

# Modernisation, multiculturalism and fundamentalism

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Being both an economist and a rationalist, one could be expected to admit to the description 'economic rationalist'. However this term, in Australia at least, has taken on the pejorative meaning of a free market ideologue, even though laissez faire is hardly a rational policy. Perhaps the term should be redefined, and the term 'economic pseudo-rationalist' used instead to describe such sentiments. However, if the existing term can be associated with the telling of home truths that people do not wish to hear, there are certainly some rationalist home truths regarding religion that a rationalist economist may deliver.

The economic portents are not good. With possible recession looming, exacerbated by excessive debt, with global warming, and with world oil depletion and rising prices, we have enough to worry about.

Solving these daunting problems will require an unprecedented level of international cooperation. Now, compounding these, we have the additional problems of terrorism and the ill-considered 'War on Terror'. This has led to increased distrust and hostility between nations, disregard for the rule of international law and disrespect for international institutions, encouraging dangerous nuclear weapon proliferation. Within many countries these troubles are leading to an increasing breakdown of social cohesion and cultural harmony. The

main cause of all this hostility is religion. Thus it is necessary to precede any discussion of fundamentalism by spelling out some rationalist home truths.

As Mark Twain once said: 'Faith is believing what you know ain't so.' Because of what we know now, we must struggle ever harder to believe. All cultures have creation myths; all think their own myths are true. However we know, according to the best estimation that reason and observation can provide, they are not all true — they are all false. Religions are nothing more than cultural mythology. They are man-made inventions. This is obvious from the contradictions within and between them, and from the history of how beliefs have arisen and evolved. Truth is found by reasoning and experimentation, not from 'authoritative' religious texts. There are gaps in our scientific knowledge, but none indicating that any religious explanation is required. The existence of an omnipotent, benevolent deity is conclusively refuted by the occurrence of events such as natural disasters.

How do religious advocates respond to these facts? They respond with the psychological tactics of denial, diversion, distraction and obfuscation. Believing what is known to be false is truly 'beyond belief'. This behaviour is not rational, hence we must seek psy-



chological explanations for it. In an individual, persistent adherence to false beliefs can only be described with one word: delusion. The phenomenon of religion may reasonably be described as one of culturally induced mass delusion. It might be thought that, despite this, religions provide some worthwhile consoling or charitable benefits. Whatever these benefits might be, they are overwhelmed by the costs. One of the most significant problems with such delusions is that they lead to presumptions of god-given rights, god-given laws and god-given lands. However, there are no such rights, laws or lands. These particular delusions, and the actions based upon them, are the root cause of the injustice in the Middle East and elsewhere. This injustice is the prime motivation for terrorism. Now, a further religiously deluded reaction to terrorism has in turn led to the disastrous US-led invasion of Iraq, further intensifying the perceived injustice.

In addition to these legitimate grievances, there is no doubt that ample additional justification for Islamic terrorism can also be found in the *Qur'an*. Attempts to prove otherwise by use of selective counter-quotation are dishonest subterfuge. However, whatever the malevolence that may be inspired by the *Qur'an*, the prior role of Judaic land acquisition in inflaming it into action should not be ignored. Worse, all this may be more than matched by what the Bible may yet inspire, especially the book of Revelation, with its hideous apocalyptic visions. Unfortunately, the influence of these psychotic notions on the crusading military policies of the administration of US President George W Bush cannot be discounted.

That global security could be massively disrupted in this way, by belief in such ancient nonsense, is both frightening and tragic. We are facing a medieval clash of Iron Age religious ideologies, fought with twenty-first century weapons. The people who perpetrate this madness are not crazy, but are victims of deception and of mass psychosis. This is propagated by edu-

cation systems, by the media and by governments. The problems we face are not merely caused by Islamism, or by fundamentalism in general. These are only the symptoms. The cause is religion itself. We are all emotionally susceptible to unnecessary and unwarranted belief. We are all direct or indirect victims of this. We need help to overcome our deluded beliefs, not encouragement to indulge in them. There will be no solution to our increasingly dire problems until this is achieved. How did we get into this mess, and what can we do about it?

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### **Modernisation**

The rise of fundamentalism may seem incongruous in a high-tech world of increasing modernity, prosperity, materialism and globalisation. It was once supposed that with increasing modernisation, scientific sophistication and secularism, religion would gradually disappear. A certain trend towards non-belief has indeed occurred to some extent in many countries, but it is counteracted by an apparent opposing trend of religious resurgence in general and of fundamentalism in particular. Part of the



reason why these conflicting trends may simultaneously occur is that they are to a large extent occurring in communities that are geographically or culturally distinct.

In countries where fundamentalism is increasing, this is happening not in spite of modernisation, but

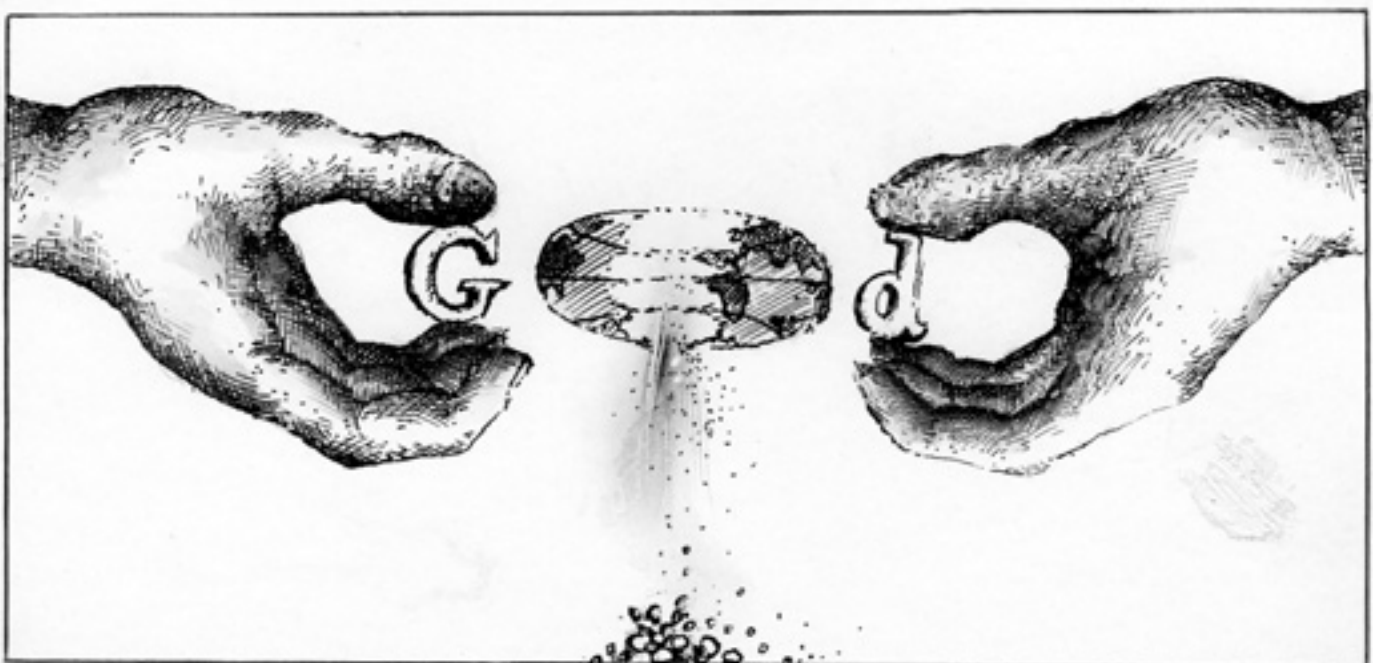


partly because of it. Where the prevailing culture promotes a religious view, especially that of Islam, increased modernisation and prosperity is typically used in such a way that provides greater cause and greater opportunity for fundamentalism to develop. Modernisation provokes reaction from a backward-yearning ideology. Increased technology provides a greater means and opportunity for the dissemination of fundamentalist views. Global injustices and political motivations provide only part of the explanation. The central role is played by education, or rather mis-education.

Economic forecasting is an inexact science, but certain long-term trends are discernible. One of the popular myths that an economist may wish to dispel is that we are not getting more prosperous. We may not feel wealthier compared with our contemporary peers, but compared to previous generations we are certainly better off. This has come about not through capitalism per se but through technical progress. One of the ways in which societies have seen fit to dis-

burse the benefits of higher living standards, particularly over the last fifty years, is through increased provision of education. In many countries, more education means more religious education.

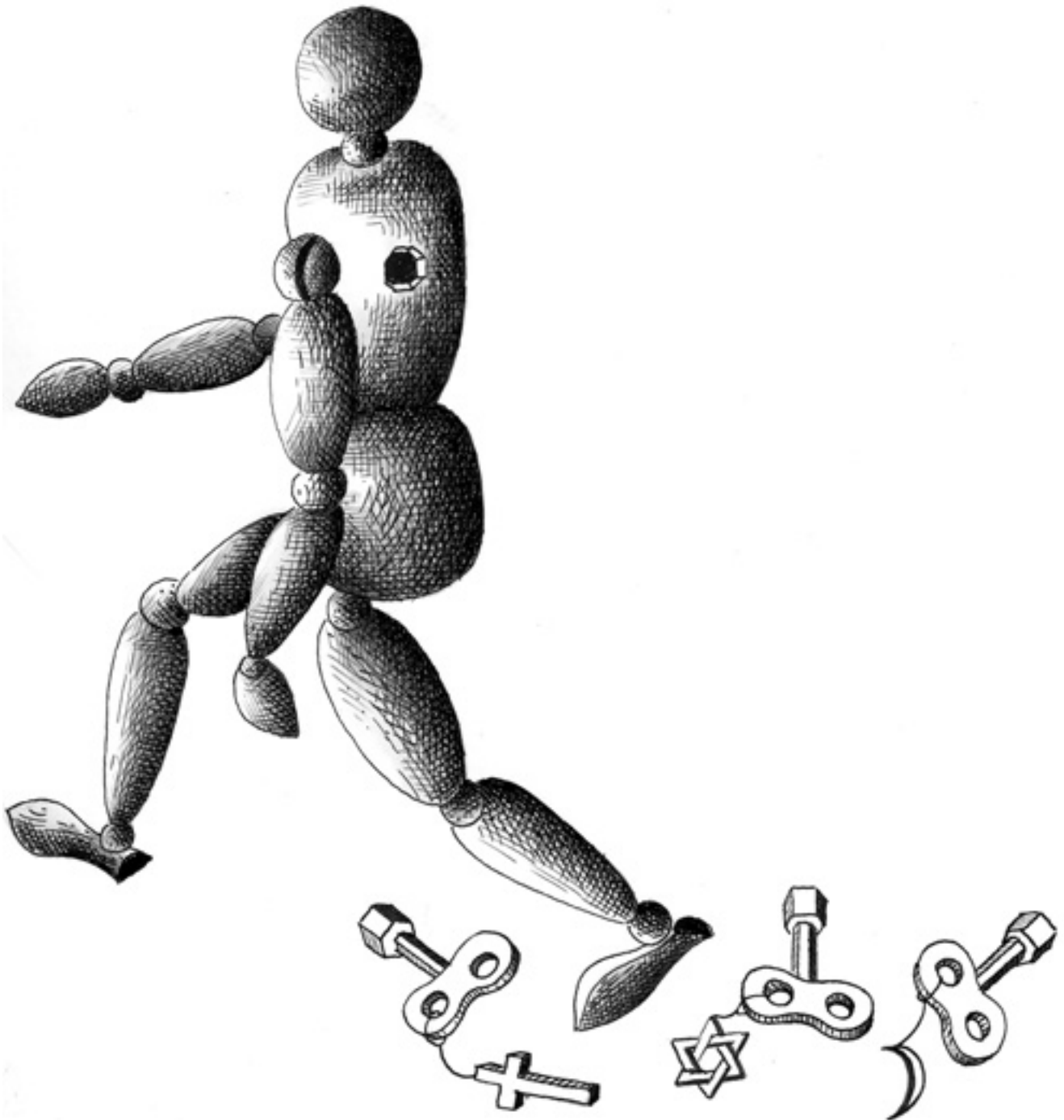
In Australia we have seen this in the large shift from government to private schools, which are almost all religiously affiliated. Many countries in Europe also have long traditions of state-supported religious education. This has not resulted in a widespread outbreak of fundamentalism, at least not yet. The situation differs in most Islamic countries, where religion is institutionalised to a far greater degree. Even in so-called secular countries such as Egypt, in government schools religion takes up around ten per cent of class time at all levels. This does not include time spent learning Arabic, which throughout the Muslim world is taught by studying the texts of the *Qur'an*. A pass in an examination on religion is a compulsory requirement for entrance to university. Critical inquiry is not encouraged, and religion is not distinguished from factual knowledge. In most Islamic



countries, religion permeates everyday life, society, media, politics, law and the constitution.

The debilitating effect this socialisation of religion has on the quality of life in Arab countries has been starkly outlined by the Arab Human Development Reports, produced for the United Nations by independent scholars from the countries concerned. They identify huge deficits in human rights, women's empowerment and in knowledge. Mass media are controlled and restricted. The number of books translated into Spanish each year is one thousand times the number translated into Arabic. Female labour force participation is by far the lowest in the world.

There is a dearth of scientists and engineers. The proportion of gross domestic product spent on research and development is negligible. Industrial innovation is stifled by widespread fatalism. In spite of oil wealth, economic performance and per capita income growth are the lowest in the world apart from sub-Saharan Africa. The centuries-old relative decline of Islamic civilisation, which once led the world, is accelerating. The cause of problems of this magnitude cannot be attributed to foreign interference. The cause is religion. The tragedy of the UN reports is that this cause was not or could not be identified, so that these countries remain doomed to spiralling relative decline.



The conflict between modernity and the ruinous idealisation of a seventh-century 'golden age' of Islam motivates governments in Muslim countries to seek a primary role in the public provision of religion. The



aim is to try to control it and direct it in less antisocial directions. But it is this very state involvement in religious affairs that provokes radical reaction. Not only is the state-authorized version of Islam in conflict with dogma, but the role of the state in providing it is seen as blatant and illegitimate usurpation of the power of the perceived deity. In providing state-supported religious education, governments are in a no-win situation. They not only increase religious susceptibility, but breed rebellion from those who oppose the officially supported and authorised version of doctrines. Even in Turkey, which has been the shining example of a secular state in an Islamic culture, this problem is beginning to cause an unravelling of the religion-state separation consensus.

Religions are not democratic institutions, nor are their ideologies democratic. Unless Islam can be challenged on rational grounds, then lasting democracy in an Islamic society is impossible. Democracy requires acceptance of the rule of parliamentary law, whereas Islam requires submission to immutable ancient doctrine. This conflict produces a political dynamic in which secularist groups are opposed to religious elites. This conflict inevitably involves violence and oppression, because the stakes are so high.

The quip that Islamic democracy means 'one man, one vote — once' is not without substance. Once Islam is constitutionally entrenched, any prospect for real democracy effectively disappears. The only hope is if rationality may speak, but such voices are prohibited, not only by legal perceptions of 'blasphemy' but by custom. Even in democratic countries such as Australia, it is considered insensitive and unacceptable to openly challenge religious belief as false and delusory.

### **Multiculturalism**

In the eighteenth century, the scientific revolution in Europe and the Enlightenment led to a systematic diminution of the power of organised religion in political life. Although religion retained a high social profile in most countries, a certain degree of acceptance of differences had mostly reduced the prospect of sectarian strife. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the doctrine of 'religious tolerance' had become established, as had a tradition of non-interference between the affairs of church and state. In monarchist countries like Australia, constitutional separation in the US sense was never fully achieved but the non-interference alternative seemed to be equally effective. Our constitutional ban on the establishment of 'any religion' was interpreted as a prohibition on the sectarian endorsement of any particular religion, and it largely achieved this objective.



Up until the 1970s, the relative peace between the dominant official religion and Catholicism coincided with generalised intolerance in many other respects, most notably in a blatantly racist immigration

policy and policies towards Indigenous Australians. These xenophobic and bigoted blights on our history were finally abolished and the policy of multiculturalism was adopted, in which diversity was welcomed and celebrated. These sentiments have been backed up with state and federal anti-discrimination legislation. All this has been a great step forward for the cause of justice and human rights and has produced an immeasurably more enriched and enlightened society.

In the new age of global religious conflict, however, certain misgivings are now being expressed about the unlimited application of the ideal of multiculturalism. People are concerned about where to draw the line between diversity and divisiveness. The problems with multiculturalism essentially occur where it neglects or abandons rationalism. Multiculturalism implies acceptance of multiple religions and multiple belief systems. A departure from rationalism occurs, however, if we accept that there are multiple truths. We seem to have arrived at this position when the ideal of religious tolerance was advanced to become one of 'full religious liberty'. A proposed 'Religious Freedom Act' based on this ideal was wisely rejected by the federal government, but other legislation such as that prohibiting religious vilification has been enacted in several state jurisdictions.

The difficulty with such solutions is their tendency to protect religious exponents from legitimate criticism and also to permit, in the name of religion, the infringement of rights that would otherwise be protected. There are many instances where anti-discrimination laws give exemptions to discrimination practised in pursuit of a religious purpose. Despite a common assumption to the contrary, children have a right to be protected from religious indoctrination in schools. The development of the social norm that inhibits the articulation of forthright rationalist home truths is a negative aspect of multiculturalism. This norm has been variously enacted in legislation that is designed to 'avoid injury to the religious susceptibilities' of religious adherents.

While no doubt well-meaning, this sentiment, which promotes moral relativism and the acceptance of the fiction of multiple truths, is seriously flawed. The absurdity of this postmodern philosophy has given intellectual sustenance to pre-modern religious

ideologies. Many other forms of superstition and pseudoscience have increased in popularity as a result. While our own cultural myths may be exposed as disappointing frauds, multiculturalism provides hope that the newfound myths of other cultures may provide substitutes of significance. But

civilisation cannot exist indefinitely with the notion that there are multiple truths that are somehow impervious to reason and to evidence. Perceptions of reality are socially constructed, but there are universal concepts that transcend culture. The 'multiple truth' fantasy world is child-like, but the consequences are not child's play. If those in free and open societies like ours are not able to come to this realisation, there is little hope that those in societies that are more oppressed by religion will be able to do so.

### **Fundamentalism**

Injustice, modernisation and multiculturalism, combined with a

deficiency of rationalism, have given rise to an increased religious susceptibility within large sections of most societies. The spectre of conflict, by heightening in-group/out-group cultural identification, has further intensified this tendency. Given these conditions, a rise in fundamentalism is perhaps not too surprising. However, it is not necessarily the case that beliefs have become more extreme or that fundamentalists have gone beyond the beliefs that their religions prescribe. Fundamentalists just make a more diligent effort than moderates do to believe what the religion says they are supposed to believe.

Islamic fundamentalism has become more prominent, not only as a result of geopolitical circumstances, which provide an understandable motivation for discontent, but because of the nature of Islam itself. The doctrines of Islam (which means 'submission') certainly do more coercively compel belief than those of other religions. As many humanist commentators have said, fundamentalist Islam *is* Islam. This is because, unlike those of other religions, Muslims are not able to selectively reject parts of the *Qur'an* and remain Muslims. All of it must be accepted. Islamic terrorists and suicide bombers repeatedly cite the *Qur'an* as their source of justification. Indeed, a reading of the *Qur'an* can readily reveal violent exhortations (in the so-called 'war verses'). Given that some Muslim grievances are quite legitimate, and given their powerlessness in many instances, is it perhaps

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hardly surprising that some extremist believers resort to illegitimate means to try to resolve these grievances. Despite all the disingenuous protestations, these actions are not unpopular. Surveys of Muslim opinion worldwide reveal that Osama bin Laden enjoys a high degree of respect.

Islamic apologists attempting to explain terrorism to a non-Islamic audience understandably have great difficulty in admitting this. Terrorism has been ascribed, by some Islamic leaders, to a deviant cult, arising from brainwashing, and as something outside the mainstream — not the 'true Islam'. This depiction belies the fact that there is no difference in principle between a religion and a cult, apart from the number of believers. Most religions originate as cults.

native — is not to indulge in faith-based cultural beliefs at all, but to seek to believe only what is in accordance with reason and observation. The key to understanding fundamentalism, then, and the path to its remedy, lies in seeing it as an inherent part of all religion. Fundamentalism is not new. Instead, modernisation and multiculturalism have led to a global neo-tribalism which makes it more apparent. It is not so much that the provocateurs are more extreme, but rather that the extremists are more provoked.

## Conclusion

Why is it that people so readily indulge their religious susceptibilities, and so enthusiastically seek to impress upon others their dedication to such



Both religions and cults are the result of brainwashing. Almost anything, including terrorism, can be justified on the basis of some religious text. This explanation for fundamentalist terrorism suffers from the same deluded wishful thinking and hypocrisy that is inherent in religion itself.

Some religious leaders have expressed the view that moderate belief is the 'polar alternative' to fundamentalism. This view is also deficient. Fundamentalism is the belief in fundamentals — that is, that all aspects of the religion are absolutely true. Moderate belief, then, would be absolute belief in only some aspects of the religion, or partial belief in part of them. In this sense, fundamentalists are simply more diligent and sincere. However, the only morally legitimate and honest position — the true polar alter-

unproven and implausible notions? The most proximate reason is childhood indoctrination, sustained by an induced fear of the future and guilt about the past. People want and strive to believe because they think they should; because they think it is good. But religions are not good — not socially, not economically and not morally. Far from it, they are perhaps the greatest malevolent threat we face. Religion is an addiction, a meme disease, for which rationalism and humanism are the only remedies. Unfortunately, global society has yet to take even the first step in overcoming this problem, which is to recognise that it is, in fact, a problem.

The solution is certainly not to restrict freedom of speech. Attempts at suppression will only be counterproductive. Laws that prohibit religious vilifica-

tion are misconceived. Religions should be given all the rope they need to expose their own mutual absurdities. Laws that equate racial and religious vilification falsely elevate religion to the status of a sacrosanct biological characteristic. Attempts to constrain outspoken religious leaders will only inflame problems. Fundamentalists should be free to advocate their extravagant desires for global Islamic states and to rave on about their apocalyptic heavenly raptures as much as they like. Rationalists should have the freedom to denounce them as the deluded religious psychopaths that they are. It is only by exposing the truly malevolent nature of all religions that enlightenment will come.

Religions should not be supported by any form of state subsidy or endorsement. They are not entitled to benefit from the assumption that they should be treated on an equivalent basis to factual knowledge. Indulging in false belief should be discouraged, not encouraged. Children should not be religiously indoctrinated in any way. Progress is made by resolving contradictions, not by pretending that irreconcilable dogmas

are compatible. We cannot afford to compound delusion with denial. The problems we face are too serious.

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Religions such as Islam, which place a higher importance on the laws of doctrine than the laws of state, are ultimately incompatible with democratic society. Islam is perhaps an ideology with which we cannot indefinitely coexist — but the same can be said for all religions. Judaic and Christian crusading neo-imperialisms are equally culpable, indefensible and unsustainable. They have created further injustice, distrust and breakdown in social cohesion. They pose a real threat of nuclear catastrophe. We live in a multiple-religion fantasy world, which is becoming increasingly unsustainable and incompatible with the survival of civil society as we have known it. Such is the issue that rationalists must face and address. We must seek to convince our fellow citizens that the solution to the problems that humanity faces lies not in religion but in the reliance on the universal humanist values of compassion, honesty, freedom, and justice.

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### **New RSA website**

The Rationalist Society of Australia is proud to announce the launch of its brand new website, which includes past editions of the *Australian Rationalist*, the latest *RSA Newsletter* (detailing upcoming free thinker events and news), information about rationalism, RSA events and activities, useful links, work from our artists, an open forum for discussions, a forum giving you the opportunity to ‘Ask a Rationalist’ a question, and more... We invite our readers to check it all out, and to have your say in the forums, at <[www.rationalist.com.au](http://www.rationalist.com.au)>.

### **The World Trade Organisation: An Australian Guide — 2006 Edition**

Global Trade Watch (GTW) has just published the third edition of its popular booklet, *The World Trade Organisation: An Australian Guide*. The guide is an easy-to-read summary of the global trading system

and how the various World Trade Organisation agreements affect people and environments in Australia and internationally. It also explores various alternatives to the unfair and unsustainable global economic system, and includes ideas on how ordinary people can create change in their own communities and around the world.

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