curious degree of systemic equivalence to these various forms of "emission":

- the inadequately restrained emissions of "greenhouse gases" currently considered vital to economic growth -- exacerbating climate change and its fatal implications;
however such gaseous carbon emissions are merely the "tip of the iceberg" of a whole range of material emissions in the form of chemical pollutants and waste that tunnels vision ensures are considered insignificant in comparison with the gases whose effects are far less obvious to the senses except in their contested non-proximate effects on the weather and climate change

- the stressful impact on well-being of increasing noise emission -- notably associated with overcrowding
- again, however, this is only the most evident of the non-material emissions that include a wide spectrum of electromagnetic radiation, of which only light pollution is of immediate concern to some, although the consequences of radioactivity will last thousands of years

- the publicly broadcast emissions of varying credibility, and the opinions (as with this document) disseminated through the many internet and other fora, effectively increasing the turbulence of the climate of global opinion
- however, together with the exploding production of conceptual models, there is little concern with the development of an adequate focus for remedial action in the light of the degree of incoherent information overload and its effective undermine

- the unrestrained emission of directives, edicts, declarations, resolutions and injunctions from a wide range of authorities of various degrees of legitimacy
- typically again, without any consideration for their harmonisation

- the unrestrained biological emissions through which human procreation is ensured
- exacerbating many other problems of the global environment, as argued here

Symptomatic of the manner in which the population issue is avoided is the use of euphemism to discuss blatant manifestations of it, when these cannot be avoided:

- "population pressure" is treated as an ultimate cause of many problems, in order to avoid any discussion of the underlying causes of "population pressure"

- "mortality" is used as a descriptor of deaths in order to avoid any discussion of the root cause of those deaths -- and by whom they were effectively, if not deliberately, ensured. It is time to "call a spade a spade". The neutral term "mortality" obscures the reality that deaths are being effectively ensured. It is more appropriate to state that "death warrants" are being effectively signed or authorized by parties that fail to take responsibility for doing so.

Terminology and argumentation is not only used in ways that obscure and neutralize the responsibility of religions and the institutions they influence, it is also used such as to:

- reframe suffering and death in terms of the most immediate cause (as noted above), avoiding any reference to prior causes in the chain of responsibility
- deny any responsibility for suffering and death as a consequence of deliberately withholding assistance to those in suffering or mortal danger (the Pontius Pilate Syndrome)

It is repeatedly asserted (as illustrated by the Economist article), despite demonstrated incapacity to deliver sufficient products and services over decades, that humanity has the ingenuity to solve the problem and distribute the necessary resources. The issue, it is claimed (without evidence), is therefore only one of application.

This critical gap between the need for practical and innovative ideas to solve complex problems and the actual supply of those ideas has been analyzed by Thomas Homer-Dixon (The Ingenuity Gap, 2000). It might be argued that the credibility of expectations that such requisite ingenuity will be engendered by current institutions is evaporating as evidently as the water resources on which people are so dependent.

Contradictions associated with "right to life"

Any effort to discuss "unrestrained population growth" is opposed by extremely well-orchestrated and generously funded "right to life" campaigns. These focus on three issues:

- abortion as a form of murder, totally neglecting any consideration of the consequence of giving birth to a child that cannot be adequately cared for
- use of contraceptives as a form of abortion, and therefore of murder
- euthanasia as a form of murder, totally neglecting any consideration of the maximization of pain and suffering and the potential impact on the subsequent viability of the family that must devote scarce resources to increasingly expensive palliative care

The above focus avoids reconciliation of the principles on which it is based with:

- justifications for use of capital punishment, possibly executed in a painful and inhumane manner
- justifications for use of interrogation methods, possibly executed in a painful and inhumane manner leading to death
- justifications (in terms of the "just war" doctrine) for faith-based conflict in the form of crusades and jihads, and for the associated "collateral damage" affecting innocent parties
- incitement of targeted assassination (notably of "unbelievers" and those of other faiths), including fatwas -- exemplified by US evangelical exhortation to assassinate the President of Venezuela (Pat Robertson calls for assassination of Hugo Chavez, August 2005; Robertson again calls for Chavez's assassination, February 2006); Robertson's endorsement for the 2008 presidential election has been assiduously sought by candidates (US Social Conservatives Criticise Robertson's Giuliani Endorsement, 9 November 2007)
- complicity in assassination of those associated with the performance of abortions, irrespective of the justification
- millions of deaths per year (as indicated by the above table) resulting from failure to restrain population growth
It is tragically ironic that the only issue on which the Abrahamic faiths share common cause is opposition to any variety of restraint on population growth. Otherwise they have indulged down the centuries in a systematic pattern of incitement to bloody conflict against each other to make good use of those whose existence they have ensured. Curiously they have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to recognize "satanic" perversions of appropriate belief in each other as well as in other faiths (cf Krishnan Ramaswamy, et al. (Eds) *Invading the Sacred: an analysis of Hinduism studies in America*, 2007)

Maximizing suffering -- or "optimizing it"?

Suffering (and possibly subsequent) death is maximized through:

- **structural violence**, namely a form of violence resulting from the systematic ways in which a given social structure or social institution kills people slowly by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Institutionalized elitism, ethnocentricism, classism, racism, sexism, adulthood, nationalism, heterosexism and ageism are just some examples of structural violence. Life spans are reduced when people are socially dominated, politically oppressed, or economically exploited. Structural violence and direct violence are highly interdependent. Structural violence inevitably produces conflict and often direct violence including family violence, racial violence, hate crimes, terrorism, genocide, and war.
- ensuring the birth of people under conditions in which it is recognized that they are likely to suffer, and die, for lack of care or resources
- withholding assistance to people in mortal danger, including to those whose birth and suffering could have been avoided
- prolonging, in an extremely undignified manner, the lives of those suffering terminal illnesses or severe incapacity when they have expressed the wish for some form of euthanasia and the right to choose the moment of their death
- **cultural violence**, as a result of the cultural assumptions inhibiting recognition of direct or structural violence.

The increase in the total amount of suffering in the world is viewed as a necessary process by which to evoke the "end times" scenarios of the Abrahamic faiths through which they believe suffering will be relieved -- for those still alive and who share their particular faith. Those who do not share the particular Abrahamic faith are promised suffering worse than death -- possibly for eternity.

To what extent is doing nothing about suffering the ultimate perversion of the values promoted by the Abrahamic faiths -- and above all to ensure nothing is done, or even envisaged? It is in this that the Abrahamic faiths have been most effective and will continue to be so.

And it is indeed through this perversion that the maximum level of suffering and unnecessary death will occur -- to reduce the population to sustainable levels.

Methodology for requisite analysis

Whilst it may be argued that huge resources are devoted specifically to the analysis of means of causing suffering and death, and to ensuring them, there is very little effort to determine the underlying causes of death and the degree of any prior suffering. Specifically lacking, as noted above, is any technical analysis of system dependencies on the continuing opposition by the Abrahamic faiths to the alleviation of suffering and associated mortality. What exactly has been the contribution of their policy to these conditions? What proportion of mortality and suffering, that might readily be considered their responsibility, arises from other factors?

One approach to the analysis of chains of dependency and associated feedback loops is exemplified by the World Problems Project (most recently as developed through the research of Nadia McLaren). The dependency chains, associated with overpopulation in the following table derive, from that work. This lends itself to various forms of visualization via the web (cf Preliminary NetMap Studies of Databases on Questions, World Problems, Global Strategies, and Values, 2006). The Netmap example notably included visual representations of analyses of the connectivity of potential "Where, When, What, Which, How, Who and Why-Questions to be asked about the relationship between Faith and Prosperity" (interrelating 2980 questions and 4804 links between them). Another application specifically designed for strategic causal mapping is Decision Explorer (John M Bryson, et al, Visible Thinking: Unlocking causal mapping for practical business results, 2004; Colin Eden and Fran Ackermann, Making Strategy; *The Journey of Strategic Management*, 1998). Clearly there is a case for applying such techniques to the relation between faith and overpopulation.

Other approaches can be taken through packages such as RiskOutlook that might provide a sharper focus on the risk dependency associated with the position taken by the Abrahamic faiths. It is appropriate to note that most of the problems directly aggravating overpopulation in the maps below are those subject to pressure from the Abraamic faiths. Those problems on the right hand part of the maps correspond in part to the rows in the table above aggravated by overpopulation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overpopulation (red circle)</th>
<th>with indication of problems <em>aggravating it</em> (to the left of it) and those <em>aggravated by it</em> (to the right of it)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data from the World Problems Project, imported into FreeMind and exported as images</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Religious opposition to birth control&quot; is the problem underlined in blue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indication of form of less detailed image (click for large legible version)</td>
<td>Indication of form of partially expanded image (click for large legible version)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Readers can also explore the complete map in a FreeMind browser (4 levels). This allows branches of the 270 aggravating and 1025 aggravated problems to be selectively expanded/collapsed.
The most extensive and insightful methodological approach to the incidence of suffering is that developed through the research of R G H Siu and the International Society for Panetics. They developed the concept of the "dukkha" as a measure of suffering. For the panetics community, the dukkha is a measure of the intensity and duration of pain and anguish adapted from the 9-point hedonic scale used to provide subjective judgements in market research. Dukkha is also a central concept in Buddhism.

According to this approach, one dukkha expresses the amount of suffering endured by one person experiencing one intensity unit for one day (roughly the equivalent to the amount of suffering felt by one person with a moderate toothache for eight hours). A "megadukkha" represents the order of magnitude of suffering sustained by 1,000 persons for about 10 hours a day, for a year, with severe stomach ulcers and without medication. The approach has been explored further by Johan Galtung (Panetics and the Practice of Peace and Development, 1999).

In a separate discussion (Varieties of Terrorism: extended to the experience of the terrorized, 2004) the question was raised as to the extent to which a climate of existential fear and terror, including that cultivated during faith-supported interrogation, might be associated with such measures of suffering. What is the correlation between suffering and fear? In the discussion there (cf Broadening the taxonomy of terrorism), attention was drawn to classical understanding of the varieties of fear (Jan Edward Garret, The Passions according to the Classical Stoa, 2000), the Jain concept of the forms of injury (himsa), and a taxonomy of fear developed for the media (Oscar Sharp with Tom DeVille, Taxonomy of Fear).

This discussion provided a context for a section on Distinguishing degrees of fear and terror in which was reproduced Siu's tabular presentation of the Estimated suffering in megadukkhas inflicted by Americans on fellow Americans in 1979 (from R G H Siu, Panetics and Dukkha: an integrated study of the infliction of suffering and the reduction of infliction. 1993; Chapter 4, Table 2). This includes a tentative assessment of the contribution of "church leaders" to suffering associated with the following problems: Unemployment and poverty, Environmental pollution, Occupational hazard and stress, Crime, Justice system, Alcohol consumption, Smoking, and Mental anguish. This methodology suggests possibilities for extending the table above.

It is curious that the methodology for causing suffering has been so systematically developed under the aegis of the Abrahamic religions - whereas that for defining and alleviating it is now developed in the light of non-Abrahamic religions.

For the Christian religion at least, its current degree of complicity in inhumane interrogation and torture is evident in its tacit support, through "military chaplains", for the actions of the military intelligence operatives in interrogation centres (Guantanamo Bay, Bagram, Abu Ghraib, etc). Ironically however, since such "chaplains" purportedly have an interdenominational mandate, they might be considered to represent a broader spectrum of support by Abrahamic faiths. Christianity at least, has a long tradition of complicity in painful interrogation and its typically fatal consequences -- morally justified as being in the interests of the sufferer's immortal soul. Protests against inflicting pain in this way are notably muted in many countries of Abrahamic faith. Tolerance of pain "elsewhere", and conducted under the responsibility of "others", is relatively high. Complicity is readily denied.

It is however less the issues arising from the quantitative increase in population that are in question but rather the process by which arguments and claims are made by faith-based science and government with regard to population policies. Another valuable approach is therefore that promoted by advocates of critical thinking, namely the software-enhanced mapping of arguments regarding complex issues (see summary and web resources in Argument Mapping). One example is an argument visualization application Rationale that facilitates diagramming of reasoning and argument (cf Paul Monk and Tim van Gelder, Enhancing our Grasp of Complex Arguments, 2004). It is not however surprising that argument maps relating to the complexities of the population issue are not widely available -- if those comprehensive in scope even exist. An examples of such a "knowledge map" produced (by the author) with the causal mapping Decision Explorer package is presented below. An "argument map" regarding population would have many similarities and could be produced with the same package.
However any such mapping in relation to religion should necessarily take into account the overriding importance attached to the symbolic dimension in some cases, as in the Middle East (Scott Atran, et al. *Sacred Barriers to Conflict Resolution*. Science, 317, 24 August 2007). Attention has also been drawn to the need to encompass the "cognitive twists" between the various faith perspectives (*Potential Misuse of the Conveyor Metaphor: Recognition of the circular dynamic essential to its operation*, 2007).

The advocated argument map relating to overpopulation would necessarily involve both systemic feedback loops and what might be recognized as "circular arguments". Given the effort to provide a poster-sized wall chart to facilitate understanding of the metabolic pathways by which individual life is sustained, the proposed map could serve a similar purpose with respect to the manner in which life is collectively threatened by unrestrained population growth (see *Biochemical Pathways: Metabolic Pathways; Biochemical Pathways: Cellular and Molecular Processes; Metabolic Pathways* of the International Union of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology).

To facilitate comprehension of the cycles in the metabolic chart, a well-known set of mnemonic songs has been produced (Harold Baum, *The Biochemists' Song Book*, 1982/2003). Clearly an equivalent set of songs could be produced to help recognize the circular games of argument so frequently played with respect to population issues. In this connection, given the many health consequences of overpopulation, it is appropriate to note the gruesome historical origins of the nursery rhyme *"Ring a Ring o' Roses*" with the punch line "We all fall down". This dates back to the *Great Plague of London* in 1665 and possibly to the *Black Death* of 1340 (estimated to have killed between one and two-thirds of the European population); the symptoms of the plague included a rosy red rash in the shape of a ring on the skin. There is clearly value in generating such songs to facilitate systemic comprehension of incipient problems rather than later to explain their catastrophic manifestation.

**Assertion of moral authority**

The Abrahamic faiths have cultivated a position of self-righteous moral and ethical authority in society as guarantor of the principles justifying the above. They at the same time fail to reconcile that position with those forms of systematically denied abuse belying such assertions (despite recent historically unprecedented successful claims by those damaged by the complicity of religious faiths in such abuse).

The Abrahamic faiths have traditionally upheld the emergence from their midst of particular individuals as exemplars of the values by which their believers are inspired. In the case of Christianity such exceptional individuals have been beatified and sanctified down the centuries -- especially when they have been persecuted for those beliefs and associated behaviors (possibly even by their own religious authorities).

The Abrahamic faiths place special emphasis on their respective communities of believers. Careful attention is therefore appropriate to their attitude to those exceptional individuals that emerge from those communities to perpetrate acts of violence on a massive scale (notably as massacres), on a smaller and more targeted scale (through crusades, jihads and suicide bombing), or at the individual level (in the incitement to assassination or in the abuse of minors). Furthermore, given their inegalitarian attitudes towards women that they have each institutionalized in different ways, careful attention is also appropriate to the manner in which faith in these community contexts may be covertly exploited by individuals held to exemplify their values. In the case of Christianity, scandals involving the most prominent televangelists (*Christian evangelist scandals*), as with sexual abuse by priests (*Roman Catholic sex abuse cases by country*; *Homosexuality in the Roman Catholic priesthood*), is evidence of a characteristic behavioural pattern that was historically most evident in arguments for the Protestant Reformation.

There would seem to be a complex process through which some individuals are promoted as exemplars of faith-based values, possibly despite disapproval by their institutions, whereas the exceptional behaviour of others is systematically denied or rationalized (once it has become only too evident) as totally unrepresentative of those values. As with the tendency to procreate, such behaviour may be framed as an only too human manifestation of "human nature" -- for which every sympathy is held to be appropriate. Of special relevance is the pattern of argument and emotional appeal that is used to reframe this behaviour as acceptable (cf Michael James Giuliano, *Thrice Born: The Rhetorical Comeback of Jimmy Swaggart*, 2002).

The question is therefore to what extent this complex process is intimately responsible for a complex and subtle form of structural violence against humanity -- a crime against humanity -- in which all involved are empowered to deny their complicity. This process may be at the heart of the challenge of overpopulation.

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"Binding of Isaac"
archetypal ethical dilemma for the Abrahamic faiths
-- Like Father, Like Son? --

There have been extensive commentaries down the centuries on the significance of the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac in response to his understanding of a request from God (as described in *Genesis* 22). [see *Symposium on the Sacrifice of Isaac in the Three Monotheistic Religions*, 1995; *Jewish perspective* (*Akedah*); *Islamic perspective* (*Dhahib*)]. The event is remembered on the 1st of Tishrei in the Jewish calendar and from the 10th-13th of Dhu al-Hijjah in the Muslim calendar. The Abrahamic religions continue to engage in sacrifice -- variously interpreted.

It might be asked whether the Abrahamic religions are now emulating that devoted willingness to sacrifice people, often metaphorically described as their "children", in response to their very human understanding of a request made by God. It would indeed seem to be their belief that in the "end times" God will manifest to justify that belief and remedy the situation.

Why should these faiths, which have played such a central role in recent human history, have as a common founding myth a story of human sacrifice? And why should they then be prepared to sacrifice each other's "children" -- on an "industrial scale"? And to extend this willingness to the sacrifice of those defined as
The question raised above is whether this founding myth shapes in profound ways the willingness to engender as many children as

unbelievers”?

In this spirit "Isaac" continues to be bound on the altar of that belief, with "Abraham" carrying the knife. However, anticipating the final fulfillment somewhat prematurely or as a precaution, the Abrahamic religions would appear already to be seeking their promised reward through multiplying the number of their children. A misplaced application of the Precautionary Principle?

"Gott mit Uns"
"Dieu et Mon Droit"
"In God We Trust"
"Trust in Allah -- but Tether Thy Camel First"

Implications of a founding myth for future faith-based governance

Such is the contemporary significance of the Binding of Isaac as a founding myth that anthropologist Carol Delaney (Abraham, Isaac, and Some Hidden Assumptions of Our Culture: Abraham's impact on Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Humanist, May 1999) articulates the following question (referring to a case in the 1990s in which a father sacrificed his child "because God told him to"): 

Perhaps, then, we should put the Abraham story on trial as well. Because, while the contemporary case helps bring the Abraham story emotionally closer and raises several issues, it cannot raise the most important question: why is the willingness to sacrifice one's child the quintessential model of faith; why not the passionate protection of the child? What would be the shape of our society had that been the supreme model of faith and commitment? By critically examining the Abraham story, I think we can catch a glimpse.

If it is true, as author Shalom Spiegel suggests, that the "story of Abraham renews itself in every time of crisis," then the time has come to take another look. The crisis of society today is about values, about the very values that, I think, are epitomized by the Abraham story-- not just faith and sacrifice but also the nature of authority; the basis and structure of the family, its gender definitions and roles; and which children, under what circumstances, shall be deemed acceptable and be provided for. My purpose is not to reinvigorate these values but to challenge them at their foundation....

Insofar as it has shaped the three religious traditions, their ethical values, and their views of social relations, it has shaped the realities we live by. Even if we are not believers, any of us raised in a culture influenced by Judaism, Christianity, or Islam has been affected by the values, attitudes, and structures exemplified by the story.

It is therefore important to uncover the set of assumptions that make the story possible, to get behind the story....

It is important to recognize how central is the myth to contemporary understanding within each of the Abrahamic faiths. Delaney points out, for example:

For believers, the story has a central place both theologically and ritually in each of the religions. Jews recite Genesis 22 annually at the new year service Rosh Hashanah; it is also included as part of the daily morning prayers of the devout. Christians think the story prefigures the crucifixion, when "God the Father sacrificed his only begotten son"; a recitation of Genesis 22 is traditionally part of the services during Easter week. Muhammad's mission was to recall the people to the one true religion given in the beginning to Abraham. Each year Muslims dramatically reenact the event on the most sacred day of the Muslim calendar -- the Feast of the Sacrifice -- that occurs at the end of the rituals of the Hajj. On that day, whether in Mecca or in the home, each male head of household sacrifices a ram (or substitute) in place of the intended child. And every male child can imagine that, but for the grace of God, there might he be.

Delaney makes the strong point that this founding myth is also of considerable significance to framing social relations in society -- even for non-believers:

The story of Abraham has bequeathed a moral legacy in which we have been taught not to question the authority of "fathers," even though, in the process, we betray children. Contemporary realities illustrate the ways in which the sacrifice and betrayal of children has been institutionalized. One can point to the dreadful conditions in which most children in the world are living. Children are abused at the hands of their parents, most frequently fathers or their surrogates, and by priests--the very "fathers" who stand in for God and whose mission it is to protect children. One can also include war and point out that "children" are sent off to fight old men's battles and that the U.S. military budget vastly exceeds that of welfare. The recent welfare debate itself shows how the "fathers" (of state) exercised their power to determine the fate of a whole generation of children.

Within this context, given the heavy investment in the manufacture, sale and use of weaponry ("arms") -- especially by countries in which the Abrahamic faiths are fundamental to culture and governance -- one can appropriately ask what is the significance of the "knife" held by the father figure over the bound child. In Delaney's words:

Like that knife eternally poised in mid-air, several questions should be held in our minds. Why is the willingness to sacrifice the child the model of faith? What is the function of obedience? Why so little attention to the betrayal of the child?

The question raised above is whether this founding myth shapes in profound ways the willingness to engender as many children as
possible in order to confront society with as much suffering and death as possible -- thereby obliging people to turn to dependency on the Abrahamic faiths and their expectation of divine intervention.

It is myth that offers an understanding of complex relationships whose nature extends ambiguously far beyond any simplistic characterization as "positive" or "negative" (Joseph Campbell (The Power of Myth, 1988). Karen Armstrong (A Short History of Myth, Melbourne, Canongate, 2005) addresses the curious status of myth in industrialized societies and its long-demonstrated functions:

Another peculiar characteristic of the human mind is its ability to have ideas and experiences that we cannot explain rationally.... imagination is the faculty that produces religion and mythology. Today mythical thinking has fallen into disrepute; we often dismiss it as irrational and self-indulgent. But the imagination is also the faculty that has enabled scientists to bring new knowledge to light and to invent technology that has made us immeasurably more effective.... Mythology and science both extend the scope of human beings. Like science and technology, mythology...is not about opting out of this world, but about enabling us to live more intensely within it...

It is within this context that Delaney argues:

In order to stem the tide of sacrifice -- of the hopes, trust, health, and lives of children -- we need a revolution in values. We need a new moral vision, a new myth to live by -- one that will change the course of history as profoundly as did the Abraham story.

Until this challenge is addressed, it is appropriate to recognize the extent to which the Abrahamic faiths are directly responsible on a daily basis for effectively authorizing "death warrants" in numbers as yet to be determined -- exceeding by far the archetypal human sacrifices institutionalized in centuries past in the Aztec culture. The first items in the above table are an indication of what these numbers are likely to be.

If an "unexamined life is not worth living" (according to Socrates), might an unexamined faith render worthless the lives of others?

Socrates spoke those words to the jury in the court of Athens in the year 399 BCE after he had been found guilty of heresy and sedition. Heresy, a crime that threatened the established religion, and sedition, that threatened the state. As a philosopher he is notably appreciated for providing the original focus to critical thinking.

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