

Men of the Millennium

by Pervez Hoodbhoy

Five personalities of the millennium – people who shaped the course of human history.

1. Averroes (we call him Ibn Rushd)
Born in 1126, Córdoba. Died in 1198.

Frequently decried as heretical and consigned to the fire by both Christian clergy and Muslim ulema, the works of Islam's most famous philosopher and jurist had fuelled the European Reformation and Renaissance centuries later. Arguing that revelation must be guided by reason, Averroes passionately rebutted Imam Al-Ghazzali's lengthy tirades against mathematics and philosophy. His elaborate scheme of Quranic exegesis inspired Muslim modernists from Syed Ahmad Khan and Rashid Rida to Ghulam Mohammed Pervez. In his extensive commentaries on Aristotle and Plato, Averroes regrets the position of women in Islam compared with their civic equality in Plato's Republic. Europe still remembers him, but his own civilization, locked into a state of frozen medievalism, has few memories. His writings exist only in Hebrew and Latin translations, the original Arabic ones were lost centuries ago.

2. Martin Luther
Born in 1483, Germany. Died in 1546.

This German priest and scholar spearheaded the attack on the depraved, profligate, witch-burning emperor popes of Rome. His ultimate success, after much blood was shed, led to the Protestant Reformation, the precursor to the European Renaissance and the most brilliant period of human history. Luther refuted the infallibility of the Pope, denied his claim to jurisdiction over purgatory, focussed upon the Church's extortion from the poor, ridiculed the sale of holy relics, and called the cult of saints a mindless superstition. Without Luther's revolt, the Christian Church would probably still be mired in the Dark Ages.

3. Rene Descartes
Born in 1596, Sweden. Died in 1650.

The father of modern philosophy, and leading mathematician and physicist, Descartes put humans at the centre of the universe with his famous dictum "I think, therefore I am". Whereas his contemporary, Blaise Pascal, trembled when he looked into the infinite universe and perceived the puniness and misery of man, Descartes rejected the view that human beings are essentially miserable and sinful. Instead he exulted in the power of human reason to understand the cosmos and promote human happiness. It was impertinent to pray to God to change things, he said. The Cartesian method - reduction of a problem into its simplest parts -- remains the foundation of scientific inquiry today. Descartes formulated a new conception of nature as an intricate, impersonal machine run by mechanical principles. The human body too was a machine, a view that has since been vindicated. In 1667 the Roman Catholic Church put his works on the Index of Forbidden Books.

4. Isaac Newton
Born in 1643, England. Died in 1727.

A self-obsessed, secretive, and intensely jealous man by the accounts of his contemporaries, Newton's influence on science is nevertheless more profound than that of any individual scientist at any point in history. His grand synthesis of the laws of mechanical motion and gravity, and his invention of the calculus, firmly established the universe as a mechanical system, and mathematics as the language of nature. Though a fervent Protestant, his discoveries unwittingly set into motion a tidal wave that ultimately swept away the power of the Christian Church. Appointed Master of the Mint, he became the terror of London counterfeiters, sending a goodly number to the gallows. Presumably he found in them a socially acceptable target on which to vent his rage at other Fellows of the Royal Society, who he despised as rivals.

5. Albert Einstein

Born in 1879, Germany. Died in 1955.

Politics are for the moment but an equation is for eternity. Probably the most creative intellect in human history, Einstein changed forever our concepts of space and time. The creation of the universe with a Big Bang is but one consequence of his General Theory of Relativity. His famous postulation of an energy-mass equation, which states that a particle of matter can be converted into an enormous quantity of energy, had its spectacular proof in the creation of the atomic bomb. Horrified by the use to which his theory had been put to, he spent the remainder of his life fighting nuclear weapons together with searching for the Unified Field Theory. He was unsuccessful in both. The most celebrated scientist in history, he championed the cause of pacifism and liberalism, and rejected an offer to become president of Israel. Judaism had played little part in his life, but he insisted that, as a snail can shed his shell and still be a snail, so a Jew can shed his faith and still be a Jew.

Pervez Hoodbhoy is professor of physics at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad.