

# **The Cost of Religious Delusion: Islam and terrorism**

by John L Perkins

In all history, the concept of a monotheistic god is the single worst idea that the human mind has ever invented. I say this because of the cumulative economic cost, to human welfare, through history. This is without even counting the cost of conflicts that monotheism has caused. Religion is far more damaging than is commonly realised. The religion of Islam is particularly damaging. The reasons for this, I will elaborate on, as well as where the “rise of atheism” fits into a long-term picture.

Firstly, I would like to say what a privilege it is to be here. I would like to pay tribute to the volunteer organising committee who have made this event possible. I have been a mere observer on this committee, and the amount of work they have done is awesome and the attention to detail mind-boggling. Thank you.

Secondly, I would like to point out, as a representative of the Secular Party, that secularism provides a guarantee of religious freedom, as well as a guarantee of the right to non-religion. As the Universal Declaration states, everyone has the right to “freedom of thought, conscience and religion”. Children also have this right. They have the right to make up their own minds about religion, rather than having a religion imposed on them via the education system.

So long as any sect, cult or religion has the ability, at taxpayer expense, to impose their divisive ideologies on the minds of children, we do not have secularism in Australia. Currently tens of billions of dollars per year are provided by governments to faith schools and in subsidies to religion. It is the mission of the Secular Party to reverse this situation and restore secularism to our education system, as was originally intended in the Australian Constitution.

Returning now to the issue of religion and human welfare, it may surprise some people to know that economists are primarily concerned about human welfare. It is true. Economists try to find an index of human welfare, then maximise it. Hence the obsession about economic growth.

This has been effective. Since the Enlightenment, per capita real incomes have increased exponentially, by a factor of fifty. This is an average two percent growth compounded over 200 years. We are rich beyond the wildest dreams of our ancestors, and we live longer.

How has this come about? It is technical progress. It is innovation, in knowledge and technique. It is increased productivity. It is the ability to produce more, with less input of time, labour and materials. What has been done with this bounty may be problematic. But technical progress, of itself, is unambiguously good for human welfare.

What, throughout history, has mainly served to stifle, inhibit and prevent technical progress? Religion. Hence, some elementary calculations with compound growth rates, over long time periods, demonstrate the basis of my opening remark.

When Christianity took over the Roman empire, and the Greek schools of learning were closed down, technical progress in Europe effectively ceased for about a thousand years. Muslim societies did, at that time, lead the world in knowledge and science. An important factor in this was the advent of the Arabic numbering system, which was derived from India. Strictly enforced Islam later caused the relative demise of these societies. They were overtaken by Europe, particularly after the Enlightenment, when the strictures of Christianity were thrown off.

The essential ingredients of a successful civilisation are the freedom to innovate in knowledge and in commerce, guaranteed property rights and the rule of law. Take away any of these ingredients, and civilisation's grip becomes tenuous. The religion of Islam, more than any other, can undermine all these basic tenets of successful civilisation. Hence we see many countries in the Middle East, and in particular Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia, that are becoming, or have become, failed states.

In the decades ahead, the world faces serious challenges. The easy economic growth path will not continue. It is not just population and climate change. In the space of less than one hundred years we will have turned most of the world's reserves of fossil fuels into carbon dioxide. This has never happened before in geological time. For those in doubt, I can assure you that climate change is real.

We have now consumed about half the world's fossil fuels, and the temperature has risen by one degree. In the next fifty years we will consume most of the rest, and the temperature will rise by at least a further degree. Based on some research that I have done, I can give you some good news and some bad news. The good news is that unless there are runaway effects, global temperatures may not rise much more than two degrees because we will run out of fuel. The bad news is that we will run out of fuel.

What has this got to do with the rise of atheism? Within perhaps thirty years, apart from Russia and Australia, most of the world's remaining extractable reserves of fossil fuels will reside in what are now Muslim countries, in particular Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran. To avoid international conflict we will need to deal with all these global issues rationally and equitably. There will be challenges never faced before. We will need to hold fast to the tenets that make civilisation sustainable. We will not be able to afford, at that time, to be still living in a world that is besotted with ancient superstitions and delusional ideologies.

I would like to offer a defence of the word "delusion" in relation to religion. Religion is a psychological phenomenon.

Delusion describes a state of mind where false beliefs are persistently held. We know that religions are in fact false. We know that the creation stories of religion are myths. It is not just a conflict between evolution and creationism. We should not neglect the archaeological evidence. Evolution negates the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. The archaeological evidence negates the first ten books of the Bible. There was no Exodus, no great conquest of Canaan. There was no historical Abraham. I refer you to *The Bible Unearthed* by Finkelstein and Silberman<sup>1</sup>.

According to doctrine, Abraham should have existed a thousand years before there is any evidence that Judaism was invented. The founder of the three Abrahamic religions, who according to the Koran built the Kaaba in Mecca, is purely mythical.

Religions are based on accounts of history that are incorrect. Therefore they are not true. Whether gods exist or not is a different question. We know that religions are not true. If religions were true, they would not be religions. Two years ago I issued a \$100,000 challenge to prove any one religion is true. No responses have been received.

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<sup>1</sup> Finkelstein, Israel and Neil Asher Silberman, "The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts", Touchstone, New York, 2001. See in particular "The Failed Search for the Historical Abraham" pp33-36

Religion induces blindness to facts and reason. Religious delusion is the result of indoctrination, socialisation and the cultivation of emotional needs. Mass delusion is the only way to describe adequately the 21<sup>st</sup> century persistence of such contradictory and false beliefs.

Using the word delusion is not intended to be spiteful and is not a reflection on intelligence. It is motivated by humanitarian concern. Believers are victims of their delusions. Religions may be consoling and charitable, but the conflicts they cause, the dangers they pose, and the costs they impose, far outweigh these benefits.

If people are aware of their susceptibility to irrationality, and its costs, then they are more able to overcome it.

Looking again at recent history, where does the rise of atheism fit? Religion worldwide has been spurred on by the rise of global Islamism. Secularism has in many ways been in retreat, and now we are seeing a reaction. What is the cause of the resurgence of Islam?

Part of the explanation, paradoxically, is increased wealth, increased education and increased literacy. In Muslim societies, more education means more Islamic education, and more literacy means more reading of the Koran. Without any constraint of secularism, these factors are inherently radicalising.

However, there is another reason for the resurgence of militant Islam. I acknowledge the crimes committed against Jews. The ongoing dispossession of the Palestinians is also an injustice that is a legitimate cause of resentment. It seems inconceivable that this has not had some effect on inflaming Islamism over the last sixty years.

Yet to state the obvious is apparently controversial. Journalist Michael Backman was sacked from *The Age* last year for saying just that. There are circles in which criticism of Israel is not tolerated.

Let me exercise my freedom of speech. Belief in a religion does not give a legitimate entitlement to someone else's land. Such claims cannot stand. There is no promised land. There are no chosen people. There is only ancient myth. Belief in a religion, or identification with a religious ideology, does not give the right to impose that belief on others.

I am not against Jews or Muslims or any other kind of believer. I am against beliefs that cause good people to do bad things.

Israel is a state that systematically denies equal rights to non-Jewish citizens, especially in relation to land. Containing the Palestinian population indefinitely in conditions akin to bantustans and ghettos is not a sustainable solution. The only solution is a single secular state in which all people have equal rights. Only then will Israel be a light to the world.

Criticising religion does unavoidably sometimes offend cultural sensitivities. However, some things need to be said. I now turn to my criticism of Islam.

Many Muslim societies are dysfunctional. Islam is the cause of the dysfunction. I would like to focus on several perceptions in Islam that I think particularly need to be challenged. These are related to Koranic inerrancy, the prophet Muhammad, jihad and perceptions of a golden era of Islam

## **Koranic authenticity**

In Islam, fear is the dominant motivating emotion. This enforces a rigid adherence to Koranic authenticity. Unlike in Christianity and the Bible, no part of the Koran can be denied or rejected by a Muslim. Only wilfully blind “interpretation” is possible. Muslims contend that the Koran is the exact word of Allah, delivered to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel in a cave near Mecca.

The Koran is, of course, full of errors and contradictions. In the Koran, man is variously said to have been created from clay, from water, from dust, from the earth, from nothing, from semen and from clots of blood. The Koran has a six-day creation and a geocentric concept of the universe. It describes the sun as being in orbit around the earth.

## **The Prophet Muhammad**

The Prophet Muhammad is lauded in Islam as a paragon of virtue. He is revered and idolised as if beyond reproach. He is regarded as a perfect human being and an example to be followed.

Muhammad was a revolutionary political leader. He was the leader of a military rebellion. We know this from Islamic historical sources. Muhammad was sometimes benevolent, but often ruthless and brutal. At one time he beheaded a whole Jewish tribe. He became wealthy from the booty of war.

By instilling religious fervour, Muhammad was able to unite warriors from different tribes in his cause. He was a brilliant military strategist. With his unprovoked attacks on the Meccan caravans in 623, he launched an unprecedented guerrilla war, the first national insurgency in history, and arguably the most successful.

The esteem in which the Prophet Muhammad is held as a man of peace and virtue, is totally at odds with Islamic history. With such denial, one wonders if the cause is delusion or deception.

## **Jihad**

Muslims often claim that the word *jihad* means to strive or struggle, and they resent the association of the word with the Christian concept of “holy war”. The word jihad may not appear in the Koran, but there are numerous references to the punishments due to be accorded unbelievers. In his book *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris lists sixty quotes<sup>1</sup>.

History shows that the 7<sup>th</sup> century rise of Islam led to a sudden imperial surge that led rapidly to the Islamic conquest of the Persian and most of the Byzantine empire, then to the west, of North Africa, and to the east, of central Asia. I refer you to *Muhammad: Islam's First Great General*, by Richard Gabriel.<sup>2</sup>

Islam is the only religion founded by a military leader. The war verses in the Koran are the proclamations Muhammad used in his military campaigns. Without the battle success he was able to achieve, and which his successors were able to build upon, Islam would not have been established as a great religion. Islam is the only religion born of war and established by war.

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, Sam, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*, Norton, 2005. See in particular p117-123

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel, Richard A, *Muhammad: Islam's First Great General*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 2007

These were backward Arabs from the desert. How did they achieve such success? What was the Muslims' secret weapon?

It was the fearlessness of soldiers imbued with religious zeal. It was the lure of a life in paradise as reward for a death in battle. At the time this was unprecedented. This was Muhammad's innovation. This was the greatest single factor in Islam's early military success.

We cannot begin to understand the phenomenon of Islamic terrorists today, unless seen as an imitation of the tactic of military insurgency pioneered so effectively by the Prophet Muhammad.

### **An Islamic Golden Era**

When Christian Europe had abandoned, the works of the ancient Greeks, Islamic society did enjoy a period of relative advancement. Arab scientists, for a time, led the world in their knowledge. However this was in spite of Islam, not because of it.

The achievements of medieval Muslims occurred when the strictures of Islam were least enforced. Islamic history is wracked by violent disputes between Koranic literalists and those with more rationalist tendencies. These culminated in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when the "door of *ijtihad*", or the path of openness to independent thought, was closed.

This was a historic turning point for Islam, and has not been reversed. It initiated the centuries-long decline of the Islamic world relative to Europe. The closed-mindedness of these societies is typified by the refusal by Islamic scholars to accept the introduction of the printing press for over three hundred years.

Inhibiting progress is a recipe for disaster. In Islam, inhibiting progress is endemic. Islam is a human rights and humanitarian disaster for its believers. We see the cost in terms of the economic and social welfare forgone.

The United Nations Arab Human Development Reports identify "three deficits" compared with other regions. The deficits are in freedom, women's empowerment and knowledge. They refer in detail to the deficiencies in Arab societies, according to all sorts of measures. One example they cite is that the number of books that are translated into Spanish each year is one thousand times the number that are translated into Arabic.

The perception of a Golden Era of Islam, that can be achieved by stricter enforcement of religion, produces an endless reversion to historical failure.

### **Islam's unique characteristics**

Consider these propositions. No other religion preserves pre-modern customs and traditions more than Islam. No other religion expects all to comply with its taboos. No other religion rejects secularism so explicitly. No other religion seeks to impose its own "legal" code. In no other religion are theologians termed "jurists". No other religion makes the demands that Islam does, including even in the United Nations. No other religion has its own version of (so-called) "human rights". No other religion seeks to implement its own financial system. No other religion generally rejects human authority in preference to a presumed supernatural authority. No other religion has a similar ambition of its global imposition. No other religion has such a global political agenda. No other religion thus portends conflict in the way that Islam does.

This is a formidable list, even if some propositions are questionable. It shows that we cannot avoid dealing critically with religion in general, and Islam in particular, despite the cultural sensitivities. We must develop the diplomatic language that makes this possible.

### **What is to be done?**

Hopefully we may have learned that instigating a “holy war on terror” is not a solution. One of the biggest failures as a result of the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, is that both countries have now been provided with constitutions that enshrine Islamic law. This makes establishing democracy virtually impossible in these countries in the long term. Ideologies that place divine law above civil law are inherently authoritarian. Constitutional separation of religion from state is a requirement that has been forgotten. We need a new global secularism.

Current day counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan have very little chance of success because there is no effective de-radicalisation program for the Taliban or other insurgents.

Recently the Americans decided they could not release Guantanamo Bay detainees to Saudi Arabia because they would not be effectively de-radicalised because the de-radicalisation strategies did not work<sup>1</sup>.

It is apparently inconceivable to imagine that terrorists could be de-radicalised by explaining to them that their beliefs, and others like them, are not true. We must make the inconceivable conceivable.

The only de-radicalisation strategy with a possibility of success is to foster reason and evidence-based beliefs, and to make clear the human welfare advantages of this, socially, politically and economically.

Promoting reason, secularism, and universal human rights, irrespective of religion, must be the answer. The greatest counter-terrorism weapon is the power of reason. It is yet to be deployed.

Reason and evidence are not a threat. They are a solution. As ever, ethics and morality are best determined on the basis of the universal principles of compassion, honesty, freedom and justice.

*This is the text of a talk given by John L Perkins to the **2010 Global Atheist Convention: The Rise of Atheism** at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, Melbourne, on 12 March 2010.*

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us\\_and\\_americas/article6982404.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article6982404.ece)