1. INTRODUCTION:
In this paper we will argue that the present period of rapidly increasing environmental complexity and interdependence tends to increase feelings of insecurity caused by a lack of environment mastery, in both the developed Western world and the largely underdeveloped Muslim world. This will be the case especially in the less educated parts of the population, where it will stimulate an upsurge of religion, especially its fundamentalist versions. In my last few papers I have dealt, directly or indirectly, with the overwhelming political and economic reasons for the war on terror and the leading role of the US in that war, in this paper attention will therefore be directed to these religious aspects, both on the Muslim side and on the US-Christian side, and to the functions of religion as such in the 21st-century world.

For a thorough understanding of the following, nearly all you might ever want to know about terrorism from the Muslim side can be found by thoroughly looking at the PowerPoint presentations – and if you are interested in the subject also the papers of the participants in a 2004 Suicide Terrorism Conference in Washington. A recent MIT study complements these findings. The main points of these presentations will be discussed later. Terrorism from the Western side is somewhat harder to understand since we ourselves are at issue here.

It is a truism that the present-day world is more than ever before characterized by increasing and often inter-correlated differences: the poor vs. the rich, the left-wing progressives vs. the right-wing conservatives, the educated vs. the non-educated, the religious vs. the non-religious, the Judeo-Christian world against the Muslim one, the exploiters vs. the exploited, etc.

To some extent, these differences have always been there, but in the sound bite world of instant TV coverage – which, amazingly, the poor often also have! – they often become painfully visible. Not only can we have our guilt trip by seeing people dying by the thousands on the side of the road through hunger, war or persecution,
but *they* too can see how the affluent part of the Western world lives, and form themselves a generally exaggerated image of it which leads to jealousy. What better anticipatory socialization could an aspiring al-Qaeda terrorist have? And there are many more of them than there are volunteers for the US army.

The above could be seen as a rough description of the tensions between the Western (Christian, Jewish or atheist) world and the Muslim world, but the existing tensions and contradictions *within* each of these worlds are at least as problematic:
- One reason why much of the Muslim world is such a good recruiting ground for al-Qaeda – apart from the fact that the US attacked two Muslim countries - is that, through the lack of countervailing forces, capitalist exploitation – also by local elites!
- is worse there than anywhere in the Western world. These local elites try to protect themselves against possible revolution by often actively directing discontent towards the West and especially towards the US.
- Especially in the US there is another contradiction: while it is one of the richest and technologically most developed nations in the Western world, and certainly the most powerful, and while it also (still) excels in virtually every aspect of science or culture, from nuclear physics to ballet, the population as a whole scores relatively low on education and religious sophistication, and in that sense is more comparable than visible at a superficial glance to many of the Muslim countries that are its adversaries in the war on terror. There is a considerable minority, especially in the so-called (Christian) Bible Belt, where fundamentalism leads to a literal belief in the Bible, coupled with a low tolerance of ambiguity, and becomes manifest in the "Intelligent Design" hypothesis, a successor to the concept of creationism which is assumed to be an answer to evolution theory. While the US certainly still produces top-level science, there is a frightening growth of a deeply rooted and irrational anti-science attitude, especially among the Christian Right, as evidenced, for example, by their resistance against stem cell research.

Freud published his “The Future of an Illusion” already in 1928. His thesis there is that religion fulfills deeply engrained childish insecurities that are hard to eradicated, and he therefore assumes that the illusions inherent in religion will indeed continue:
- A refusal to believe that everything ends with individual death leads to the illogical question "what would then have been the meaning of life".
- The belief in an afterlife, nowadays decreasing in the Western world, is a strong reinforcement for Muslim suicide terrorists in view of the expected sexual rewards, as one of the by now famous Danish cartoons demonstrates

2. RELIGION AND THE WAR ON TERROR

Most wars are fought for territory and/or access to raw materials, often with ideology and/or religion thrown in as an additional motive. However, purely religious wars have been relatively rare since the 1600s. The last more or less purely religious wars were the wars of Islamic expansion beginning in the 7th Century, the Crusades starting in the 11th Century and the Reformation wars beginning in the 16th Century, when religion was forced to start its retreat in the face of accumulating scientific discoveries about the world around us.

Of course, the war on terror is also primarily a war for raw materials, in this case mainly oil, but apart from being packaged as a struggle for democracy – a modern post-colonialist version of “civilizing the natives”! – it has been given a religious
tone already in the beginning when president Bush unlucky announced it as a “crusade”. This was not a slip of the tongue; as an article in the Guardian claims, but the president got his orders to do something about Iraq and Afghanistan directly from God, although this was obviously firmly denied by the White House. In the 21st century, such hallucinations should lead to immediate impeachment. A fellow-Texan, psychologist Doug Soderstrom, considers the US at the moment “the biggest bully on the block” and illustrates this as follows:

“So, the next time you have a chance, listen to George Bush. Listen to Dick Cheney. Listen to Donald Rumsfeld. Listen to what they have to say, and how they say it. Look at how they position their bodies… so straight and tall. Pugnacious profiles. Self-righteous men, hardened to the core, and, no doubt, pious to a tee. Take a look at their faces; the smugness of their smile. And then…… never forget that power corrupts, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely, and that pride, without fail, always cometh before the fall! “

As to the effects of the war on the Iraqi population, it is certainly worth while to look at several blogs on Iraq, which often give a better impression than can be gained from the daily news. There are different estimates about the number of dead in the civilian population. While the US may have had for a long time an isolationist image, reality is different: the actual number of military interventions in foreign countries since 1798 has been an astounding 185, not including both world wars. One of these, by the way, resulted in an agreement signed already February 7, 1901 to cede Cuban territory at Guantánamo to construct a naval base, where detainees are often held without process. One century later, this base is apparently used, together with others in Europe, Iraq (Abu Ghraib) and Afghanistan (Baghram) for what is described euphemistically with terms like “outsourcing of torture”, “extraordinary renditions”, “ghost detainees”, etc. Therefore, in that sense, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are nothing new; and even the fact that the US Press is doing nothing to “challenge the lies of this war” is old hat, as is the conclusion that the US press to a large extent is not a free press anymore.

2.1 On the US side: “Onward Christian soldiers” – The infiltration of the Republican Party and the American government by the Christian right:

What indeed is new and very worrying in what is the most powerful military nation on earth is the increasing importance of the religious element in the present war on terror, and more precisely the growing influence of the fundamentalist Christian right in the US, as documented amongst others by an October 2005 public opinion poll, which concluded that 22% of all Americans consider themselves to be Fundamentalist, Evangelical or Charismatic Christians. Perhaps, half a century after president Eisenhower coined the term “military-industrial complex”, this potentially explosive mixture should be called the “military-religious complex”.

Apart from president Bush, who was re-elected to a large extent by that Christian right, belongs to it himself, and actively promotes its interests, the present US government as a whole is explicitly influenced by the extremely conservative bias of a considerable portion of the electorate, which feels itself under attack in a secularizing (though for European standards still extremely religious) society which they do not feel at home in anymore. Actually, in reality it is the Christian right that is vehemently on the attack against virtually all aspects of modernity, including sex education, and advances in science. It tries to promote a Christian nationalism to attack the secular state, and it is threatening the US Constitution in different ways. Perhaps the US should emulate the excellent Turkish solution: a military
government which takes power in cases of threat against the secular constitution, but only after due warnings, and then voluntarily steps down again when the threat to the secular basis of the state has been removed. Perhaps a suggestion for the US Army!

Incredibly, without even have proven that people do have souls, Bible Belt Christians are trying to save Muslim souls in Iraq:

“American Christian missionaries have declared a "war for souls" in Iraq, telling supporters that the formal end of the US-led occupation next June (2004, FG) will close an historic "window of opportunity". Organising in secrecy, and emphasising their humanitarian aid work, Christian groups are pouring into the country, which is 97 per cent Muslim, bearing Arabic Bibles, videos and religious tracts designed to "save" Muslims from their "false" religion.”

Moreover, they have promoted the emergence of an Islamic theocracy in Iraq. The aggressive activities of the Christian right can indeed be compared with the agitprop (i.e., agitation and propaganda) activities of the Communist parties in the last century, and also with the infiltration tactics of the Nazis in the latter days of the Weimar Republic. The core idea is to obtain power by devious means, i.e., by using stealth tactics, and once obtained subject all of society to that power – i.e., produce a Christian Republic of the USA as opposed to the Islamic Republic of Iran – and then do the Crusades all over again, but this time with an arsenal of atomic weaponry.

The Republican Party has already been infiltrated and largely taken over by Christian fundamentalists,,, while many of them have or are specifically trained to have government functions , - or influence people who have government functions . A ludicrous example is NASA, “where a 24-year-old college dropout was until recently in a position to order senior officials to make references to the Big Bang compatible with the possibility of 'intelligent design.' Another example is formed by the Centers for Disease Control, which classifies all fertile women as "pre-pregnant". One such infiltrating agitprop organization is the Council for National Policy, a highly secretive organization described by the Times as consisting of “a few hundred of the most powerful conservatives in the country” who meet “behind closed doors at undisclosed locations…to strategize about how to turn the country to the right.”

Perhaps dominionism is the clearest expression of the Christian right. The Wikipedia defines it as "a term used to describe a trend in Protestant Christian evangelicalism and fundamentalism, primarily though not exclusively in the United States, that seeks to establish specific political policies based on religious beliefs".

Even a former Republican strategist and prolific writer, Kevin Phillips, who worked on the Nixon campaign in the 1960s, warns against this tendency in his recent book American Theocracy. It is not only the Republican Party on which the Christian right concentrates its efforts at infiltration, but also for example the public school system where efforts are made to introduce Bible classes disguised as literature or history courses. Generally, special prerogatives are asked for by the Christian right under the common denominator “faith-based initiatives”. President Bush has given billions (!) in subsidies to such faith-based initiatives. A lawyer who originally was originally in favour of special treatment for faith-based groups, has
recently published a book reversing her position. Moreover, the title of this paragraph "Onward Christian soldiers" also holds literally true for the Christocrats in the US air force, which - after complaints of *Americans United for Separation of Church and State* of official preference toward evangelical Christianity at the Air Force Academy - drew up draft guidelines in June 2005.

"The guidelines, called “Revised Interim Guidelines Concerning Free Exercise Of Religion In The Air Force,” significantly backtracks from those the Air Force issued last year following an investigation into allegations of heavy-handed forms of proselytization [by Evangelical Christians] at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo.

However, on June 11, 2006 the House approved, voting 396 to 31, a defense authorization bill to the tune of 513 billion dollars, which overrides the earlier Navy and Air Force regulations for non-sectarian prayer at official ceremonies. In other words: Allah and Jahweh will not further participate in the war on terror.

The "Campaign to defend the Constitution" operates a useful website, which documents attacks on the separation between church and state to prevent it from becoming a theocracy. However, that is precisely what is being exported to Iraq, instead of democracy.

**2.2 Resistance in the US against infiltration by the Christian right:**
Resistance against the Christian right (Christian Coalition, founded in 1989 by televangelist Pat Robertson; Focus on the Family; Family Research Council; Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum to name but a few) is slowly growing.

Up till now, it comes mainly from three groups:
1) *Other religions, mainly Jews* - understandably so as they often function as the proverbial canary in the coal mine and are often the first to warn about the first whiffs of discrimination, even though in this case it is not a matter of discrimination against other religions, but rather a matter of pushing one’s own religion down everyone else’s throats; and to a lesser extent from Catholics. Although conservative Catholics share some positions with the Christian right (abortion), they are more liberal and are generally in line with the position of the American Bishops Conference in several respects (re social welfare, death penalty, nuclear weapons, and homosexuality).

There is definitely some unease among American Jews and many others about the aggressive activities of the Christian right. It is worth while in that respect to thoroughly reconnoiter the “jewsonfirst” website mentioned above: attacks of the Christian right on church-state separation, attacks on gay and lesbian civil rights, on the neutrality of public education, on sex education, on abortion, (by promoting government-subsidized and fake “pregnancy crisis centers”, attacks on foreign aid (HIV subsidies only for promoting abstinence, while slashing subsidies for condoms), on evolution by promoting Intelligent Design, cultural intimidation by the religious right, etc.:

*Bullying minorities into accepting public display of Christianity is not "unconstitutional". But it is definitely chilling, especially to Jews who hear in the triumphalism of the religious right echoes of Nazi street thuggery."

Also, many American Jews and even Israelis feel uneasy about the support given to
Israel by the Christian fundamentalists – sometimes even acting in collusion with the worst elements on both sides: the Israeli mafia and Texas oil interests. However, the national director of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League does not feel embarrassed by evangelical support, and argues why it is on balance good for Israel;

2) **Homosexuals**, who in the opinion of the Christian right commit the most heinous crime imaginable. They view Sweden as an overly tolerant and decadent society, and describe the king of Sweden and his family in language not exactly befitting Christians (DO see endnote 39!). A very interesting website documents the anti-gay pronouncements of some well-known Christian right TV preachers like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and others - who should definitely feel at home in Iran where homosexuality carries the death penalty. Another part of this "hate crime" website compares Nazi anti-Semitic speech and religious right anti-gay speech on fifteen dimensions. Same-sex marriages are now possible in many Western countries, including South-Africa from December 2006 onward, and in the state of Massachusetts, but encounter string resistance in most other states: "It was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve!" Louisiana, for example, has a no-exceptions abortion law, where even after rape or incest abortion is criminalized. However, a Federal Marriage Amendment that would define marriage as a union between one man and one woman was narrowly defeated in the senate. In the Muslim world, homosexuality is of course legally impossible. The Christian right is definitely homophobic, as the JewsonFirst website demonstrates with an extensive collection of links to the national press.

3) and most forcefully from **atheists**, a large part of whose criticism is obviously directed against religion per se, although often specifically against the Christian right. Atheists are often perceived (wrongly) as a threat to "the American way of life", are thought to be more criminal - though the percentage of atheists in prison is lower than in the general population – but turn out to be more often against torture than the general population. According to Austin Cline, the Christian right is more characterized by what it is against than by what it is in favor of: it is anti-science, anti-secularism, anti-feminism, anti-liberty, anti-pluralism, anti-sex, anti-enlightenment, anti-democratic, and most of all it is anti-modernity. Its anti-sex attitudes are apparent in its upright attitudes on abortion.

**2. 3 The Muslim side of the war on terror:**
Since the start of the war on terror after the attack on the World Trade Center, Muslims and Muslim nations enjoy the undivided attention of the neocon (a generally used shorthand for neo-conservative) circles in the US. With the end of the Cold War, a new external enemy was needed, and the stage was set for a vigorous military response to any other external threats, in view of the neocon need for an "American Century". Bacevich, for example, himself a West Point graduate, feels that:

"while neoconservatism has many facets, […], its influence on defense affairs has been to support intellectually the new American militarism."

He also argues that:
"the military and the evangelical right began to share common viewpoints, notably on “traditional
values” and common themes of patriotism and America’s role in the world. The religious outlook of the officer corps, previously restrained Episcopalianism, tilted toward evangelical Christianity, and the makeup of the Chaplains’ Corps followed suit.

All this tells more about the US side of the war on terror than about the Muslim side, which was demonized by a neocon government that played on the xenophobic fears of an American public, already singularly uninformed about what goes on in the rest of the world. However, on the Muslim side, in spite of and apart from fundamentalist fanaticism, there seems to be more religious tolerance than the Western media lead us to believe, with their propaganda terms like "the axis of evil" –in contrast to Ronald Reagan’s still purely communist "evil empire"—now largely consisting of Muslim nations, with the exception of North Korea.

With Khadaffi getting old and tired at the time of writing this, Iran seems one of the few Muslim states more or less officially sponsoring state terrorism, and doing so at least in part from an Islamic viewpoint. Moreover, its president has hardly made himself popular by insisting on his rather contradictory message that on the one hand Iran has a right to develop its own nuclear technology for peaceful purposes only, while on the other hand Israel should be wiped off the map—the first time an UN member has suggested this about another UN member. Nevertheless, in this case as well, the Iranian situation may have been exaggerated in the Western media, as former ISA president Immanuel Wallerstein maintains:

"Why would not the balance of terror operate equally well in the Middle East? Why would not the possession by Iran of nuclear weapons be an element in pacifying the Middle East rather than the reverse? The only answer offered is that the Iranian government is not sufficiently "rational" to abstain from using the bomb. But this is clearly nonsense—racist nonsense, one should add. The present Iranian regime is at least as politically sophisticated as the Bush regime, and is a lot less vocally militarist."

In an as usual well-informed article in the New Yorker, Seymour Hersh basically agrees with Wallerstein, and discusses the risks of an aggressive policy towards Iran, as does former presidential adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. This policy already seems to be under way, with a decision to promote regime change already taken, and with covert operations presently going on inside Iran, and with the nuclear option certainly not excluded. According to one of Hersh’s informants,

"Under Ahmadinejad, the Revolutionary Guards have expanded their power base throughout the Iranian bureaucracy; by the end of January, they had replaced thousands of civil servants with their own members. One former senior United Nations official, who has extensive experience with Iran, depicted the turnover as “a white coup,” with ominous implications for the West. “Professionals in the Foreign Ministry are out; others are waiting to be kicked out,” he said.”

While this possibly forthcoming coup at first sight looks a bit like a relatively peaceful alternative to the "night of the long knives" in Nazi Germany, such a complete restructuring of the Iranian bureaucracy definitely may have ominous implications. Certainly so when Ahmadinejad will feel really threatened by the aggressive posturing of the American Satan, as he seems to be, having started construction on a third nuclear centre with a capacity of up to 155,000 centrifuges. Iranian counter-measures are apparently already in preparation: The Guardian mentions that a so-called independent two year old group, with 52,000 recruits, the Committee for the Commemoration of Martyrs of the Global Islamic Campaign, linked to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, is now recruiting
members especially in Britain. They are given a choice of attacking "the Quds (=Jerusalem) occupiers" [Israel], the British author Salman Rushdie, or "the occupiers of Islamic lands", i.e., the US and Britain. Iran is financing terrorists to hit Americans in Iraq as well as Israeli civilians. As an aside, one may wonder why non-Arab Iran is and always has been almost more vehemently anti-Israel than any Arab country. Perhaps president Ahmadinejad is all the more infuriated because both Israel’s president (Katsav) and until recently also its minister of defence (Mofaz) happen to be Iranian-born.

However, as Irshad Manji argues, Ahmadinejad is not pathologically sick, as Elie Wiesel claims, but his behaviour is "entirely rational from the perspective of a religious fanatic". As a Shia Muslim, he eagerly awaits the return of the “hidden imam”, just like the Evangelical Christians, including president Bush, are waiting for Armageddon, and 40% of the Israeli religious settlers in the West Bank and Gaza strip have a similar “belief in a divinely ordained mission to inhabit the land.” Now that Ahmadinejad has taken the initiative to write Bush we can only hope for the start of a fascinating theological correspondence between the two presidents, and hope – to paraphrase the ending of the well-known cult movie “Casablanca” – that this will be the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Where are the good old days when presidents engaged in naked power politics? Nevertheless, conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer advises the US government not to fall into the trap offered by Iran’s president, and reverse longstanding Iran policy, in spite of the fact that the US has a decreasing number of foreign policy options with rising oil prices.

Of course, while Iran may be the only country supporting terror so openly, individuals in many other Muslim countries also give financial support, especially to the war against Israel, and like Iran subsidize the PLO, Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. This money enables the poor souls who are indeed pathologically sick to end their lives in a totally useless and even counter-productive suicide. Bradley Burston argues: 1) suicide bombings have had a catastrophic effect on the Palestinian national movement; 2) the shahid bomber has soiled the name of Allah and of Palestine, “draining the Palestinian people of the abundant reservoir of international good will that their cause and their plight enjoyed for decades”; 3) The shahid bomber plays into the hands of his worst enemies: the settlers and the Jewish hard right; 4) but it is a moral booster for the folks back home. In an earlier article, Burston lashes out rather effectively at Ahmadinejad’s remarks about Israel, and at Hamas. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will most probably remain very messy for quite some time, certainly as long as suicide bombing continues after the recent victory of Hamas which strives for another Islamic state, incorporating all of Israel as its maps show, and provides different information to the west than to the other Arab states. However, the Hamas government consists of a highly educated crew, most of them with university degrees. The Iran-subsidized Islamic Jihad has several websites, operating from Iran and the US.
As is well-known, the "cartoon controversy" sparked vehement and rather hysterical protests all over the Muslim world in general - and caused well over 100 deaths and more than 800 wounded - after publication of mildly critical cartoons of Mohammed in a Danish newspaper. Just depicting the prophet is already sacrilege, let alone criticizing him, although much of the Arab press is still full of the most obscene anti-Semitism, even in relatively friendly Jordan. In this respect those involved in the cartoon riots certainly have double standards, and should perhaps develop a somewhat thicker skin. Also the Danish cartoons led to an often rather tasteless "anti-Semitic cartoon contest" in the Iranian newspaper Hamshari, to which a group of Israeli cartoonists reacted with another anti-Semitic cartoons contest, only open to Jews, at least equally sharp and often very good, though often also like the Iranians in bad taste. As one of the organizers said:

"...we can do the best, sharpest, most offensive Jew hating cartoons ever published! "No Iranian will beat us on our home turf!"

As we stated at the very beginning of this paper: "... we will argue that the present period of rapidly increasing environmental complexity and interdependence tends to increase feelings of insecurity and a lack of environment mastery, in both the developed Western world and the largely underdeveloped Muslim world."

This seems to be the root cause that is driving both sides in the war on terror. It remains a moot point who started it, certainly if one is not fixated on the attack on the WTC, but takes decades of Third World exploitation in to account. The Muslim world is still afflicted with the lingering anti-Western resentments of the exploited ex-colonial world (not to speak of the Crusades) and partly as a result of that is still underdeveloped, poor, and under-educated, and therefore feels bewildered in an environment it has not made. The Western world, on the other hand, is now also driven on the defensive, and suddenly has to arm itself against a diffuse, elusive and fanatical enemy that can hardly be pinpointed. Things were simpler and easier in the good old days of the Soviet Union, when there was the safety of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction). Clearly, these two tendencies reinforce each other, and lead to exaggerated theories like Huntington's "clash of civilizations", which then may tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies.

3. THE EUFUNCTIONS AND DYSFUNCTIONS OF (MONOTHEISTIC) RELIGION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

3.1 Introduction:
This brings us to a more serious point: to what extent has at least a large part of formerly functional religion become dysfunctional in the present-day hyper-complex environment?

Advances in (both social and natural) science and knowledge have on the one hand increasingly reduced the feelings of insecurity that were often a root cause of
religious beliefs, and have led to an increased sense of environment mastery that contributed to secularization. On the other hand, increased mastery of one’s micro-environment (progress qua medical facilities, insurance against natural disasters, international communication, etc.) has led many to the realization that there is a much larger macro-environment – for many visible only for the first time through the ICT revolution - which one cannot influence?

And to what extent is religion even actively fueling disagreements in a globalized world between groups that have opposite economic interests, and is it hiding the economic causes of these disagreements, thus making it more difficult to even discuss them, let alone solve them? Both for a simple Muslim in Wajiristan, or an almost as simple Christian in America’s Bible Belt, it is often easier to suggest simple religious solutions than to discuss the complexities of economic and political interactions in a globalized world.

In line with the title of this paper, we feel that much of the content of the world’s mainstream religions needs to be modernized, and denuded of its sometimes patently irrational elements in order to be at least a little more applicable to modern times. However, before giving the impression here that the irrationality of religion is the only root of all evil, and that atheism is the only solution, it should be stressed here - although that merits another paper - that this seemingly rational world of ours is still full with the most absurd nonsense, from venerable semi-"sciences" like astrology, to spiritism (which implies life after death).

Sub 2.2 we have mentioned that, in response to the activities of the Christian right in the US, different atheist organizations and websites have emerged or expanded their activities there (mentioned in endnote 79) Most influential of these has probably been Sam Harris, with his “Atheist Manifesto”, and his earlier book, “The end of faith”. In the following, we will quote him extensively, as he summarizes very well what many other authors say in a more roundabout way.

Harris defines atheism not as a philosophy, not even as a view of the world, but simply as a refusal to deny the obvious. The word “atheism” should not even exist, as there are no non-astrologers and non-alchemists. In the US 260 million Americans (87% of the population) claim to “never doubt the existence of God”. Harris thinks they should be obliged to present evidence for his existence, and for his benevolence as well, in view of “the relentless destruction of human beings we witness in the world each day”.

Belief in God’s existence is actually necessary for seeking public office in the US, with the result that “public policy in our country conforms to religious taboos and superstitions appropriate to a medieval theocracy”. Harris mentions a Washington Post poll which mentions that 80% of Katrina’s survivors claim that the event has only strengthened their faith in God. His reaction:

“Only the atheist recognizes the boundless narcissism and self-deceit of the saved. Only the atheist realizes how morally objectionable it is for survivors of a catastrophe to believe themselves spared by a loving God while this same God drowned infants in their cribs.”

The same goes, mutatis mutandis, for the Holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda,
and "lesser" disasters.

This leads to the problem of theodicy, which Harris considers solved: he adheres to the other solution, i.e. that the biblical God is a fiction, and stresses that we are all atheists with respect to Zeus and Thor. Harris considers atheism "... a moral and intellectual necessity. It is a necessity, however, that places the atheist at the margins of society. The atheist, by merely being in touch with reality, appears shamefully out of touch with the fantasy life of his neighbors."

Harris mentions that according to several recent polls:

"22% of Americans are certain that Jesus will return to Earth sometime in the next 50 years. Another 22% believe that he will probably do so. This is likely the same 44% who go to church once a week or more, who believe that God literally promised the land of Israel to the Jews and who want to stop teaching our children about the biological fact of evolution."

As stated earlier, President Bush is fully aware of the importance of this voting bloc, and therefore “their views and prejudices now influence almost every decision of national importance”. The numbers from recent public opinion polls are rather frightening:

"More than 50% of Americans have a “negative” or “highly negative” view of people who do not believe in God; 70% think it important for presidential candidates to be ‘strongly religious’.... Only 28% of Americans believe in evolution (!); 68% believe in Satan (!)"

I cannot but fully agree with the conclusion: “Ignorance in this degree, concentrated in both the head and belly of a lumbering superpower, is now a problem for the entire world.”

Harris admits it is easy enough to criticize religious fundamentalism, but he is even more critical of religious moderation:

“While fundamentalists justify their religious beliefs with extraordinarily poor evidence and arguments, they at least make an attempt at rational justification. Moderates, on the other hand, generally do nothing more than cite the good consequences of religious belief. Rather than say that they believe in God because certain biblical prophecies have come true, moderates will say that they believe in God because this belief “gives their lives meaning.” Fundamentalists, on the other hand, tend to consider the tsunami in New Orleans, the attack on the World Trade Center and similar catastrophes as “another oblique message about the evils of abortion, idolatry and homosexuality”

“Faith is nothing more than the license religious people give themselves to keep believing when reasons fail. In a world that has been shattered by mutually incompatible religious beliefs, in a nation that is growing increasingly beholden to Iron Age conceptions of God, the end of history and the immortality of the soul, this lazy partitioning of our discourse into matters of reason and matters of faith is now unconscionable.”

Harris ridicules the concept of a “God gene” , and quotes instead the Human Development Report (2005) which tends to support his thesis that the least religious societies are also the healthiest, according to criteria like:

“life expectancy, adult literacy, per capita income, educational attainment, gender equality, homicide rate and infant mortality. Conversely, the 50 nations now ranked lowest in terms of human development are unwaveringly religious.”
“The United States is unique among wealthy democracies in its level of religious literalism and opposition to evolutionary theory; it is also uniquely beleaguered by high rates of homicide, abortion, teen pregnancy, STD infection and infant mortality. The same comparison holds true within the United States itself: Southern and Midwestern states, characterized by the highest levels of religious superstition and hostility to evolutionary theory, are especially plagued by the above indicators of societal dysfunction, while the comparatively secular states of the Northeast conform to European norms.”

Harris argues that “the dubious link between Christian literalism and Christian values is also belied by other indices of charity”, and mentions in this respect:
1) that countries with high levels of atheism give more foreign aid than the US, with the US often at or near the bottom of the list compared to the generally much less religious European countries;
2) that the salary ratio between top-tier CEO’s and their average employee ranges from 24:1 (UK), 15:1 (France), 13:1 (Sweden) in Europe, while it is an astounding 475:1 in the US.

Zuckerman presents an excellent overview of contemporary rates and patterns of atheism, often based on a comparison of different research projects and opinion polls per country, in the forthcoming Cambridge Companion to Atheism. He distinguishes “organic atheism” from “coercive atheism” (most of the ex-Communist countries). Countries with coercive atheism are often:

“marked by all that comes with totalitarianism: poor economic development, intellectual censorship, widespread corruption, ubiquitous depression, etc. However, nations marked by high levels of organic atheism – such as Sweden, the Netherlands, and France – are among the healthiest, wealthiest, most educated, and most free societies on earth.”

Apart from the fact that the least religious societies score high on life expectancy, adult literacy, per capita income, educational attainment, gender equality, homicide rate and infant mortality – as mentioned above – they also have the lowest youth illiteracy rates, and are most accepting of gender equality as demonstrated by a high percentage of female members of parliament. Zuckerman stresses:

“…that I am in no way arguing that high levels of organic atheism cause societal health or that low levels of organic atheism cause societal ills such as poverty or illiteracy. If anything, the opposite argument should be made: societal health causes widespread atheism, and societal insecurity causes widespread belief in God”.

Zuckerman rejects the argument brought forward by many cognitive neuropsychologists and academic theists that belief in God is biologically natural or neurologically based.

3.2 Religion and violence
According to Harris, “One of the greatest challenges facing civilization in the 21st century is for human beings to learn to speak about their deepest personal concerns—about ethics, spiritual experience and the inevitability of human suffering—in ways that are not flagrantly irrational.” He maintains that “religious faith promotes human violence to an astonishing degree, and indeed, many wars are going on at this moment that certainly have a strong religious component, “It does so in two ways: 1) for some, by the psychopathic imagination that God wants you to engage in violence – and will reward you for it with an eternal life - plus 72 virgins, as in jihadist violence; 2) for many, because their religion constitutes the core of
their moral identity.

Harris maintains that "human conflict is not always reducible to a lack of education, to poverty or to political grievances"; this for him is "one of the many delusions of liberal piety". Many jihadists are quite well-educated (see also endnote 2), and apparently the human mind can easily be partitioned by faith. If one wants to uproot the causes of human violence, one must uproot the false certainties of religion. These are often quite extreme, both in mainstream Christianity and mainstream Islam, and presumably in most other religions as well. Some Christian websites, like "Rapture Ready", even sound as if the people behind them are certifiably insane.

However,

"Religion is only area of our discourse in which people are systematically protected from the demand to give evidence in defense of their strongly held beliefs. The endgame for civilization cannot be mutual tolerance of patent irrationality. While all parties to liberal religious discourse have agreed to tread lightly over those points where their worldviews would otherwise collide, these very points remain perpetual sources of conflict for their coreligionists. Political correctness, therefore, does not offer an enduring basis for human cooperation."

From the argument presented so far, it should be clear that the war on terror is largely a religious war, whereby fundamentalist Muslims are making a holy war (jihad) to a large extent directed against fundamentalist US Christians that still live, as Harris suggested, in the Iron Age, but unfortunately have 21st century armaments. It remains to be analyzed who has started this war; the attack on the World Trade Center should not necessarily be considered the start of this war. Of course, there are many other factors involved, apart from religious ones (vestiges of colonialism, capitalist exploitation of the Third World, etc.).

However, especially in Europe, the war on terror has reduced much of the goodwill the US had acquired, having "saved" Europe in two World Wars.

4. EUROPE VS. AMERICA: WHO SHOULD, CAN, AND WILL TAKE THE LEAD IN THE WAR ON TERROR?

Up till now, the US has been clearly leading the war on terror, and has determined that and how it should be waged - and understandably so, in view of its military might, and in view of the attack on the WTC. Recently, however, the power equilibrium in the Western world is changing, as argued in three fascinating books, recently reviewed by Tony Judt in the New York Review of Books and quoted at length in the following:

"To a growing number of Europeans, however, it is America that is in trouble and the "American way of life" that cannot be sustained. The American pursuit of wealth, size, and abundance —as material surrogates for happiness —is aesthetically unpleasing and ecologically catastrophic. The American economy is built on sand (or, more precisely, other people's money). For many Americans the promise of a better future is a fading hope. Contemporary mass culture in the US is squalid and meretricious. No wonder so many Americans turn to the church for solace."

It is not anymore generally assumed that Europe and America are converging upon a single model of late capitalism. The US has a number of peculiarities that are
relatively absent so far in Europe, and would make Europe better able to lead the world into an anyhow uncertain future:
1) we have dealt already with the nation’s marked religiosity, which apparently does not prepare people for life in a complex and globalized world
2) selective prurience, especially on TV
3) affection for guns and prisons: the European Union has 87 prisoners per 100.000 population, the US has 685
4) the US still embraces the death penalty in most states, whereas its abolition is a condition for EU membership, and it executes prisoners on a scale matched only in China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Congo.
5) Americans work harder than Europeans; one in three even works more than 50 hours per week
6) The US is an excellent place to be rich (see endnote 85) and has become enormously richer in the last quarter century; in 1980 the average CEO earned 40 times the salary of the average manufacturing employee, now that is 475 times!
7) A privileged minority has access to the best medical treatment, but 45 million Americans are completely without health insurance; South Africa and the USA are the only two developed countries without universal medical coverage, and while the WHO mentions that the US is number one in health spending per capita, it is considered 37th in the quality of its service.
8) As a consequence Americans live shorter than Europeans; the US ranks 26th qua infant mortality, its rate double that of Sweden. While the US spends 15% of its GDP on health care, Sweden spends only 8%. The same picture emerges when one compares educational spending in the US and Europe: the US spends much more on education, has the best universities in the world, but gets worse results.
9) While Americans work more hours, GDP per hour of work in Europe is approaching US levels, or even surpassing them
10) Among other things as a result of waging wars, the US now has a foreign debt of 3.3 trillion dollars, or 28% of GDP. Europe invests nearly 40% more in the US than the US does in Europe
11) Social security in the broadest sense is much better in Europe, including parental leave in case of childbirth. Norway’s minister for children and family is quoted: "Americans like to talk about family values. We have decided to do more than talk; we use our tax revenues to pay for family values."
12) In the US today the richest 1 percent holds 38 percent of the wealth and they are redistributing it ever more to their advantage. Meanwhile one American adult in five is in poverty—compared with one in fifteen in Italy.

So far the essentials from the reviews of Rifkin and Reid. The third author discussed in Judt’s review, Timothy Garton Ash, roughly agrees with this diagnosis, but adds a few other points:
13) “As an international citizen the US is irresponsibly delinquent. In 2003 the EU spent 36.5 billion on development aid, the US about one third of that amount, nearly 80% of which has to be spent on American goods an services.” Moreover, the US does not pay its fair contribution to the UN.
14) The US, with 5% of the world’s population, is responsible for 25% of greenhouse gas output.
15) Ash clearly does not like president Bush: “But on the insouciant indifference of
the present incumbent of the White House he is utterly unforgiving: 'It was said of ancient Rome that the emperor Nero fiddled while the city burned. In the new Rome, the president fiddled while the Earth burned.' "However, Ash is hardly more positive about Blair: "a political tactician with a lucrative little sideline in made-to-measure moralizing."

16) Insofar as international opposition to different treaties is concerned, the US tends to find itself in bad company:

a) the 1997 international treaty to ban landmines was accepted in the UN by a vote of 142-0, with the US, Russia and a few other countries abstaining;
b) The US and Somalia are the only two states which have not ratified the 1989 Convention on Children’s Rights.
c) The US is opposed to the international biological weapons convention – together with countries like China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Cuba and Iran.
d) The US supported a measure introduced by Iran denying two gay rights groups a voice at the United Nations, together with Cuba, Sudan and Zimbabwe, nations the State Department has cited in annual reports for their harsh treatment of homosexuals.

17) Ash notes that American-style belligerent patriotism is rare in contemporary Europe, perhaps because it “experienced the twentieth century to a degree unmatched anywhere else”, whereas the US did not.

18) Corruption surely exists everywhere, but some countries are more corrupt than others. Since president Bush was elected, the number of lobbyists has more than doubled: there are now 65 lobbyists for every member of Congress, spending nearly 200 million dollars per month on winning, dining and seducing federal officials.

Judt ends by stating: “As things now stand, boundary-breaking and community-making is something that Europeans are doing better than anyone else. The United States, trapped once again in what Tocqueville called its "perpetual utterance of self-applause," isn't even trying.”

The conclusion of his review of these three books (see endnote 93) is that Europe may be better equipped to deal with the problems that are caused by the war on terror than the US.

Some other publications add strength to this conclusion:
The National Vanguard, otherwise a nasty white supremacist and anti-Semitic journal, quotes from the above-mentioned European dream and other sources:

20) 20% of Americans think the sun orbits the earth, , and 17% believe the earth revolves around the sun once a day (The Week, Jan. 7, 2005).
21) The European Union leads the U.S. in “...the number of science and engineering graduates; public research and development (R&D) expenditures; and new capital raised…. Europe surpassed the United States in the mid-1990s as the largest producer of scientific literature" (The European Dream, p.70). Nevertheless, Congress cut funds to the National Science Foundation. The agency will issue 1,000 fewer research grants this year (Nyt, Dec. 21, 2004).
22) Lack of health insurance coverage causes 18,000 unnecessary American
deaths a year, six times the number of people killed on 9/11.) (NYT, Jan. 12, 2005.)
23) "U.S. childhood poverty now ranks 22nd, or second to last, among the developed nations. Only Mexico scores lower" (The European Dream, p.81).
24) The harsh conclusion of the Vanguard: The USA is “number one” in nothing but weaponry, consumer spending, debt, and delusion.

Add to all this that the US has managed to make itself highly unpopular, already for a long time in the third world, including its own hemisphere, and now especially in the Muslim world and even in Europe. Different reasons are given for this:
- David Callahan argues that cheating has come to be rewarded as a result of America’s brutally competitive climate, and has permeated the culture.
- Allan Uthman presents the top ten signs of the impending police state, and includes here the relatively unknown presidential signing statements.
- Austin Cline argues that the warrantless wiretapping proposed by attorney general Gonzalez can easily lead to a dictatorship. “
- A recently pensioned Supreme Court judge, Sandra Day O’Connor, also feels the US “risks edging near to a dictatorship” if the party’s rightwingers continue to attack the judiciary.
- Andrew Kohut, former head of the Gallup organization, and presently director of the Pew Center for the People and the Press, reports that a recent (i.e. 2003) Pew survey found that “majorities in seven of eight Muslim countries think that the United States might threaten their country militarily”. He added: “Last year we had loathing of the United States, this year we have fear and loathing.”
- Bob Herbert argues that the present government instills fear in Americans in order to be better able to manipulate them. Quote: “If voters can be kept frightened enough of terrorism, they might even overlook the monumental incompetence of one of the worst administrations the nation has ever known.”

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS:

If one is looking for a suitable symbol to depict both sides of the war on terror, one may take the two presidents on both sides: Bush and Ahmadinejad. Amazingly, they are far from being each other's opposites as one would have expected at first sight; on the contrary, they are very much like one another, and in that sense one cannot help wondering what the conflict is all about. It is deplorable that this seemingly rational and rationalized world of ours has regressed this far that two religious fanatics have managed to become presidents of their countries, and that they both espouse completely crazy millennial ideologies: Bush waiting for the Rapture and Admadinejad for the return of the hidden imam.

If you feel I am exaggerating, just type "rapture" in Google, and look especially at the Rapture Index. And as to the return of the hidden imam, apart from a historical explanation, the author Timothy Garton Ash, quoted above, has an interesting article on modern Iranian youth, entitled "Soldiers of the hidden imam".

This paper has largely concentrated on the negative aspects of the US – especially in comparison to Europe - and those of its president and its government. That is not to deny that the US has its good sides, and Europe its bad ones. The recent French
and Dutch "no" votes against the European Constitution are an embarrassment, and the widespread European resistance against the admission of Turkey is likewise something to be ashamed of, also because here is a Muslim country with a strictly secular constitution, where at least the generals outrank the mullahs.

While there is a tendency nowadays to criticize Islam - in view of its positions re democracy, emancipation of women, homosexuality, etc. – we hope to have demonstrated that the convictions of fundamentalist US Christians are at least as primitive and mediaeval. The losing battle of religion against the advances of science has caused Creationism to be slowly replaced by the absurd theory of "intelligent design" as the fundamentalist answer to Darwinian evolution theory. However, in present-day post-authoritarian culture, many "infidels" and even modern Christians do not have any objections to evolution theory, and realize that God is a projection of man, rather than the other way round, and that this projection has changed from a stern, authoritarian father to a democratic friend and adviser with the transition from a pre-WW2 authoritarian male-dominated culture to a relatively more female-dominated and egalitarian one.

If only for the practical purpose of taking some religious steam out of the war on terror, mainstream religions should stress the relativity of their convictions, in order not to aid in promoting fundamentalism. The growing environmental complexity of our present multi-group society produces anxiety, if not fear, and demands high tolerance of ambiguity, typically lacking in monotheistic religions, esp. their fundamentalist offshoots.

For those needing a religion, we plead here for at least a modernized, "systems-inspired religion". Based on, for example, the ten commandments one could compare these with similar logical and acceptable prescriptions for decent human interaction in other religions and perhaps arrive at a sort of "religious UN charter". Such a charter would probably be more humanistic than religious – and probably would end up like a UN Declaration of Human Rights, without the absurd and non-falsifiable propositions that characterize so many religions. As long as the war on terror will continue, it should at least be bluntly admitted that it is a war about power, money, land, minerals, etc. that has nothing to do with religion. As Freud described in The Future of an Illusion, there obviously is no answer fulfilling the needs for transcendence of those longing to somehow transcend the limitations of their individual lives. The French poet Jacques Prévert agreed in a witty little poem. Even for suicide terrorists - or suicide tourists for that matter! – there are no answers to satisfy the apparently inborn need for transcendence. Transcendence can only be satisfied in the here and now. As William Blake said: "Eternity is in a grain of sand", not in an imaginary hereafter.

ENDNOTES: