RELIGION AND SOCIETY: DILEMMAS OF OUR TIME

AN OCCASIONAL PAPER FOR THE RATIONALIST SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA
The cover image is an artist’s impression of the Pantheon as it may have looked after being refurbished at the initiative of the Emperor Hadrian, in the early 2nd century CE.
Religion is both an enduring reality in our world and a seriously problematic one. We can trade statistics or polemics regarding the number of believers in one religion or another, or about whether religious freedom should be respected and on what terms; but the presence of religion in the 21st century remains palpable and is something we must all grapple with. This paper is a brief attempt to set out a position consistent with the ideals and goals of the Rationalist Society of Australia.

We are able to inquire and write freely on this subject, because we live in a largely secular society, in which dogmatic religion has no power to hinder our quest and the political regime is largely open to such searching and writing. John Cleese quipped, when Malcolm Muggeridge pressed him, in a 1978 BBC interview, to admit that *The Life of Brian* was a shoddy film. “Well, I suppose it’s true that, if we’d made this film four hundred years ago, we probably would have been burned at the stake.” Unfortunately, as Salman Rushdie would discover just over ten years after Cleese’s interview, the problem didn’t end 400 years ago. It’s still with us now.

Religious fanatics continue to violently assault unbelievers and apostates. More broadly, the human proclivity to adopt fixed ideas and adopt a rabid attitude to those whose opinions or actions are at odds with their prescriptions is as rampant in our time as it ever was. It stunned me recently to learn that the young Australian entrepreneur of ideas, Desh Amila, when he produced and directed a wonderfully civil and constructive documentary film called *Islam and the Future of Tolerance*, could not secure funding from any standard source, could not get a screening at any film festival or in any cinema chain, could not get an airing
on the ABC or SBS or the BBC and could not get reviews in major print media.

Why? Let’s call this what it is: craven fear of Islamist rancour and contemptible political correctness. This is a scandal of the most shocking kind. What has become of freedom of expression when a beautifully crafted film that tells a story of dialogue across the boundaries between traditional religion and secular rationalism, between the ex-Islamist Maajid Nawaz and the outspoken philosopher and cognitive scientist Sam Harris, can be shunned in this manner, as if it and they were among the Amish and had offended the community? Has it come to this? Have the fatwa against Salman Rushdie and the slaughter at Charlie Hebdo so intimidated our liberal intelligentsia that they balk at a film of this exquisite and temperate nature, merely because it discusses Islam dispassionately?

More than ever, in the light of this extraordinary development, it seems to me that we need to think long and hard about not just religion as such but our collective attitude towards it. And, for the purposes of this paper, I won’t dwell on Islam but will cast my net wider. Islam is certainly deeply problematic in our time, but religion more generally and the attitudes taken towards it by many non-believers are what needs to be put in perspective. Islam is no more than a sub-set of the problem; a special case, as it were. Let’s, therefore, take a broad view, an anthropological view of what religion is, rather than whether any specific one is particularly troubling or objectionable.

1 Islam and the Future of Tolerance was co-directed by Desh Amila and Jay Shapiro. The film was produced by by Think Inc and This is 42. The film has not had a full commercial release and is not available on DVD, but it can be accessed at iTunes - http://bit.ly/IAFOTMovie, at Amazon http://bit.ly/IAFOTMovie2, or at Vimeo: http://bit.ly/IAFOTMovie3.
RELIGION AND ROME

The Pantheon in Rome is an icon of civilized and inspiring religion; but it is safely inspiring, because it was a shrine built to deities that no-one sacrifices to anymore: the seven planetary gods of classical antiquity – Jupiter, Mars Venus and the rest. It will be for that reason a central reference point in this reflection, just as it is a central tourist point for millions when they visit Rome. It was first built during the rule of Augustus, two thousand years ago, under the auspices of his great lieutenant Marcus Agrippa. But it was rebuilt two centuries later, during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian, a famous Philhellene, sometimes rated the greatest of the Roman Emperors. It is a sublime structure; not least the famous dome and oculus, of which Michelangelo was so in awe, 500 years ago, that he declared it ‘the work of angels’.

When the Pantheon was originally built, in the late 1st century BCE, it was already more than a hundred years since the great Greek historian Polybius (208-125 BCE) had written that few educated Romans believed in the old gods, any more than educated Greeks did. They studied philosophy, not theology and were generally Stoics, Epicureans or Platonists. Given the widespread attitudes to religion in contemporary societies, it’s worth recalling what Polybius wrote, long before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, concerning religion in Roman society.

Writing for a largely Greek readership, in Book VI of his history of the rise of the Roman Empire, Polybius declared:

*The sphere in which the Roman commonwealth seems to me to show its superiority most decisively is in that of religious belief. Here we find that the very phenomenon which among other peoples is regarded as a subject for reproach, namely superstition, is actually the element which holds the Roman state together. These matters are treated with such solemnity and introduced so frequently both into public and into private life that nothing could exceed them in importance. Many people may find this astonishing, but my own view is that the Romans have adopted these practices for the sake of the common people.*
This approach might not have been necessary had it ever been possible to form a state composed entirely of wise men. But as the masses are always fickle, filled with lawless desires, unreasoning anger and violent passions, they can only be restrained by mysterious terrors or other dramatizations of the subject. For this reason, I believe that the ancients were by no means acting foolishly or haphazardly when they introduced to the people various notions concerning the gods and belief in the punishments of Hades, but rather that the moderns are foolish and take great risks in rejecting them.

These lines were composed well over four hundred years before the Emperor Constantine took the first steps to making Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. Half a century after he did so, the Emperor Theodosius suppressed pagan religion and made Christianity the only legal religion around the Mediterranean basin. Whether that was a sound or retrograde step for the Empire or for Western civilization has been the subject of serious debate ever since.

We should, however, reflect that since the first stirrings of modern science, the same questions that Polybius pondered with regard to the old, polytheistic religion of the Mediterranean world have been much debated with regard to Christianity itself and the monotheistic religions more generally: should religion be abandoned and discouraged, or kept for the sake of the common people and social order? Those questions have become ever more pressing in our time. They are difficult to address satisfactorily, not only because so many believers cling by their teeth to their religions, but because political regimes since the 18th century and especially in the 20th century, that attempted to suppress established religions, have themselves been guilty of gross abuses.
The scientific epoch, however, has raised questions of a kind that none of the religions can answer. Between the espousal of the heliocentric theory of the cosmos by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) in the 16th century and the discovery of biological, including human, evolution by Charles Darwin in the mid-19th century, the claim that a God had created the cosmos and had a design in mind regarding its purpose and destiny has become more and more untenable. What is commonly called ‘the Copernican revolution’ displaced the Earth from what Aristotle, in the late 4th century BCE, had declared was a stationary centrality, with the Sun, Moon and stars revolving around it. Copernicus showed that, on the contrary, the Earth revolves around the Sun. This idea had first been espoused by Hellenistic scientists in the 3rd century BCE, most famously by Aristarchus of Samos (310-230 BCE), but had not taken hold. After Copernicus it did.

The development of telescopes in the 17th century and after led, step by step, to an even more astounding discovery: our Sun was not itself the centre of the cosmos either, but was merely a modest star far out on a spiral arm of a vast galaxy that consists of numberless stars – perhaps 250 to 300 billion of them, according to current estimates - many of them immensely larger than ours. Note the somewhat quaint notion, incidentally, that it is ‘our’ star. In fact, we sit in a contingent ‘goldilocks’ zone in our orbit around the vast atomic furnace of this star and when, in due course, it begins to expand into a red giant, it will first overheat, then obliterate ‘our’ planet. Fortunately, that inexorable outcome is estimated by astrobiologists to be several billion years away; but it is calculated based on atomic physics. ‘God’ is nowhere in the picture.

As recently as 1916, leading astronomers, such as Harlow Shapley (1885-1972) and Vesto Slipher (1875-1969) concluded that the Milky Way was the cosmos and that its centre was the centre of the cosmos – some 30,000 light years from Earth. But in the 1920s, Edwin Hubble (1889-1953) showed that the Milky Way is only one of a large number of galaxies – we now count them in the tens of billions – and that even nearby there is at least one which is larger than our own: Andromeda. If we were some special creation and the greatest concern of a God who had created
the cosmos, what had the Deity been thinking? Why all these countless stars and galaxies? If the Bible was the revealed truth about the world, what conceivable relationship was there between the account of creation in the Book of Genesis and these cosmic realities?

**GOD IS DEAD**

It was the dissipation of our imagined centrality and special status that led Friedrich Nietzsche to declare, decades before even Hubble’s stunning discoveries, that ever since Copernicus man had been sliding from the centre towards X. In other words, our place in the cosmos had become ever more uncertain and decentred. We may have been a remarkable species and our scientific discoveries truly awe-inspiring, but we had realized that reality utterly transcended our primitive notions of being the prized creation of God and the whole point of creation itself. Famously, in fact Nietzsche made another, even more dramatic claim in the 1880s: God is dead. The phrase resounded through the 20th century, but it necessarily strikes the positivist mind as odd and the monotheistic one as an oxymoron. It needs a little unpacking.

The proclamation of the death of God is most dramatically made in Nietzsche’s book *The Gay Science*, published in 1882 when its author was 38 years old. It appears in aphorism 125 and is made by a fictional madman in the marketplace to a group of those who do not believe in God. When the madman comes among them in the morning holding up a lamp and crying out that he is looking for God, they find what he says absurd. Is God a child? Has he got lost? Has he emigrated or gone on a holiday? They mock him and laugh at his theological seriousness. He assures them, however, that the absence of God is anything but a joke.

He insists that humanity has killed God and, in doing so, has wiped away the entire horizon of being, with unfathomable consequences. The passage is powerful and dramatic. The madman astonishes the unbelievers in the marketplace by declaring to them:
How did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down?...God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?...

Nietzsche, of course, was a classical scholar and philologist who knew his Greek and Latin and was familiar not only with the ancient polytheistic myths but with the history of Christianity from its beginnings and the many debates about the divinity or otherwise of Jesus of Nazareth. His father and both his grandfathers had been Lutheran pastors. His ‘madman’ was a mythic figure whom he invented in order to capture and dramatize the human significance of what the modern sciences have done by ‘killing’ the God who supposedly created and oversaw our special place in the cosmos. The above passage belongs with Hesiod’s *Theogony* and the tale of Prometheus – but also with the passage I cited from Polybius.

Poetry, as compared with science, is an attempt to capture the felt experience human beings have about things. Whether or not we are religious in any common meaning of that term, poetry or song can enable us to get our bearings. On a recent visit to Rome with my partner, I attempted to give expression to our experience of the Pantheon for these reasons. The poem is simply called ‘Pantheon’. It was written for her, but has much wider resonance. It reads:

*We reached the fabled Pantheon at dusk,*
*Meandering down from the Borghese Gardens,*
*Where we’d lingered on the Pincio,*
*Discoursing on the villa of Lucullus,*
*As the sun declined above the Vatican.*

*We made our way past Trinita dei Monti*  
*And through the crowds upon the Spanish Steps,*  
*With passing thoughts of dying Keats and Shelley;*
We cast our coins into the Trevi Fountain,
Then came, at last, to the Sanctissimum.

Remember Nietzsche’s madman sagely asking,
When hauled out from a church for having chanted
His requiem for the eternal God,
‘What are these buildings now, if not the tombs
And sepulchres of what we thought divine?’

In just that spirit, surely, Hadrian,
The Empire’s ruler at its apogee,
Reconceived what M. Agrippa built;
Bequeathing us a truly stunning shrine
To all the seven planetary gods.

But, as with other monuments that day,
What most impressed itself upon my mind
Was less the awesome structure in itself
Than your naively beautiful response
To all the layered meanings of that space.

And how, in Catholic pews beneath the dome,
That Michelangelo himself described
As the work of nothing less than angels,
We sat by candlelight and spoke in earnest
Of all our deepest thoughts and future plans.

All of us, in the 21st century marketplace society, would do well to ponder the matter of religion in such spaces – and talk in earnest about all our deepest thoughts and future plans.

For what Nietzsche called ‘the death of God’, though still resisted by many believers, is a major issue in our time. We confront the strange and disturbing spectacle of billions of human beings clinging to their monotheistic or even polytheistic beliefs, despite clear evidence from the physical sciences that these beliefs are without foundation. Worst of all, as we see in the case of Islamist jihad in the name of God and Muhammad, some of them are willing to destroy our marketplace society if they can, rather than come to terms with the death of their religion or the profound need to rethink their scriptural traditions.
Writing some thirty years before the First World War and long before those upheavals and cultural revolutions we associate with the 20th century, Nietzsche in his own voice forecast two centuries of upheavals, again in dramatic words directed primarily at Western civilization—though we can see that he might as readily have been writing about Islamic civilization, or even the Chinese world, as Mao’s Cultural Revolution made dramatically clear in the late 1960s:

*What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what is inevitable: the rise of nihilism. This tale can already be told, for necessity itself is at work here. This destiny speaks in a hundred different signs, announcing itself everywhere; for this ‘music of the future’ all ears are already pricked. The whole of our European culture has long been in an agony of suspense, increasing with each passing decade, as if in anticipation of disaster, like a torrent, restlessly, violently rushing to its end, refusing to reflect, afraid to reflect.*

Rationalists would do well to consider that Nietzsche was onto something. The only cultural answer we can hope to find to his disturbing challenge is one grounded in the sciences but committed to a radical hermeneutical overhaul of all our religious traditions— from a phenomenological and existential point of view. Yet that task is enormous and far from straightforward. Everything is coming to a head in our time. Will we be afraid to reflect, or can we take on the challenge? Let me outline why I think we should reflect and how I believe we can take on the challenge.

**MODERN DISENCHANTMENT**

One of the greatest scholars of religion and social order was Max Weber (1864-1920). He died of the Spanish flu in 1920, aged only 56. The most important aspect of his highly influential thinking that needs to be registered by rationalists is his idea that the modern world has seen, through the advances of rationalism, science, bureaucratic social organization and capitalist approaches to time and motion, what he dubbed *die Entzauberung der Welt*—the disenchantment of the world. This was his broadening of Nietzsche’s recognition of the death of God.
At the most fundamental level, Weber was arguing that for better or worse, everything that made religions existentially appealing and that structured human relations to the intuitive or mystical – belief in spiritual beings, whether gods or angels, devils or natural animisms; in miracles; in the efficacy of prayer; in magic; in sacraments; in life after death; in souls as entities separate from our bodies; in heaven or hell; in there being a providential design behind nature or history – was being eliminated relentlessly by the physical sciences and the exercise of critical reason.

To cling to any of these things made less and less sense. Yet the loss, in terms of the existential economy of human life and culture, he believed, was enormous and it was far from clear what could be generated to replace such things and rebalance human culture in the modern world. Taking his cue in many ways from Nietzsche, he didn’t see the disenchantment of the world as ‘progress’ in any straightforward or enthusiastic way. He saw it as something unanticipated and humanly problematic.

Weber famously concluded his best-known book, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, with the remark:

No one knows who will live in this [iron] cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrifaction, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.’

His assessment of where things stand now, a century later, would be interesting. It’s rather likely that he would recoil from a great deal that now characterizes our globalized world. But what would surely overwhelm him is the explosion of human technologies, human populations, human consumption of raw materials and bio-matter; in short what has recently been dubbed the Anthropocene.
Our physical sciences have thrown open to us, in the past couple of centuries, an understanding of the geological and biological character and age of the Earth of which no earlier human civilization had any grasp. What we are now realizing is that we are generating a geological epoch all of our own and one that may well end, within a vanishingly brief period in geological terms, with an epic disaster of global proportions. Would we have been better off had we not ‘killed God’; had we remained within the naturalistic cycles of primitive myths and closed societies, ignorant of the realities of the cosmos and of evolution – as Claude Levi-Strauss more or less argued in his anthropological treatises in the 20th century? It’s a disturbing thought, to which our response should, surely, be a grave and thoughtful dissent rather than either assent or glib mockery.

If you are largely unacquainted with the anthropology of religion and the wider sweep of what Weber and Nietzsche were concerned about, you would do well to read Roy Rappaport’s *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* and Robert N. Bellah’s *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Palaeolithic to the Axial Age*, then Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas (eds) *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*. For we have not only evolved biologically, but culturally and cultural evolution has been no more teleological – preconceived and designed by a guiding hand – than has biological evolution. Such books are, of course, only a point of entry; an entry into what rationalists might regard as a museum of curiosities, but which holds the keys to the enigma of our humanity and to why so many of our contemporaries still cling to many strange beliefs and traditions.

Without, in this brief paper, entering into a discussion of what religions are and what functions they perform, or how to work our way through their often arcane claims on human credulity, I want to argue that we are all now implicated in a gigantic process that no-one planned; that God, Allah or Providence has no role in; and for which we are not yet taking collective responsibility in anything like an adequate manner. What we are experiencing is the climax of some fifteen thousand years of human technological and cultural development, since the end of the last Ice Age. It wasn’t intended by anyone or anything and no-one is in
control of it. It’s exhausting the biosphere and could end in the mother of all mass extinctions, including our own.

It badly needs, from this point on, to deeply inform:

A. our sense of what kind of beings we are,
B. how we think about our place in the cosmic and terrestrial scheme of things,
C. how we look back at our history as a species and, not least,
D. how we rethink and reshape the things we call our religions.

The chief subject of concern here is the last of these challenges, but they cannot even be seen as challenges unless we first agree that the modern sciences have made clear that we are one species among countless others; that they were not put here by special creation for our use; that most of them emerged, flourished and went extinct millions of years before our primate ancestors appeared on the scene a few million years ago; that we were not created in the image of any God, but evolved over a long period of time to have unusual characteristics, including a very particular kind of imperfect brain; that we are embedded in the biosphere and are as mortal as all other beings and that our religions evolved, spun off by our peculiar human brains, as a response to both the natural world and the challenges of building more and more complex human societies. They did not come down from ‘above’ as ‘revelations’ from any deity or its messengers.

These claims can’t be demonstrated here and even at book length the arguments would encounter challenges from all quarters. After all, the claims made in the previous paragraph are not the common beliefs of the eight billion or so members of our species on Earth. Several billion of them still officially adhere to some form or other of Christianity or Islam. The things I have stipulated, however, are simply the reality within which, whatever these billions choose to believe, we are all in fact embedded. It is, I suggest, in terms of this reality that our collective fate will be determined.
The question before us is, as I see it: what role is religion likely to have in the way that fateful reality plays out? What is the relationship – conflictual, oblique, congruent in any way – between the old religions or their new-fangled, latter-day variants and rivals, on the one hand; and the ecological and social challenges we are now confronting? Whatever our professed religious beliefs – and all the more so if they are seriously held – we should be asking ourselves this question and debating it in earnest in a search for common ground.

To answer this question, even provisionally, requires a great deal of thinking and to generate agreement on it, even among those reading this occasional paper; would be exceptionally difficult. For what they are worth, therefore, these are my own thoughts, after the better part of a lifetime wrestling with these issues. For simplicity's sake, I’ll anchor my remarks in reference to the religions of the Bible – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Islam is, I should emphasize, a religion of the Bible, since without the Bible the claims of the Qur’an would lack any foundation. Muhammad claimed, after all, to be the ‘seal of the prophets’ and the true heir of Abraham and believed that Jesus would return in the End Times, which were imminent.

Common to these religions, in all their many variations, are three fundamental beliefs:

1. That God created the world a relatively short time ago, as a stage for the human drama;
2. That there is something called sacred scripture, i.e. the Bible, which prescribes in detail how we should live; and
3. That history will end quite soon in an apocalypse, when a Messiah – Jesus, in the case of Christians and, though this may surprise you, also the Muslims - will come to save the faithful remnant of humanity from the Devil, amid the ravages of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.
The trope of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse appears in the last book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation chapter six, verses 1 to 8. That chapter tells of a book or scroll in God’s right hand that is sealed with seven seals. The Lamb of God opens the first four of the seven seals, which summons four dread beings that ride out on white, red, black, and pale horses and ravage the human world.

Yet *none* of the three beliefs listed above has *any warrant* in what we have learned about the world in the past century or two, nor does the Book of Revelation. Hence the dramatic announcements by Nietzsche and Weber, relatively early in the era we have recently come to describe as the Anthropocene. Nonetheless, the religions of the Book, as they are often called, persist in either dogmatic or apologetic claims and many people seem still inclined to see in them the pillars of civilization and morality. They clamour to have their religions respected, reaffirmed and accepted.

While the history or all these things is wonderfully rich and complex, what we need to do in the 21st century is see these religions for what they really are: the ethical and poetic attempts by iron age seers long ago to grapple with what already seemed to them to be the *troubling course of human history*. And on any reckoning, the course of human history has indeed been troubling – and has not become less so in the past century.

From the tales of the Garden of Eden, the deluge of Noah and the Tower of Babel to the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, to the apocalyptic expectations of Daniel, Jesus and John of Patmos, there is a growing sense throughout the Bible, that the human story is not what it should be and that it can only be turned around or resolved by some colossal divine intervention – but also that the religion centred on God is itself continually becoming corrupted by idolatry, the greed of priestly casts and the hypocrisy of those who preach belief but do not live righteous and compassionate lives. This theme is, as it happens, the point of departure for Muhammad and the obsessive theme of the Qur’an.

All those raised as Christians are broadly familiar with this narrative. The story is stirring and has some relationship with historical realities, but the apocalypse, if it comes, will not be redemptive. It will be *catastrophic* – nuclear war, genocide, pandemics of super bugs, mass extinctions, rampant AI, environmental devastation without any kind of second coming or redemption. It has, if at all possible, to be
avoided, not looked forward to in hope or rapture. We might be able to adapt the apocalyptic language of the Abrahamic religions to this situation, but a moment’s reflection indicates how radical the adaptation needs to be and the stance of Islamists suggests they are hell bent on bringing on the religiously anticipated End Times, rather than fending them off. *We have to take responsibility for the Earth, not trust in God or Allah. There is no basis for such trust and no authentic Deity in which to trust.*

As part of the long cycle of poems which includes ‘Pantheon’, I wrote a poem recently called ‘Book of Revelation’, which gives expression to this background and this interpretation of the Bible. Once again, though addressed intimately, it has a clear meaning in the public space. It reads as follows:

```plaintext
We grew up, we two, in Christian homes;
Bathed, for all we little knew,
In the aura of the apocalypse:
That diffuse cultural notion,
Shards and shimmers of which,
With elements of Catholic ritual,
Fragmentary scenes from the odd Gospel
And dimly apprehended lines from Paul,
Glued together, like a colloid,
Our patchwork of quite confused beliefs.

Is that not so, or was it not just so?
Yet what, then, did ‘apocalypse’ denote?
When did we ever have explained,
By one who may have known their many meanings,
What sainted John of Patmos might have meant
With his Alpha and Omega and Amen?
Innocent, of course, of what the saint deplored
In the patient tribulation – so he wrote –
Of all the seven churches then in Asia;
What should we have thought?
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Yet, looking back to that cacophony
Of late first century mystical imaginings;
And, steeped now in many sound sciences,
I discover in his fiery flow of images
Borrowings from both Daniel and the Stoics.
I see Nero as the shadow of the Beast
And contemplate world-ending cataclysms
In terms of the later sack of Rome,
Or fears for our blue Earth in human hands.
Do you so read the Book of Revelation?

Of course, like everyone who did have a Christian upbringing, I did not simply grow up in a Christian home. We all grew up in the era of the nuclear arms race and the Cold War; in the immediate wake of the Holocaust and the fire-bombing of Germany and Japan; of the GULAG archipelago, the Cultural Revolution in Mao’s China and the Vietnam War. Many of us, Christian or not, decided when young that we could not but grapple with all these things and find a better grounding for our view of the human condition than the Bible or Papal encyclicals such as *Humanae Vitae*. One might say that I have ended up writing this occasional paper because I have spent a lifetime pondering these dark and overwhelming matters.

It’s worth emphasizing, in terms of the project of overhauling our religious traditions, that we do not need to reject Christianity or religion more generally in their entirety. We can and I suggest we should still see them as rooted in the human past and as complex parts of our human patrimony. One can still love and listen to Palestrina, Bach and Handel; or revel in deeply liturgical requiem masses like those by Mozart or Brahms or Verdi’s extraordinary requiem for Alessandro Manzoni. We should be as in awe of the greatest Christian architecture, art and ritual as we are of the Pantheon. We should see the Bible as a highly complex text, which is even more deeply embedded in our past than are the classic epics by Homer or the plays of Shakespeare. We cannot say the same, in the West, of Islam, because it is alien to our Western heritage, but we can make comparable statements about it – as should those in Muslim countries.
None of this should, I suggest, be jettisoned. Rather, its full existential weight and significance must be appreciated and brought to bear in the cause of 21st century human responsibility and the overhauling of global human civilization. It’s just not altogether clear how this is to be done, especially given the deeply entrenched reactionary character of the Catholic and Orthodox hierarchies, with their roots in the administrative institutions of the Roman and Byzantine Empires and their deeply Pharisaical approach to dogma, moral law and ritual – to say nothing of Islam, as we see it in Saudi Arabia, Iran and many other places.

OVERHAULING CIVILIZATION

Rather than dwell upon the faults of our religious traditions, however, especially given serious spatial constraints in a brief paper of this nature, I want to propose a broad philosophical approach to this challenge, which applies equally to all religions. It is this: that we need to shift from the primitive literalism of so much religion to a combination of awe at the actual, material world of which we are inextricably a part and on which we are wholly dependent, with the creation of – to use Nietzsche’s lovely phrasing – festivals of atonement and sacred games: communal ceremonies that honour and deepen the ethical and social commitments we must make to one another and to the Earth.

Can this be done? There are no guarantees. It may be that we shall fail. We shall certainly do so if we approach this task frivolously, ignorantly, clumsily or dogmatically. And the 21st century is a time of changes and challenges on such an unprecedented scale that even getting our bearings, or keeping our balance is difficult. We will not achieve a perfect outcome readily, quickly or in one go – indeed, it’s not even clear what would constitute a ‘perfect’ outcome. No earlier attempt at religious renewal took place easily or harmoniously. Not even close. Consider the suppression of paganism and of heretics in the Roman world from the time Christianity was made the state religion in the 4th century CE; or the wars by which early Islam was established. Look at the violent upheavals that occurred in the 16th and 17th centuries, as a result of the Protestant Reformation.
Much, however, that we still look back on with respect and even reverence – such as the Pantheon or the Sistine Chapel – points in the general direction of what we need to imagine and construct, literally and metaphorically, architecturally and socially. It may be that the best and most creative efforts of that fraction of our species awake to this need will not avail, or will not appear to do so over the next century; that the nihilism Nietzsche forecast will deepen and that our children and grandchildren will, in fact, confront an apocalyptic future – not in a religious, but in a secular sense. Numerous end-of-days cults already mislead people in this regard by declaring that they will be ‘saved’ by miraculous means if all they do is believe, since the end is nigh. But I submit that such a grim future isn’t inevitable. It isn’t fated. It isn’t the will of any Deity or the work of any Devil.

It’s one possible outcome, a paradoxical and disturbing possible outcome, of the extraordinary rise and accomplishments of our species, which has been for millennia now a phenomenon without parallel or precedent in the cosmos, as far as we are aware. What we are experiencing and awakening to might be seen as a grand cosmic experiment. We are beginning to comprehend it. We have the means to deepen and share that understanding. Our ‘religion’, or what comes to replace our old religions, must come to consist of that understanding. Awe at the nature of being, humility in the face of the cosmos and solidarity with one another and with our fellow creatures are all necessary to our future and can be summoned forth just to the extent that we blend our old religious inclinations with our emerging scientific and ecological understanding.

**HAMLET AND US**

We more or less grasp, as Hamlet did, that there is “something rotten in the state of Denmark”. Like him, we are called upon to set it to rights. We do not as yet know how or whether we can do so. However, the ghost of our best traditions calls upon us to do – as the ghost of Hamlet’s father called upon him to do so, at Elsinore Castle. We understandably ponder, gloomily at times, the darker possibilities before us.
We hesitate about what to do – as Hamlet did. We might well cradle in our hands the skull of our religious traditions, as Hamlet did the skull thrown out to him by the gravedigger, and remark philosophically:

_Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio. He was a man of infinite jest and most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times._

The whole graveyard scene in Act V of *Hamlet* is among the most brilliant in Shakespeare. Hamlet himself is the most articulate character in literature and stands on the cusp of modernity. He was conjured up for the Elizabethan stage around the beginning of the 17th century – the century in which the discoveries of Galileo, Newton and Descartes set us on the path to the scientific and industrial revolutions that have both rendered our species Promethean and brought us to the very brink of cultural and ecological collapse.

If it was the ghost of Hamlet’s father that urged upon him the necessity to act, we might, out of a certain nostalgia for the best elements of the Biblical tradition, feel that it is the ghost of God that urges us now to act, to take responsibility for our condition and address what is rotten in the state of Denmark. Certain progressive elements of our religious bodies have attempted this since the Second World War. The Catholic Church at least gestured in that direction at the Second Vatican Council. In the documentary to which I referred at the beginning of this paper, *Islam and the Future of Tolerance*, Maajid Nawaz speaks eloquently of his hope that Islam, too, can be drawn in this direction.

But generally speaking, confusion reigns – world-wide. As we can see in the cases of revived religion and its militant or enthusiastic sects, the false, dogmatic, apocalyptic threads in our religious traditions are too deep for us to trust in the existing religions to bring us together and take humanity and the ecosphere to a safe harbour. Faith will not save us. To echo St Paul, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 13, verse 11, but with a profound tone of irony, we have to tell ourselves:

_When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things._

Granted that there are many distinctly adult stories in the Bible and impressive figures, we nonetheless stand at a point where we can no longer afford to think
like children and look to a Heavenly Father to care for us or sort the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats. We must at long last take stock and put away childish things—not cynically, but if I may say so, devoutly, profoundly, with spiritual seriousness.

The purpose of this occasional paper is not to make some narrow point, but to stimulate deep thinking and what might be called politically incorrect but profoundly constructive discussion. If asked to sum it up, I would do so in the following seven points:

1. The Pantheon in Rome is iconic of the hollowed out shrines of a dead religion. Yet it also embodies the greatness of religion at its best and how its shrines and stories can be repurposed for changing times;

2. Polybius, even before the Pantheon was built, was strikingly modern in arguing that religion has its social uses and needs to be understood, even by those who reject its claims;

3. Between Copernicus and Hubble, scientific cosmology has obliterated the idea that the Earth and our species are the centre of the universe and the special concern of a creator God;

4. Nietzsche and Weber felt a certain alarm at what they called “the death of God” and the “disenchantment of the world”;

5. We now live in a world dominated by human numbers, appetites and conflicts: the Anthropocene;

6. Our religions must be seen in this cosmic and ecological context and reshaped to serve useful social ends;

7. This will demand a shift from theological literalism to existentialism and the creation of new cultural forms consistent with both our knowledge and our challenges, but everything is moving very fast and we will have great difficulty keeping our balance as we attempt all this.

Having been appointed a Fellow of the Rationalist Society of Australia, I see these seven points as foundational to my rationalist outlook. Let’s have the discussion and extend it among others as rationally as we can – in solidarity with Desh Amila and those like him.
Dr Paul Monk took a degree in European History, ancient, medieval and modern, from the University of Melbourne, in 1981, with First Class Honours. His honours thesis was on the student rebellion and general strike in France in May 1968. He has a PhD in International Relations from the Australian National University. His dissertation was on American counter-insurgency strategy throughout the Cold War, with case studies of the Philippines, Vietnam and El Salvador. He worked for the Defence Intelligence Organization on East Asia between 1990 and the end of 1995, ending up in 1994-95 as head of the China Desk. He was a founder and principal consultant with Van Gelder and Monk between 2000 and 2017. He is the author of ten books, including The West in a Nutshell, The Secret Gospel According to Mark and Dictators and Dangerous Ideas. He was appointed a Fellow of the Rationalist Society of Australia in 2018. He is a poet, an essayist and a regular writer of reviews and opinion pieces in the serious media.
RELIGION AND SOCIETY: DILEMMAS OF OUR TIME

An occasional paper for the Rationalist Society of Australia

Paul Monk
Fellow of the Rationalist Society of Australia