

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



# Enlightenments, old and new – I

What can the history of the European enlightenments tell us about the chances of an Islamic enlightenment?

The ongoing proxy war inflaming West Asia (including India's western frontiers), between the Sunnis led by the theocratic Wahhabi monarchy of Saudi Arabia and the Shias led by the theocracy of Iran, is reminiscent of the Thirty Years' War between the Catholic and Protestant powers of Europe in the 17th century that ended with the treaty of Westphalia in 1648. But just as this treaty merely stopped the merging of domestic and foreign policy, allowing each sovereign state to maintain its own religious order domestically, even an ending of the transnational external threats to peace in the proxy religious Sunni-Shia conflict would not touch the respective sectarian fundamentalist religious beliefs in the domestic domain. In Europe, it was the Scottish Enlightenment and its extension into the French Enlightenment in the 18th century that allowed these religious fundamentalisms to morph into the secularism that has come to characterise modernity. Is such an Islamic Enlightenment likely? This is the subject of this and my next column.

The best guide to the issues is David Hume, the philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment. He lived in a society still dominated by the Calvinist Scottish Kirk.

In 1696, Arthur Herman (*How the Scots Invented the Modern World*, 2001) informs us, a 19-year-old theology student, Thomas Aikenhead, was hung for blasphemy at the instigation of the Scottish Presbyterian Church. It is described by Dr Herman as follows: "The Kirk wiped out all traditional forms of collective fun ... Fornication brought punishment

and exile; adultery meant death. The church courts, or Kirk-sessions, enforced the law with scourges, pillories, branks, ducking-stools, banishment, and, in the case of witches or those possessed by the devil, burning at the stake." This sounds eerily similar to what we read in our newspapers about Shia Iran, Wahhabi Saudi Arabia and the Afghan Taliban.



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Yet by 1725, Francis Hutcheson (a clergyman and a teacher) and Lord Kames (a lawyer and judge) had launched the Scottish Enlightenment. David Hume, sitting in his study in the 1750s, wrote his devastating critiques of Christianity in the *Dialogues* and the *Natural History of Religion*, but fearful of the still potent charge of atheism he locked them up and they were only published after his death in 1776.

Monotheistic religions, argued Hume, like most others, have a "natural religion" that is presumed to be based on reason, and a "revealed religion" based on faith. Hume was devastating about both aspects of Christianity. As he noted in the *Dialogues* about the belief in an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent deity ruling the world: how could one explain evil in such a world? "Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"

On the revelatory part of religion, Hume argues that there is no essential difference between polytheism and monotheism. Polytheism, which is the original religion of mankind, "arose not from a contemplation of the works of nature, but from a concern

with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears that activate the human mind". Theism by contrast believes in a supreme deity, the author of nature, the omnipotent creator.

Comparing the two – polytheism and theism – Hume notes: "The greatest and most observable differences between a traditional, mythological religion, and a systematical, scholastic one are two: the former is often more reasonable, as consisting only of a multitude of stories, which, however groundless, imply no express absurdity and demonstrative contradiction; and sits also so easy and light on men's minds, that, though it may be as universally received, it happily makes no such deep impression on the affections and understanding."

But he also noted in his *Natural History*, discussing the relative merits of polytheism with monotheism: "Idolatory is attended with this evident advantage, that, by limiting the powers and functions of its deities, it naturally admits the gods of other sects and nations to a share of divinity, and renders all the various deities, as well as rites, ceremonies or traditions, compatible with each other." He cites Pliny's own *Natural History* as affirming "that it was usual for the Romans, before they had laid siege to any town, to invoke the tutelary deity of the place, and by promising him greater honours than those he at present enjoyed, bribe him to betray his old friends and votaries. The name of the tutelary deity of Rome was for this reason kept a most religious mystery; lest the enemies of the republic should be able, in the same manner, to draw him over to their service".

All this leads him to conclude: "The intolerance of almost all religions which have maintained the unity of God is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists. The implacable narrow spirit of the Jews is well known. Mahometanism set out with still more bloody principles, and even to this day, deals out damnation, though not fire and faggot, to all other sects. And if among Christians, the English and Dutch have embraced the principles of tolerance, this singularity has proceeded from the steady resolution of the civil magistrate, in opposition to the continued efforts of priests and bigots."

This inability of Islam, to date, to embrace tolerance through the "steady resolution of the civil magistrate" is due to a unique feature of its cosmological beliefs: its inability to separate church and state. Whereas in most other civilisations a distinction can be made between the public and private spheres, and, hence, duality in the beliefs relevant to each can be accommodated, this is not possible in Islam. As Bernard Lewis noted in a 1992 *New York Review of Books* essay: "For Muslims, the state was God's state, the army God's army, and of course the enemy was God's enemy ... The question of separating church and state did not arise, since there was no church as an autonomous institution, to be separated. Church and state were the one and the same." It is only in the 20th century, and only Turkey, that legally formalised the separation of church and state. It, too, under its current moderate Islamic government seems to be backsliding.

A number of liberal voices are appearing in Muslim societies; and, as in Christendom, perhaps the end of the ongoing war between the Shias and Sunnis in West Asia will finally lead to that Muslim Enlightenment that can only come from within Islam.

Read the second part next month