ENLIGHTENMENTS OLD AND NEW – FAITH AND REASON

DEEPAK LAL[*]

I am very pleased to be able to contribute to this Festschrift for Suri Ratnapa, who has been a valuable colleague on the Board of the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) over the last 6 years. My theme applies some insights of David Hume (one of Suri's heroes) to understand the current turmoil in the Middle East caused by Islamic fundamentalism.

Hume famously argued that it was tradition, custom and social norms which make us moral animals despite our instincts. As a trenchant critic of the Christian cosmology which had held the West in thrall for over 1500 years, he argued that neither God nor Reason (as the Greeks and later Kant maintained) was needed to anchor morality. He overturned what had been the bedrock of Western philosophy for nearly two thousand years: the primacy of reason in guiding human action. The mastering of our emotions by reason was to lead to the virtuous life. Hume in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* reversed this. 'Reason' he wrote' is and ought to be the slave of the passions'. The 'is' in the above statement being shown by the recent advances in the neurosciences to be exactly as Hume envisaged. It is the passions underlying Islamic fundamentalism I want to dissect to see if and how they might be tamed as the European Enlightenment tamed those of the Christian West.

In an earlier Presidential address to the MPS[1] I had noted that, there was a major difference between the Semitic monotheistic religions and the polytheism of the classical pagan world of antiquity which they replaced. The Semitic religions unlike those of the pagans claimed to be universal, and that they worshiped the only true God. Except Judaism, the other two– Christianity and Islam– sought to convert heathens, if necessary by the sword. This has led to incessant strife, not only between the votaries of these religions and the Rest, but even between different sects within these religions, who all claim to have the ultimate truth. Despite the attempts by the sages of both the Scottish and French Enlightenments to end the intolerance of their monotheistic religions, fundamentalist Christian beliefs of various hues still prevail and continue to influence politics and society. But their virulence is outdone by the fundamentalists of the other monotheistic religion – Islam – which has never even had its Enlightenment. It is the continuing religious passions of adherents to these monotheistic religions, in particular Islam, that I want to address.

I RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

One of the more surprising survivals of the pre modern age is the continuing cleavage along religious lines, despite the seeming victory of the Enlightenment value of secularism, separating the public sphere from the private sphere where individual beliefs – including religious – can thrive. In the late 1980s the American Academy of Arts and Sciences sponsored the Fundamentalism Project to assess the fundamentalist religious movements which seemed to have become a major source of domestic and

---

[*]   James S. Coleman Professor Emeritus of International Development Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, and Professor Emeritus of Political Economy, University College London. This is a revised and refurbished version of my Presidential Address to the Mont Pelerin Society's general meeting in Sydney in October 2010.
[1]   Deepak Lal, 'Towards a New Paganism: The Family, The West and the Rest', *Biblioteca della liberta*, Anno XLV, n 197.

international disorder.[2] These encompassed the rise of political Islam in the Middle East and South Asia, to the Hindu fundamentalists in India, Buddhist fundamentalists in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar, and Christian fundamentalists in the US and Jewish fundamentalists in Israel. In their conclusions in the final volume of the series, *Fundamentalisms and the State*, the editors and sponsors of the project, Martin Marty and Scott Appleby noted that, religious fundamentalism arose in the 20th century as many developing countries saw the rapid modernization of their traditional societies resulting in 'profound personal and social dislocations' without 'mediating institutions capable of meeting the human needs created by these dislocations'.[3]

Religious fundamentalists 'are concerned with defining, restoring, and reinforcing the basis of personal and communal identity that is shaken or destroyed by modern dislocations and crises'. They reject distinctions between the 'public' and 'private' spheres. They want the 'observances of a religious community to permeate the whole of life, an organic unity that the agents of secular modernity have wrongly segmented and compartmentalized. The boundaries that matter are not between the 'private' and 'public' but between the believer and the infidel'.[4]

These religious fundamentalisms are a form of cultural nationalism, and reflect the Romantic revolt against the Enlightenment and its 'disenchantment of the world'. For them too, like the Romantics, globalization and the modernization it brings is a 'desert in which everything has been leveled, and all beauty stamped out to create a mundane serviceable world of use objects'.[5]

As Benedict Anderson has noted there is a similarity between the imagined communities of nationalism and the imagined communities of religious fundamentalists. Both reflect a deep human desire for cosmological beliefs which give meaning and purpose to their lives and their relationships to others, but most important of all to explain and come to terms with death: Man's inescapable mortality. 'The great merit of traditional religious world-views has been their concern with man – in the cosmos, man as species being, and the contingency of life'. The Enlightenment with its 'rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness. With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary. Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What was then required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, a contingency into meaning'[6]. The nation was the answer.

Religious fundamentalisms hark back to older imagined communities. These formed part of the great sacral cultures which 'conceived of themselves as cosmically central, through the medium of a sacred language linked to a superterrestrial order of power'.[7] Thus whilst the nations are concerned with defined territorial boundaries, religious communities are often imagined as transnational, eg the *umma* of Islam. 'Both the nation and the fundamentalist community are conceived of as deep horizontal comradeships, 'sacred' fraternities for which people may die or kill other people. Like nationalisms, fundamentalisms possess hegemonic political ambitions and

---

[2] I was associated with this project and wrote a paper on 'The Economic Impact of Hindu Revivalism', published in the third volume of the project *Fundamentalisms and the State.*

[3] Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds), *Fundamentalisms and the State* (University of Chicago Press, 1993) 620.

[4] Ibid 621.

[5] Charles Taylor, 'Socialism and Weltanschung' in Leszek Kolawski and Stuart Hampsire (eds), *The Socialist Idea – A Reappraisal* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1974).

[6] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2006) 11.

[7] Ibid 13.

demand colossal sacrifices from their devotees'.[8]

The majority of these fundamentalisms are to be found in the monotheistic Semitic religions which destroyed the classical world of antiquity. The 7th century was the turning point in the Middle East, but as Sam Finer in his *History of Government* argues, the whole period between Classical Antiquity and Modernity described as the 'Middle Ages' in European history also applies to the historical periodization of China and India, but the dates would be different from the European ones of 450–1450AD. For, globally these 'Middle Ages' saw three developments in the civilizations of Eurasia: the emergence of the 'Historic' religions; the destruction of the old established state structures and the creation, after a time of troubles, of completely novel ones, in some areas; and – finally – the interruption of this same process of state and community building by wild incursions of uncivilized hordes from the Eurasian 'heartland.'[9]

There was a major difference between the 'Historic' religions (which by and large were monotheistic) and the polytheism of the classical pagan world of antiquity which they replaced. 'These religions, neo-Zoroastrianism in Iran, Christianity in the Roman Empire, Islam in the Middle East, and even Buddhism in India and then China, shared the view that they and they alone worshipped the 'true' God and/or professed the 'true way'. They were *exclusive*, and in Europe and the Middle East as far as the Jaxartes and north India, rulers enforced them on their subjects under more or less severe sanctions for the first time in history'.[10]

They were also congregational with the individuals professing common beliefs forming 'what the Jews called the *kabal*, Christians the *ecclesia*, Muslims the *umma*, and (and more restrictively here) Buddhists the *sangha*'.[11] These monotheistic religions, particularly the Semitic ones, unlike those of the pagans, claimed to be universal. They worshipped the only true God. Except Judaism, the other two – Christianity and Islam – sought to convert heathens, if necessary by the sword.

This has led to incessant strife, not only between the votaries of these religions and the Rest, but even between different sects within these religions, who all claim to have the ultimate truth. States with their rulers following one of these religions, began 'for the first time in history to deprive, or humiliate, or mulc, or mutilate, stab, and burn to death not only those of their subjects who rebelled against them, and not only those who did not outwardly conform to their rituals, but even those who simply held different religious opinions from their own. This odious practice sprang from the historic religions' view, unlike that of their predecessors, that worldly life was merely a transient probation for the real – and eternal – life to come, and to their unshakable conviction that only by right thinking, not just good conduct, could the human soul be saved from eternal torment hereafter'.[12]

After the split in Christendom with the Reformation, the whole of Europe was plunged into the Thirty Years religious Wars between Protestants and Catholics which only ended with the Treaty of Westphalia. The Scottish and French Enlightenment then tamed the religious passions of Christian states, by their promotion of secular values, and the acceptance by most European states and their offshoots of the important distinction between the private and public sphere. This was best emphasized by Queen Elizabeth the First of England, when seeing her kingdom torn by religious strife, and the demands to eliminate all heretical thinking, she demurred saying that she 'did not want to make windows into men's souls'.

---

[8]   Marty and Appleby, above n 3, 623.
[9]   S.E. Finer, *The History of Government vol. II* (Oxford University Press, 1997) 613.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid 614.
[12] Ibid 615.

But, despite these attempts by the sages of both the Scottish and French Enlightenments to end the intolerance of their monotheistic religions, fundamentalist Christian beliefs of various hues still prevail and continue to influence politics and society. But their virulence is outdone by the fundamentalists of the other monotheistic religion – Islam – which has never even had its Enlightenment. As the Enlightenment seems to have tamed Christian fundamentalism, is there any hope of a Muslim Enlightenment which might tame the Islamicists who are currently one of the major sources of global disorder?

II DAVID HUME ON RELIGION

As Hume noted, monotheistic religions like most others have a 'natural religion' which is presumed to be based on reason, and a 'revealed religion' based on faith, and the special rituals associated with the particular religion which allow God to reveal himself and perform miracles for the faithful. Hume is devastating in his *Dialogues* and *Natural History of Religion* about both aspects of Christianity.[13] As he noted about the purported rational belief in an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent deity ruling the world: how could one explain evil in such a world. 'Epicurus's 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?' (p. 100).

 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' (p.139). 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'. (p. 176).

As Hume had 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, compatabile with each other.' (p. 160). He cites Pliny's *Natural History* as affirming 'that it was usual for the Romans, before they had laid siege to any town, to invoke the tutelar 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' (p. 187).

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

---

[13]   David Hume, *Dialogues* and *Natural History of Religion* (Penguin Classics, first published 1779, 1990 ed).

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' (p. 162).

III ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISTS

This inability of Islam, to date, to embrace tolerance through the 'steady resolution of civil magistrates' is due to a unique feature of its cosmological beliefs: its inability to separate church and state. Whereas in most other civilizations 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 has noted, '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'.[14] It is only in the 20th century that the question of privatizing religion became an issue, and then only in Turkey, the only Muslim nation to legally formalize the separation of church and state. But which too, under its current moderate Islamic government seems to be backsliding. Clearly, it is Islam itself, which is at the root of the problems of the Muslim world in coming to terms with modernity.

It is worth looking back historically at the roots of the problem.[15] The Muslim civilization, that Mohammed and his successors created, was the dominant world civilization at the end of the first millennium. It was described by their poets as providing 'tastes of paradise'. This paradise was shattered by the rise of the West. Though, it was not till the Ottomans were turned back after the siege of Vienna in 1683 that this Islamic world went into relative decline.

Most of the ancient civilizations traumatized by the rise of the West have had three major responses. The first is that of the oyster, which closes its shell. The other was to modernize, to try to master the foreign technology and way of life, and to fight the alien culture with its own weapons, as the Japanese did when Commodore Perry's black ships appeared off the coast at Yokohama. Some Islamic countries – in particular Attaturk's Turkey and Mehmet Ali's Egypt – also took the second route, but only partially. The third remedy was socialism, which claimed to be able to combine modernity with tradition, through a combination of principles derived from both the Enlightenment and the Romantic Reaction.

This third remedy, which was the common response of many other traumatized ex colonial elites, was also tried by the Muslim nationalist elites which came to power after the withdrawal of the West, as epitomized by Nasser in Egypt. Nasser like many other nationalist socialist leaders in the Middle East realized that they had to come to terms with the low Islam of the common people,[16] to avoid social unrest. This low Islam was often syncretist and much influenced by the mystical form of Islam preached by the Sufis and their cult of saints. By contrast, the high Islam of the scholars (ulemma), from which the Islamists arose, was seen as a threat to the nationalist's modernizing ambitions and was ruthlessly suppressed. But the popular

---

14   Bernard Lewis, 'Muslims, Christians and Jews: the dream of co-existence' (1992) 39(6) *New York Review of Books* 50.

15   See Deepak Lal, *Unintended Consequences* (MIT Press, 1998), ch 4, and Deepak Lal, *In Praise of Empires* (Palgrave–Macmillan, 2004) 85-102 for fuller accounts of this and other aspects of the Islamic predicament.

16   This distinction between high and low Islam was made by the great Arab historian Ibn Khaldun, and was picked up in his analysis of Muslim society by Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

low Islam had little influence on the growing mass of educated youth in the cities. An attempt was then made to co–opt high Islam. In Egypt, Nasser in effect nationalized Al–Azhar, the Islamic seminary which had instructed the ulemma for a thousand years, and sought to get its teachers and pupils to argue for the compatability of Islam with Nassersist socialism. But this attempt backfired, as the ulemma came to be looked upon as stooges of the state and could no longer fulfill their traditional function of mediating between the state and society.

It was the shattering Arab defeat in the six day 1967 Arab–Israeli war, which destroyed any hope that socialist nationalism offered a solution to the Muslim predicament. This military defeat being compounded by the failure of Arab socialism to increase the economic pie sufficiently fast, to allow the lower middle classes and the rural and urban proletariat to share in the material gains promised at independence, but garnered mainly by the traditional elites.

The Islamic intelligentsia, financed by Wahhabi Saudi money, then turned to the other common remedy, that of the oyster. They turned away from nationalists and toward Islamism and the creation of an Islamic state as the answer to Muslim woes. This response – in which Muslims sought to purify Islam from all the corruptions that had crept over the centuries into Muslim lives and thereby to regain Allah's favor – has had much greater resonance in the Muslim world than the other Eurasian civilizations. Whilst, other civilizations have come to realize that modernization does not entail Westernization, and hence ancient cosmological beliefs can be maintained even when material beliefs have to change to modernize,[17] it was (as William McNeill notes) Islam's misfortune that, despite many voices (eg Sir Syed Ahmed in 19th century India) stating that Islam could be reconciled with modernity, the two remedies of the oyster and the modernizer 'seemed always diametrically opposed to one another. Reformers' efforts therefore tended to cancel out, leaving the mass of Muslim society more confused and frustrated than ever'.[18]

Much worse, unlike the other Eurasian civilizations which came in time to recognize that modernity and tradition could be reconciled, not least because of the growth of a Western educated elite which has imbibed some of the messages of the Enlightenment, in Muslim countries, Western education and other trappings of modernity, instead of creating modern rational societies, have in part led to the Islamist backlash. The hijackers who flew into the World Trade Center were not poor, illiterate peasants, but the children of well–off middle class parents, who had been given a technical education. The important study of Fundamentalism by the AAAS[19] – with which I was associated – found that in the Arab world, and in Muslim states from Iran to Pakistan, there is a consistent pattern in the educational and socio–economic status of Islamic militants. Fundamentalists are mainly students and university graduates in the physical sciences with rural or traditionally religious backgrounds. They are the recent beneficiaries of the expanded university systems, were raised in a traditional family, and have had to make recent adjustments to a modern cultural and intellectual

---

[17]   This distinction between 'cosmological' beliefs (how one should live) and 'material' beliefs (how to earn a living) is made in my *Unintended Consequences:* Lal, above n 11.

[18]   William McNeill, *A World History* (Oxford University Press, 3rd ed, 1979) 390.

[19]   Martin Marty and Scott Appelby (eds), *Fundamentalisms and the State* (Chicago University Press, 1993), which summarizes and presents some of the AAAS studies, including mine on Hindu fundamentalism. In this I had reported my interview with L. K. Advani the leader of the Hindu nationalist party the BJP. He rightly noted that given the polytheism of Hinduism there cannot be Hindu fundamentalists. He said his promotion of Hindu nationalism was a purely political ploy, as it helped to garner votes from the large anti-Muslim minority of voters, who resented Muslim prosleytising and the fact that they had ruled the Hindus as conquerors for over 500 years. Its more recent stance against Christian missionaries seeking to convert tribals in India is based on similar motives.

environment. Moreover, a study[20] of the educational profiles of the Marxist and Islamic guerilla movements which overthrew the Shah of Iran, found that the Islamists were mainly students of natural sciences, the Marxists of the humanities and the social sciences.

Malise Ruthven has provided persuasive reasons why the students from rural and traditionally religious lower middle-class families are turning into Islamists in the Muslim world. It is caused, argues Ruthven, by the failure to integrate 'the dual identity of the village Muslim and the applied scientist … The religious mind inherited from the village or suburb is conditioned to believe that knowledge is 'Islamic', that all truth is known and comes from Allah. The scientist operates in a field of epistemological doubt'.[21] One way out of the dilemma would be for the villager–turned scientist to pretend that the truths of science are already contained in his/her religion. But this escape is not possible for those trained in the natural sciences. They could just accept this dual identity, but it is not possible for many. Moreover, for the devout Muslim, the real scandal is that knowledge acquired through doubt, has proved more powerful in creating material prosperity, than the revealed knowledge of their religion. During the initial phase of Islam's expansion, its stupendous conquests, which provided booty for the material prosperity of the 'umma', were seen as proof of God's approval. The success of the post Enlightenment West then becomes unbearable.

Thus the September 11 hijackers were not motivated by 'some naïve faith in a paradisiacal future, but the final solution they found to a profoundly tragic personal predicament. The pre–Kantian metaphysical deity taught in the mainstream academies of Islam had failed them catastrophically. In a world dominated by the post–Enlightenment West, the Argument from Manifest Success was collapsing everywhere. These highly educated products of Western technical education…[found] their faith in the benign and compassionate deity of Islam begin to wobble. Their final act was not a gesture of Islamic heroism, but of Nietzschean despair'.[22]

And, paradoxically it is partly in this cognitive dissonance of educated Muslim youth that the hope for a prospective Muslim Enlightenment lies. If this were to occur, it would be able – as Hume said of the England and Holland of his time – to embrace the principles of toleration 'in opposition to the continued efforts of priests and bigots'. For, it should be remembered that, Hume and his contemporaries of the Scottish Enlightenment, were changing minds in the Western world, only a few decades after the iron grip of the Calvinist kirk seemed to have closed all Scottish minds.

Arthur Herman,[23] the historian of the Scottish Enlightenment, informs us that in 1696 a 19 year old theology student, Thomas Aikenhead, was hanged for blasphemy at the instigation of the Scottish Presbyterian Church. This Calvinist church established by John Knox, and of which young Aikenhead became a victim, is described by 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' (p. 16). This sounds eerily similar to what we read in our newspapers about Shiite Iran, Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, the Afghan Taliban and most recently the jihadist ISIS.

By 1725, Frances Hutcheson (a clergyman and a teacher) and Lord Kames (a lawyer and judge) had launched the Scottish Enlightenment. Could not a similar change occur in Muslim societies? This may seem unlikely at the moment as the

---

[20] Valerie Hoffman, 'Muslim Fundamentalists: Psycho-Social Profiles' in ibid.
[21] Malise Ruthven, *A Fury for God* (Granta Books, 2002) 124.
[22] Ibid 132.
[23] Arthur Herman, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World* (Three Rivers Press, 2001).

stunning march of the jihadist warriors of the Islamic State (ISIS) through parts of Syria and Iraq and its growing threat to Jordan and Lebanon as it seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate in the old unified Mesopotamia, brings to mind another electrifying campaign in the 7th century AD which destroyed the classical world of antiquity and created a new world order in Western Eurasia.

IV THE RISE OF ISLAM

This was the Arab conquests under the banner of Islam. It was a totally unexpected development, and the factors behind this reordering of the world are still in dispute.[24] But, as this century was in many ways an important hinge of history, I briefly summarize what is now known, and look to see if these intimations from the past provide any prognosis for the current battle for the Middle East.

About 600 AD two long established great empires dominated western Eurasia – the truncated and Christian Roman Empire centered on Constantinople, and the neo-Zorastrian Persian Empire reconstituted by the Sassanian dynasty in the third century. Both could mobilize vast resources for war: the Romans those of North Africa and much of Italy, the Balkans and the near Middle East. The Persians: from the fertile lands of Mesopotamia and highland Iran. Their territories abutted, and they competed for influence over the peoples of the north Caucasus and the Bedouin tribes of Arabia, with whom both had established patron–client relationships to guard their respective desert frontiers. They were commercial rivals, competing for the lucrative overland trade from China and the seaborne trade across the Indian Ocean from India and South East Asia.

By the second quarter of the 8th century, the Persian Sassanian Empire had been extinguished. The Roman Empire had shrunk to Byzantium, controlling Asia Minor, the islands of the Aegean and the southern extremities of the Balkans. It was now in a mortal struggle with the new imperial power of the Bedouin Arabs who in a short space of time since their eruption from the marginal lands beyond the zone of direct confrontation between the two existing imperial powers, had defeated both imperial field armies in open battle, and soon controlled Egypt, Mesopotamia and highland Iran. The binary world order of late antiquity was replaced by the new unitary Arab power in the 7th century.

How had this astonishing new world order been established? Howard-Johnston argues that of the two contending explanations – circumstances like the Roman-Persian war lasting from 603-628, and the ideological changes brought about in Arabia by the

---

[24]   The history of this pivotal century has been contested by three sets of historians. The first are those who accept the picture painted by Muslim sources, and largely accepted by Western scholars like Ernest Renan in 1883, and more recently by Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammed* (Pelican Books, 1973). These sources (mainly the Koran and the *hadiths*) which date some two centuries after the events they describe have been questioned by historians like John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford, 1978), who using the method of textual analysis developed by biblical scholars to determine the authenticity of these classical sources, provide a different time line and location for the events they describe. A popular and controversial account of this revisionist history is provided in Tom Holland's *In the Shadow of the Sword* (Little Brown, 2012). The third account is by my old friend (since we were young lecturers together at Christ Church, Oxford) the scholar of Byzantium, James Howard–Johnston. In his important book *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford, 2010) he builds on the pioneering work of the Princeton historians Patricia Crone and Michael Cook (*Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977)) and their students, by a scholarly and persuasive vetting of the Muslim and non–Muslim historians and histories of the seventh century. The text gives his account.

prophet Mohammed – it is the latter which accounts for the extraordinary rise of the Arab's Muslim Empire.

'The greatest appeal of Muhammad's monotheist message' writes Howard-Johnston 'lay in its bleakness, in its clear–eyed view of a universe governed by a single divine autocrat … The traditional *passive fatalism* of the Bedouin, conducting life according to a tribal code of man's creation, was transformed by faith, which required complete submission to Allah … This engendered an *active fatalism* in genuine converts, a commitment to serve God with their persons and worldly goods together with indifference to the personal cost. It maybe termed a *whole faith*, one which permeated the whole being of the believer. This in turn endowed Muslim troops with extraordinary élan. They were committed unto death. The armies which invaded the Roman and Persian empires were in essence ordered arrays of suicide fighters, endowed with extraordinary courage and daring'. (pp. 450–451). This is a description equally applicable to the warriors of ISIS, as David Blair who witnessed the attack on the Iraqi justice ministry in March 2013 by Baghdadi's men has noted.[25]

There were two political innovations which transformed Islam's prospects after the Prophet's flight to Medina. The first was to change Muslims direction of prayer from Jerusalem (the holiest place on earth for both the previous monotheist religions) to the Ka'ba, the premier pagan sanctuary of Arabia. This incorporation of the Ka'ba and its associated rites into Islam, forced though it was on the prophet, was a political act, which once Mecca had formally submitted in 630 allowed it to draw on the developed institutional endowment, diplomatic expertise, and mercantile ingenuity of this well-established trading city. Secondly, it was this Meccan statecraft which allowed the early Muslim caliphs to devise and implement a 'grand strategy' of husbanding the military resources of Arabia, directing operations at a distance, establishing priorities, and deploying the requisite resources at the right place to achieve their objectives.

And its success was phenomenal. By the 16th century Christendom had begun its voyages of discovery in large part to bypass the Islamic behemoth which now bestrode the whole Middle East, denying it access to the vital Eastern spice trade. It controlled 'all but the western, eastern and southern extremities of the Eurasian continent'. (p. 516)

Can ISIS repeat a similar feat? Blair notes that Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, is 'not merely a religious fanatic, but a strategic thinker and an accomplished commander'. He has captured vital oilfields and the northern city of Mosul containing military depots stuffed with weapons and millions of dollars in the Iraqi Central Bank's branch. Baghdadi has become 'the richest and best-equipped terrorist leader in modern history' notes Blair, 'and the ruler of enough territory to be able to proclaim the birth of an "Islamic state"'. Having swiftly shown up the weakness of the Iraqi army and the Kurdish *Peshmerga*, and with the leader of the remaining superpower only belatedly entering the fray, it remains unclear whether Baghdadi will be able to match the feats of his self-proclaimed *nom-de-plume*, the Caliph Abu Bakr, or whether his Caliphate will end as it was born in blood.

V ISLAMIC JURISPRUDENCE

The ongoing war between the Sunnis and Shias in the Middle East is reminiscent of the European Thirty Years War between the Catholic and Protestant powers of Europe in the 17th century, which ended with the treaty of Westphalia in 1648. But, just

---

25   David Blair, 'Islamic State's cunning leader', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 August 2014.

as this treaty merely stopped the merging of domestic and foreign policy, allowing each sovereign state to maintain its own religious order domestically, even with an ending of the transnational external threats to peace in the proxy religious Sunni–Shia conflict, the respective sectarian fundamentalist religious beliefs in the domestic domain would remain. In Europe it was the Scottish Enlightenment and its extension into the French Enlightenment in the 18th century which allowed these religious fundamentalisms to morph into the secularism which has come to characterize modernity.

As David Hume noted in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, the religious tolerance which was embraced by the English and Dutch 'proceeded from the steady resolution of the civil magistrate, in opposition to the continued efforts of priests and bigots' (p. 162). 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,[26] in these countries 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 which are a gross infringement of personal liberties, and as Hamid shows for the parties of political Islam this remains their *raison d'etre*. 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 which has evolved in the two branches of Islam, Sunni (particularly the Wahhabi version) and the Shia, which 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 *itjihad* allowed some doctrinal flexibility.[27] This period particularly under the Abbasids saw the flowering of Islamic civilization, which came to be the intermediary between the ideas and techniques of the older civilizations of Greece, China and India. But sometime during the ninth to eleventh 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 *itjihad*' was closed.

This closing of the Sunni Muslim mind curbed curiosity and innovation – particularly in the education system, which from then on emphasized rote learning and memorizing, instead of problem solving. The *madrassas* 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 anathematizes other beliefs, in particular the 'idolatrous' 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 civilization built under the earliest Caliphs of the Abbasid dynasty. It should also be noted that ISIS consists of Wahhabis whose quarrel with other Sunni regimes in particular Saudi Arabia is that they are hypocrites who do not practice what they preach.

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.[28] The major difference

---

[26]   Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a new Middle East* (Oxford, 2014).

[27]   See Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed, 1979) and Deepak Lal, *Unintended Consequences* (MIT Press, 1998) ch 4.

[28]   See Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival* (W.W. Norton, 2007) and Gerhard Bowering et al (eds), *Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2013).

is that, unlike the Sunnis, the Shia community relies on its clerics not only to interpret religion but 'to make new rulings which expand on religious law, first codified in the eighth century' (Nasr, p. 69). 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, and philosophy, logic, rhetoric and sometimes literature. On graduating they 'become a full member of the *ulema*, someone who can practice *itjihad* (independent reasoning to give a new ruling) – a *mutjahid* – collect religious taxes and serve as the guardian of the flock' (p. 70). 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.' (p. 71)

The Shias have also developed a different political doctrine since the Safavid dynasty established itself as a Shia monarchy in Iran. With the occulation of the Twelfth imam in 939 A.D., 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 recognizing 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' (p. 74).

This 'Safavid contract' survived for 500 years until with the Iranian revolution of 1979, Khomeni 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 Khomeni's doctrine, most importantly Grand Ayatollah al–Khoi, the mentor of Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq. Khomeni'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' (p. 134).

Nasr argues that, Khomeni's influence and his deviant theory has now lost influence even in Iran, where the quietest traditional view of a less politicized faith as represented by the Iraqi Ayatollah Khoi and his disciple Sistani are gaining influence. 'This yearning for an older and less politicized faith also helps to explain why the modest, deeply learned, and plain–living Sistani has so quickly become popular in Iran'. (p. 219). It is this victory of the old quietest Shia Islam – with its opening to alternative interpretations through *itjihad,* and its implicit acceptance of the separation of church and state – over Khomeni's politicized Shia Islam – which offers the best hope of a Muslim Enlightenment.