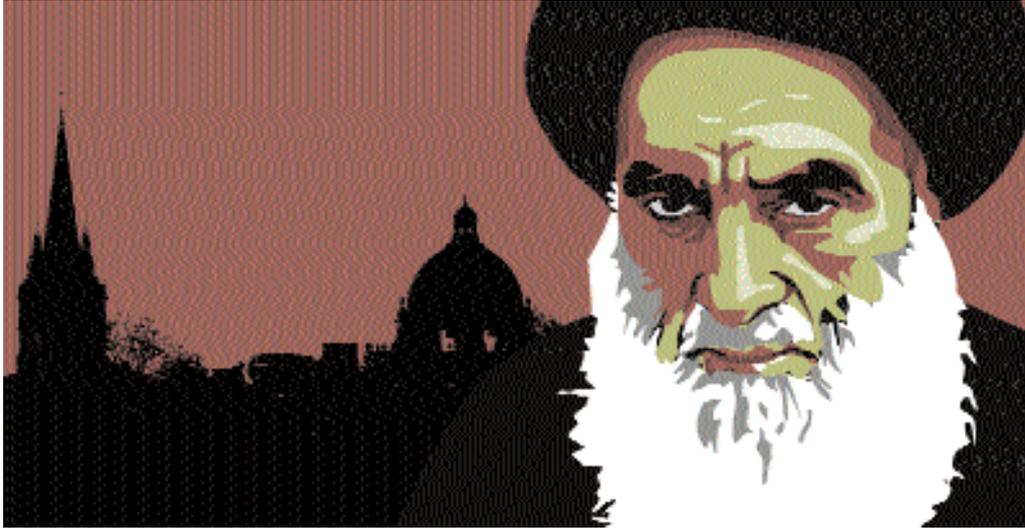


ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



Enlightenments old and new – II

Why the best hope for an Islamic enlightenment comes from the Shia clerics of Iraq

In my last column I had discussed the Scottish Enlightenment and how it had tamed the religious passions of the Scottish Calvinist Church within a few decades and allowed the secularism that is a hallmark of modernity to develop. In this column I want to discuss whether such an outcome is likely in Muslim societies. As David Hume noted in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, the religious tolerance that was embraced by the English and the Dutch “proceeded from the steady resolution of the civil magistrate, in opposition to the continued efforts of priests and bigots”.

Many had hoped that the Arab Spring promised the emergence of liberal democracies, which with their separation of church and state and the establishment of a secular legal order would lead to a similar outcome in Muslim societies. But, as Shadi Hamid has argued in *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (Oxford, 2014), democracy has turned out to be the enemy of liberty, as the devout who are the main soldiers of political Islam inevitably want to enforce *sharia* laws that are a gross infringement of personal liberties. As Professor Hamid shows, for the parties of political Islam this remains their *raison d'être*. So democracy in the Muslim world is unlikely to be the midwife of an Islamic enlightenment.

However, there is a major difference in the jurisprudence that has evolved in the two branches of Islam, the Sunni (particularly the Wahhabi version) and the Shia, that offers the prospect of a Scottish route to a Muslim enlightenment. In the earlier years of the Arab conquests, when the *sharia* was being developed, the

process of interpretation and exercise of independent judgement known as *ijtihad* allowed some doctrinal flexibility. (See Fazlur Rahman’s *Islam*, and the chapter four of my own *Unintended Consequences*). This period, particularly under the Abbasids, saw the flowering of Islamic civilisation, which came to be the intermediary between the ideas and techniques of the older civilisations of Greece, China and India.

But sometime during the ninth to 11th centuries as part of the Abbasid compromise the majority Sunnis (unlike the Shia) came to accept the *ulema* (clerics) as the true heirs of the prophet by expounding the sacred law — and the “gate of *ijtihad*” was closed. This closing of the Sunni Muslim mind curbed curiosity and innovation — particularly in the education system, which from then on emphasised rote learning and memorising, instead of problem-solving. The *madrasas* sponsored and financed by Wahhabi Saudi

money in the Balkans, south, central and south-east Asia, continue to preach the extreme interpretation of monotheism of Wahhabism, which anathematises other beliefs — in particular the “idoltrous” practices of Christians, Shias and Hindus — as infidels or apostates, and preaches hatred to young minds, who learn little if anything about the modern world. Wahhabi Sunnism is, thus, contributing to the continued “closing of the Muslim mind”, which has been the major reason for the decaying of the glorious Islamic civilisation built under the earliest caliphs of the Abbasid dynasty.

By contrast, after their break with the Sunnis after the battle of Karbala, the Shia *ulema* have played a very different role from their Sunni rivals (see Vali

Nasr’s *The Shia Revival* and E Bowering (editor)’s *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*). The major difference is that unlike the Sunnis, the Shia community relies on its clerics not only to interpret religion but, as Professor Nasr says, “to make new rulings which expand on religious law, first codified in the eighth century”. They are educated at seminaries, mainly in Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran, studying through tutorials and lectures under a senior *ulema* law, jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, logic, rhetoric and sometimes literature. On graduating they “become a full member of the *ulema*, someone who can practice *ijtihad* (independent reasoning to give a new ruling) — a *mujtahid* — collect religious taxes and serve as the guardian of the flock”. The senior clergy’s stature is determined by the religious taxes and donations that believers give him for charitable purposes and to help educate seminary students. The bigger a senior cleric’s purse, the wider a patronage network he can build in the clerical ranks below him. “Because the Shia hierarchy depends not only on knowledge but on money, its desire to maintain strong ties to the bazaars has always been among its major priorities.”

The Shias have also developed a different political doctrine since the Safavid dynasty established itself as a Shia monarchy in Iran. With the occultation of the 12th *imam* in AD 939, Shia theologians argued that there could be no true Islamic rule until his return and their task was to keep faith till then. Though not recognising Sunni rule, they would not directly challenge it, and wait for the final reckoning with Sunnism at the end of time. But with the establishment of the Safavid’s Shia dynasty in Iran, “the Shia *ulema*, many of whom had become part of the Safavid aristocracy as landowners and courtiers, crafted a new theory of government ... Shia *ulema* would not recognize the Safavid monarchy as truly legitimate but would bless it as the most desirable form of government during the period of waiting”.

This “Safavid contract” survived for 500 years, until the Iranian revolution of 1979. Khomeini erased this Shia distinction between church and state, with his theory of *velayat-e-faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) and created a populist theocracy in Iran. But other Shia *ulema* did not accept Khomeini’s doctrine — most importantly Grand Ayatollah al-Khoi, the mentor of Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq. Khomeini’s notion of *velayat-e-faqih* was a neo-Platonic notion of a specially educated “guardian” class led by the “philosopher-king” armed with knowledge of a transcendent truth to produce and maintain a perfect government that would safeguard all national and spiritual interests. He created an intolerant theocracy limiting individual and minority rights using a narrow interpretation of the law to “erase all Western influences on society and culture”.

Professor Nasr argues that Khomeini’s influence and his deviant theory has now lost influence even in Iran, where the quietist traditional view of a less politicised faith as represented by the Iraqi Ayatollah Khoi and his disciple Mr Sistani are gaining influence: “This yearning for an older and less politicised faith also helps to explain why the modest, deeply learned, and plain-living Ayatollah Sistani has so quickly become popular in Iran.” It is this victory of the old quietist Shia Islam — with its opening to alternative interpretations through *ijtihad*, and its implicit acceptance of the separation of church and state — over Khomeini’s politicised Shia Islam that offers the best hope of a Muslim enlightenment.



DEEPAK LAL

The first part was published on September 20 mybs.in/2QhNEMO