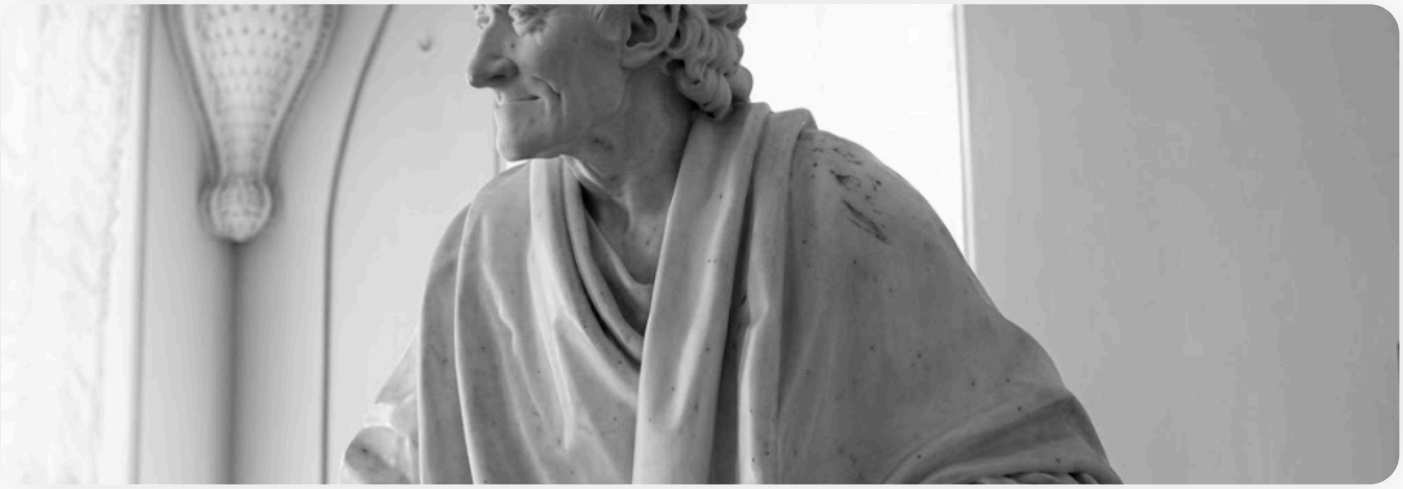
AKAL WAHYU

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Invited Article: Voltaire's Political Thought and the Foundation of Western Secularism

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Tellentyre (1907, p. 199) summarizes Voltaire's stance on freedom of speech: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." This later became an adage for freedom of speech espousers and an ethos that outlined the very premise of the concept. However, is it in line with Islamic tenets?

Voltaire was one of the founding fathers of the Enlightenment. For him, to be enlightened—at that moment of convictional and emotional panic that spread throughout Europe—was not to believe in "organized religions," i.e., not to believe in Catholicism, the Catholic Church, or scriptural dogma (Voltaire, 1998, pp. 6–15; 48–52; Hannam, 2010, p. 3; Mishra, 2022, p. 42; Said, 2003, pp. 76–77). The Catholic Church had claimed total authority over the people, yet was proven wrong in interpreting the universe by asserting that the sun orbited the earth. In addition, corruption and abuse of power had long been plaguing the ecclesiastical establishment. For Voltaire, those who blindly followed these institutions were "scriptural fanatics" who became ignorant of reason and civility (Mishra, 2022, p. 42; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. 3). The misuse of religious authority blinded the masses, rendering them dogmatic and intolerant of other faiths.

Hence, Voltaire's secular goal was not to totally reject religion in human life. He was a Deist who believed in one God as the supreme creator of the universe (Voltaire, 1998, pp. 48–52). His primary objective was rejecting the abuse of religion for personal gains. Such fanatical figures were dangerous because they held the potential of escalating disagreements in intellectual discourse into physical violence and war, as seen in historical events like the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648).



Voltaire's stance on discourse and humility provides an interesting point of reflection for Islam. Voltaire argued that we should defend the right of people to voice their thoughts, unless they are among the "intolerants"—those who are religiously dogmatic and extremist. He promoted the idea of the "ignorant philosopher" to cultivate intellectual humility, reminding scholars that human beings must recognize their limitations in understanding the universe (Voltaire, 1992).

Such humility is indeed in line with Islam. Islam encourages people of other faiths to express their thoughts without fear of threats or imprisonment (Alegre, 2022), while maintaining boundaries against harm such as hate speech. Engaging in conversation with non-Muslims is a vital part of da'wah (invitation to Islam), which must always be conducted with hikmah (wisdom). Furthermore, Islam stands strongly against the misuse of power for personal gain. However, this does not mean Islam rejects an organized public role; an organized and institutionalized framework in an Islamic society is viewed as necessary for justice, prosperity, and blessings from God.

In conclusion, Voltaire provides a crucial critique of the misuse of power by religious authorities who bent religious tenets to meet their personal interests. While his call for intellectual humility and civil discourse shares common ground with Islamic ethics, his ideas eventually laid the foundation for total secularization between religion and the state in the West. This form of complete secularism ultimately diverges from Islam, which maintains that religious and ethical values must actively guide the state and public life.

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