RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES IN THE MIDDLE AGES: IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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Abstract: A casual glance at the Middle Ages reveals a period of varying religious encounters and attitudes that provide fundamental models which continue to shape and drive Christian-Muslim relations today. The Middle Ages mark the period in the history of the world where Christianity and Islam first encountered each other. The exclusivist crusaders of Western Europe arrived in Palestine and the Middle East in a multi-religious context, which permitted Jews, Christians and Muslims to co-exist peacefully. The paper, finally, argues that the religious encounters and attitudes of the Middle Ages offer a socio-religious platform with enormous lessons for Christian-Muslim relations of the religiously pluralistic and increasingly secularized sub-Saharan Africa in the twenty-first century world.

Key Words: Christian Crusades, Christian-Muslim Relations, Muslim Conquests, Sub-Saharan Africa.

Introduction

It is difficult to argue against the fact that religious encounters of the Middle Ages continue to shape and drive Christian-Muslim relations today. The Middle Ages (Medieval periods) mark the period in history where Christianity and Islam first encountered each other. The relationship that ensued is a mix-one, which is worthy of examination for proper appraisal and application in the sub-Saharan African context. Christian and Muslim encounters in the Middle Ages offer two key classical models: exclusivist and pluralist. Exclusivist crusaders of Western Europe arrived in Palestine and the Middle East in a multi-religious context, which permitted Jews, Christians and Muslims to co-exist peacefully.

In this paper, I will discuss the exclusivist religious attitude of Western Europe during the Dark Ages, characterized by widespread anarchy and chaos. The only organized institution was Christianity which largely championed an exclusivist claim against other religions.

Although the dominance of Christianity led by the Papacy was often challenged in many ways, Charlemagne (Charles the Great) emerged in the political and social scene and succeeded in unifying the region under a central government and one religion, Christianity.

I will also opine that the Eastern Empire (which later became known as Eastern Europe) rather had a very different experience during the Middle Ages. Though largely Christian, Eastern Europe took up a pluralistic nature after the Great Schism of 1054 A.D, in terms of theology, doctrine and liturgy. The successful Arab/Muslim campaign on the Eastern Empire was followed by a rich and highly developed civilization and a more open attitude to other people's ideas, cultures and religions.[1] Christian Western Europe embarked on military crusades to regain parts of Palestine from the Arabs for Christian pilgrimages and to ensure the return of the region to Christian control. The crusades brought together men from every European region, which ushered in a period of great exchange of ideas and customs. It also offered Western Europe an important opportunity to encounter and appreciate the religious plurality of the East uniquely.

Finally, I will contend that the religious encounters and attitudes of the medieval periods, especially the plural ones have enormous implications and lessons for Christian-Muslim relations of the increasingly secularized sub-Saharan Africa in the twenty-first century world.

Exclusivist Religious Attitude in Western Empire

Christianity became the only religion in Western Europe and remained so throughout the Middle Ages. The Edith of Milan issued by Emperor Constantine in 313 A.D. ushered in religious toleration with the legalization of Christianity.[2] Christianity became only one of the religions, but the imperial Roman cult continued to be the official religion. The issuance of the Edith of Milan ended the external challenges that Christianity faced in the early period of its history, i.e. the imperial persecution which was started by Emperor Nero in 64 AD.[3] Over time, with the adoption of the Nicene Creed of 325 AD, the

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[1] Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 47.

[2] Gregory DiPippo, "The Edict of Milan," June 13, 2022; https://veterumsapientia.org/the-edict-of-milan/ [Accessed, May 24, 2023].

[3] Noel Lenski, "The Significance of the Edict of Milan," in *Constantine: Religious Faith and Imperial Policy*, ed. Edward Siecienski (London: Routledge, 2017), 27-56.

Christian Church streamlined its doctrines and teachings to deal with the many false or heretical teachings such as Gnosticism, Montanism, and Arianism. Other religions, such as the imperial cult, also faded away and Christianity became the only religion.[4]

On February 27, 380 AD, the Roman emperor Theodosius I and Valentinian II signed a decree which declared Christianity the official religion of both the Roman Empire (Western and Eastern Empires).[5] The position of Christianity in the empire was further strengthened with the assumption of the powers of the state by church leaders and the Bishop of Rome (the Pope). The extent of the association of Church and State in the Middle Ages is demonstrated by the new name of the empire, The Holy Roman Empire.[6]

Consequently, the papacy became the sole religious authority which managed to deal ruthlessly with not only Christian separatist movements but also remnants of other religions in the empire.[7] The Papal authority was infallible which defined Christian thoughts, doctrine and liturgy for a long time. The Pope was ably assisted by the Cardinals, Archbishops, and Bishops in the discharge of the Petrine duties.[8] Nevertheless, the Papacy could only keep the church together under one authority till 1054 A.D. when the first schism took place. The Christian Church split into two (Western and Eastern Churches) along doctrinal, theological, linguistic, political, administrative, and geographic lines.[9] The Great Schism did usher in two Christian administrative authorities (the Papacy at Rome and the Patriarchy at Constantinople) in the Roman Empire.

In the Middle Ages, Western Europe experienced a period often referred to as the Dark Ages, which also impacted the practice of Christianity and challenged papal authority in many ways.[10] Politically and socially, the period of the Dark Ages was marked by feudal gover-

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[4] Lenski, "The Significance," 47.
[5] Marta Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 134.
[6] Scott Buttler, Norman Dahlgren and David Hess, *Jesus, Peter & The Keys: A Scriptural Handbook on the Papacy* (Santa Barbara: Queenship Publishing Company, 1996), 196.
[7] Lenski, "The Significance," 51.
[8] Lenski, "The Significance," 51.
[9] Sordi, *The Christians*, 134.
[10] Joana Story, *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 56.

nance. Tribes such as Visigoths, Vandals, Burgundians, Ostrogoths, and many others helped to destroy a centralised government. Each of these tribes, though made up of a small group, set up a kingdom in some part of the Western empire, ruling a much larger native population by military force.[11] Once defeated, the natives vanished; either killed or absorbed into the population. But two groups of Germanic tribes survived. These were the Angles and Saxons in Britain, and Franks in Gaul.[12] Kings were unable to hold their land together or protect them. Local lords protected their own territories. There were weak kings, strong nobles, numerous peasants, strict local governments, and petty warfare. With the breakdown of central governance, all societal dealings and administrations were not based on law and policies but on interpersonal relationships.[13]

Meanwhile, Western Europe, religiously, entirely remained Christian, i.e. Roman Catholic headed by the Pope.[14] The papal authority was often challenged on various fronts by kings, nobles, and vassals. It was around these times, particularly in 678A.D. that Charlemagne took up the leadership of the Franks, a Germanic tribe, in Gaul. Charlemagne ruled the Franks for 46 years, from 768-814 AD.[15] He is certainly one of the outstanding men in the political and cultural history of Western Europe. He was determined to bring back the central government and preserve the authority of the Papacy in Western Europe. To achieve this aim, Charlemagne embarked on a series of wars. He conquered the Lombards in Italy and forced them to recognize him as their ruler.[16] He also eventually defeated the Saxons in Britain and parts of Germany and forced them to accept his rule and Christianity. He managed to bring the Avars in central Germany on board through a war that lasted a long time. He pushed the Moors back further across the Pyrenees in the East.[17] By the end of his reign, Charlemagne's

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[11] Story, *Charlemagne*, 56.
[12] Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe, 300-1000* (London - New York: Red Globe Press, 2010), 46-49.
[13] Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, 99.
[14] Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, 99.
[15] Rosamond McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 89.
[16] Story, *Charlemagne*, 37.
[17] Matthew Gabriele and Jace Stuckey, *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages: Power, Faith, and Crusade* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 45.

control covered all of France, most of present-day Germany and some of Northern Italy.

Charlemagne was an ardent supporter of the Pope and promoted Christianity. He was a devout Christian who highly respected the Papacy and did everything to protect it, especially from attempted revolts orchestrated by Roman nobles and kings. He went further to place Christianity and the clergy at the centre of his educational policy. He realized that a good education led by the clergy was in the interest of both the church and the government.[18] Upon his direction, Bishops and major superiors of religious congregations established schools in the cathedrals and monasteries. They also collected libraries by copying ancient books.[19] His policies eventually helped strengthen the clerical authority and Christian faith, devotions and practice. Later, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne in the Cathedral of St. Peter and gave him the title 'Emperor of the Romans.'[20]

Upon the death of Charlemagne, Louis the Pious (the sole heir) succeeded his father in 814 AD and so inherited the whole empire. He was not a strong ruler.[21] He granted even more immunities. Local governments became more independent. He, however, managed to maintain the unity of the Empire. At the death of Louis the Pious (840 AD), he divided the empire among his three sons (Lothair I, Pepin, and Louis the German).[22] A strategic settlement, the treaty of Verdun in 843 A.D. ended a conflict which ensued between the sons. The settlement divided the empire into three. The eastern part became a kingdom which is now Germany; the western part, roughly what is called now France, was another kingdom.[23] A strip of territory between the two became a third kingdom which included Northern Italy and its ruler had the title of the empire. Charlemagne's Carolingian descendants were incompetent rulers. They fought among themselves instead of uniting against invaders.[24] Within 50 years after the treaty of Verdun, France and Germany had become independent under intelligent kings. The middle

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[18] Story, *Charlemagne*, 37.

[19] Bernard S. Bachrach, *Charlemagne's Early Campaigns (768-777): A Diplomatic and Military Analysis* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2013), 76.

[20] Jeff Sypeck, *Becoming Charlemagne: Europe, Baghdad, and the Empires of 800 A.D.* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 34.

[21] Sypeck, *Becoming Charlemagne*, 77.

[22] McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 91.

[23] McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 65.

[24] Gabriele and Stuckey, *The Legend of Charlemagne*, 47.

kingdom broke up and disappeared. In the 9th and 10th centuries, organized or centralized government disappeared in Western Europe.[25] The non-availability of a central government contributed greatly to the Great Schism of the Christian Church in 1054 AD.

Religious Attitudes in the Eastern Empire

The Eastern Empire was spared of the Dark Ages. Two great empires sustained society and civilization. These are the Byzantine and Sassanid empires. The two empires preserved the classical civilization of the Greeks and the Romans in the East. Constantinople was the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire.[26] The empire was Greek in culture (language, philosophy, art). Its religion was Christianity; its governance was Roman. The empire survived the Barbarian invasion of the 5th and 6th centuries under the able leadership of Emperor Justinian.[27] Emperor Justinian succeeded in putting both the government and the army in good shape. He set out to revive the empire and his reign is marked by the ambitious *renovatio imperii* or 'restoration of the Empire' which saw the Eastern Roman Empire lasting way into the 15th century.[28] Justinian developed a successful, efficient central government which was the envy of all. The economy expanded and created enough wealth to meet the demand of the empire. A well-organized army defeated all external aggressors and ensured a conducive environment for human development and the practice of religion. Constantinople grew wider and became a great and prosperous major centre of trade.[29] It was a cosmopolitan centre which brought people of Europe and Asia together.

In terms of the preservation of the Greek civilization, the Byzantine Empire was un-marched.[30] Though scholars did not create much concerning innovations, they preserved the culture of the Greeks and Near East and passed them on to the generation after them. The empire kept

[25] Sypeck, B*ecoming Charlemagne,* 38-40.

[26] Warren Treadgold, *A Concise History of Byzantium*, 2nd ed. (London - New York: Red Globe Press, 2001), 46-47.

[27] Georgije Ostrogorski, *History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 57.

[28] Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army*, 88.

[29] H. Magoulias, ed., *O City of Constantinople, Annales of Niketas Choniates* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 325.

[30] Robert Browning, *The Byzantine Empire*, rev. ed. (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 1992), 46.

alive industry and trade with their civilization.[31] It preserved and impressed Roman law. The great emperor Justinian ordered the scholars to collect and collate all kinds of Roman law. The entire collection is known as *Corpus Juris civilis* (the body of civil law).[32] Constantinople became the centre of civilization for thousand years.

The Eastern Empire largely held on to Christianity but in various forms. The Patriarch of Constantinople was the religious and spiritual head who sought to encourage Christian devotion in its diverse forms. Greek Orthodox Catholic church helped to bring unity to the Eastern Empire and undertook very important missionary work.[33] Aggressive missionary endeavours were carried out in a manner which eventually deteriorated interfaith relations between Christians and Jews in the empire.[34] In collaboration with the Greek Orthodox Church, a system of law was developed by emperor Theodosian II in 438 AD and also emperor Justinian I in 534 AD which demanded forced conversion into Christianity.[35] It also justified the persecution, segregation, and humiliation of adherents of other religions including pagans, heretics, and Jews across the empire.

However, the Persian Empire of the Sassanids founded by Ardashir I adopted a different approach to the practice of religion altogether.[36] It was an approach which purposefully allowed members of all religions to thrive. At its greatest extent by the end of the 6th century, the Sassanian Empire encompassed all of today's Iran, Iraq, Eastern Arabia (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatif, Qatar, UAE), the levant (Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan), Egypt and a large part of Turkey, Yemen and Pakistan. In many ways, the Sassanian period witnessed the peak of ancient Iranian civilization.[37]

The Sassanid dynasty (224-651 AD) recognized religious pluralism which not only acknowledged the existence of other religions but also

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[31] Nadia Maria El Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 204.

[32] Magoulias, *O City of Constantinople*, 329.

[33] Treadgold, *A History*, 99.

[34] Philip Mansel, *Constantinople: City of the World's Desire, 1453-1924* (London: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), 68.

[35] Sarah Guberti Bassett, *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 98.

[36] Peter J. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford: University Press, 205), 106.

[37] Heather, *The Fall*, 109.

ensured their toleration. There was the state religion, Zoroastrianism, and at the height of its worship was Ahurā Madzā, the Good God.[38] This state religion was administered by a caste of priests called the Magi and was patronized by the aristocracy, the army, and the common people.[39] It was increasingly challenged by other faiths particularly Nestorian Christianity in Babylonia, Susiana, Khuzistan, and in Bahrain and Oman. There was also a significant Jew community in Babylonia, particularly along the banks of the Euphrates and the Tigris.[40]

The Arab-Muslim Conquests and Spread

The Arab invasion of the Byzantine and Sassanids empires in the 7th century was followed by a rich and highly developed civilization. This Arab civilization surpassed that of Western Europe during the Middle Ages.[41] At the heart of the civilization is a religion called Islam. The founder of this Arab religion is the Prophet Muhammad, born in Mecca in about 570 A.D.[42] The Arabs had wonderful opportunities for conquests. Muslim historians attribute the success of the conquests to religious zeal for the way of Allah. Efraim Karsh, a historian of Mediterranean Studies, argues that the gradual Islamization of the conquered territories does not support the religious zeal position.[43] He roots rather for the idea that the conquered lands adopted the religion of Islam in the second and third centuries.

Bat Ye'or, a British researcher of Jews and Christians under Islamic rule, contends that the era of the conquest was characterized by weak governments of Byzantine and the Persian-Sassanian empires in Mesopotamia.[44] Everywhere the people were unhappy because they had little incentive. According to Hugh Kennedy, the Arabs had superior ability for war because of the harshness of their Bedouin and nomadic

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[38] Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London: Pearson & Longman, 2004), 7.

[39] Kennedy, *The Prophet*, 24.

[40] Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude*, trans. Miriam Kochan and David Littman (Madison – Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), 43.

[41] Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 47.

[42] Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (London: Weidenfeld &Nicolson, 2007), 48.

[43] Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven - London: Yale University Press, 2007), 23.

[44] Bat Ye'or, *The Decline*, 78.

lifestyle.[45] The mix of tribal loyalties and tribal rivalries, the new religion of Islam and the desire for booty were important in motivating the Arabs to fight and conquer. One cannot rule out the fact that individual glory and reputation remained important to the conquerors.[46] To a large extent, all adult male Bedouins could be described as a soldier. Arab victories were also made easier by their wise policies towards conquered people. The Arabs were fierce and fearless in battle but often generous in victory.[47] Non-Muslims who surrendered were allowed to keep their religion and culture. They had to accept Muslim rule and pay a special tax which the faithful did not have to pay.

In less than a century after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, his followers had overrun Arabia which began with the *ridda* campaigns to deal with apostasy and the rejection of Islam and control of Medina (632-634 AD).[48] They also conquered Palestine and Syria (637 AD), Mesopotamia (638 AD), part of the Indian subcontinent, Egypt and North Africa (645 AD). They besieged Constantinople but were turned back initially.[49] However, at the other end of the Mediterranean, the Arabs gained success and entered Europe through Spain. The moors of North Africa were eager for conquest.[50] A general named Tarik led an expedition into Spain. In 1711A D, Tāriq bin Ziyād led his army past the great rock that guards the strait between Africa and Spain. The rock was named Jabal Tāriq meaning the mount of Tāriq. Later Europeans changed it to Gibraltar.[51]

Pluralistic Religious Culture under Arab-Muslim Rule

Although the Islamic empire was divided into parts, it remained united in Islam, civilization and culture. The Arabs were intelligent and very tolerant. They were willing to adopt any best idea, custom and institution available to them. Their language, Arabic, formed a common bond throughout the empire.[52] The Arab-Islamic empire developed what came to be known as Arabic civilization. It was not a

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[45] Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests,* 48.
[46] Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, 47.
[47] Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, 51.
[48] Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism*, 23.
[49] Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, 61.
[50] Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, 204.
[51] Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, 309.
[52] Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism*, 66.

ready-made one by the Arab invaders.[53] It was created after the Arab campaigns with the help of many other people, particularly, Arabs, Persians, Egyptians, and Asians. It was not also purely Islamic, though Islam was the catalyst or the engine. It included significantly the product of converts to Islam from many religions such as Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and others.[54]

The Arabs' greatest contribution to culture was their broad tolerance and willingness to accept the idea of others.[55] They took the science and philosophy of Greece, Rome, India and the Orient and tried to combine them, using Arabic as a common language. Muslim scholars were interested in every field of learning. Their scientists were practical men.[56] They wrote handbooks and Encyclopaedias of useful knowledge on many subjects namely: geography, navigation and mathematics. They introduced the use of compass from India and China. They also perfected the Astrolabe, an instrument used to measure the altitude of stars. From the Chinese, they learned paper making and the use of gunpowder. From the Greeks in the medical field, they added much knowledge to Hippocrates and Galen.[57] The greatest contribution of the Arabs to mathematics was the system of writing numbers which they called Arabic numerals. They used the counting device called an abacus in arithmetic. From the Hindus, the Arabs learnt the use of the symbols one to nine.

The Arab civilization brought religion and politics together in a way that was unheard of in the Middle Ages.[58] The State used religion as a medium for governance. There were different legal religions rubbing shoulders with each other, but largely co-existing peacefully.[59] There was Islam, the original and true religion; the religion of the ruling class. There were also the *dhimmi* religions (religions of the protected which included Christianity, the largest religious tradition, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism) and lastly the pagans (those who

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[53] Nazib Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 8.

[54] Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson, 1985), 56.

[55] Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 143-144.

[56] Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, 147.

[57] Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, 145.

[58] Ayubi, *Political Islam*, 5.

[59] Bat Ye'or, *The Decline*, 70

worshipped idols.[60] The condition of the *dhimmi* differed variously from time to time and from place to place. Jacques Ellul, a renowned French professor of Sociology and Philosophy in his 'Preface' to Bat Ye'or's book *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam* contended that it cannot be assumed that the protection of the non-Muslims under Muslim domination was universal and always uniformed. The protection varied from forced conversion, persecution, segregation and humiliation to wilful conversion depending on the perceived attitude of the protected.[61]

The Islamic faith was subject to and also developed by external influences.[62] Some foreign words and beliefs in Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism entered not only into Islamic religious sciences but also the Quran, philosophy and religious, and theological literature.[63] By the end of the 9th century, Islamic philosophy had reached its height, which contributed immensely to the flourishing of the pluralistic climate. It was a philosophy which, though uniquely Arab, was strongly influenced by Greek works and adapted some of the Platonic, Aristotelian, and other ideas to their brand of monotheism.[64] The works of such medieval Arab figures as Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), Al-Fārābī, Al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) had a significant impact on Western philosophy as well as Arab civilization.[65]

In his work, *The Rescuer from Error*, translated and edited by Muhammad Ali Khalidi, Al-Ghazali (AD 1058-1111), a celebrated Islamic philosopher and theologian described his open and positive attitude, which sums up the general, pluralistic academic and intellectual situation in the Islamic empire.[66] It was a condition which offered him, and fellow scholars, the opportunity to critically study the tenets of every religion available to him. He, and his colleagues, endeavoured to search for truth wherever it would be found. Thus, they

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[60] Gloria E. Dharmaraj and Jacob S. Dharmaraj, *Christianity and Islam: A Missiological Encounter* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999), 83.

[61] Bat Ye'or, however, argues that the *Dhimmi* laws and their application were mere replicas of laws which underlined the religious intolerance of the Byzantine empire and the religious toleration of the Sassanid empire.

[62] Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism*, 68.

[63] Muhammad Ali Khalidi, *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 144.

[64] Ali Khalidi, *Philosophical Writings*, 156.

[65] Ali Khalidi, *Philosophical Writings*, xi.

[66] Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism*, 23.

examined every belief of every religion and investigated the hidden creed of all sects and Religions.[67] He, in particular, did not brush aside any doctrine or belief system which went contrary to his own belief as a Muslim. He sought to find out and scrutinize the bases of and the logic behind those contrary views.

Christian Europe Response: The Crusades

As discussed already, the Arabs were largely tolerant of other religions, and even the religious and civil administration of the conquered people. Christians and Jews were generally granted the privilege of the status of *dhimmīs*, which permitted them to merely pay taxes and observe other simple regulations put forth by the conquerors.[68] Thus, generally, Christians and Jews and members of other religions could live in Palestine, keep their religion, and follow the business they chose.[69] For some centuries, Christian pilgrims visited the Holy Places unhindered.[70] European traders from Constantinople or the Italian cities had little trouble doing business. Thus, the change from Byzantine to Arab Rule was welcomed by many.[71] Some of the Christian populations of Syria and Egypt preferred the rule of Islam to that of the Byzantine.

However, this favourable condition of religious toleration which accompanied the Islamic civilization did not last forever.[72] General conditions became unfavourable in the 11th century when the Seljuk Turks, new and very earnest converts to Islam, came from Central Asia into the Muslim empire. In 1076 Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantine army, broke the military power of the Byzantine empire, took all of Asia Minor and threatened Constantinople.[73] They ill-treated Christian East. The Seljuk Turks were reported to have persecuted the Christian pilgrims and made trade difficult in Europe. The Byzantine Empire wanted mercenary (paid) soldiers to help defeat the city and

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[67] Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism*, 56.

[68] Ali Khalidi, *Philosophical Writings*, 135.

[69] Kenneth Stow, *Popes, Church, and Jews in the Middle Ages: Confrontation and Response* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 57-59.

[70] Stow, *Popes*, 67.

[71] Stow, *Popes*, 67.

[72] Niall Christie, *Muslims and Crusades: Christianity's Wars in the Middle East*, 1095-1382 (New York: Routledge, 2014), 67-69.

[73] Jonathan Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades* (London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), 46-49.

regain the lost territories.[74] The Eastern emperor appealed for help which was most warmly received by the West. For a variety of reasons the Pope, Urban II, in AD 1095 was glad to promote the idea of a great Christian offensive to regain the Holy Land from the Muslims.[75]

Consequently, in the 12th and 13th centuries, the Christian movement in the West undertook an offensive expedition (the Crusades) against the Muslim East. The move was largely an attempt by Westerners to regain Palestine (the Holy Land of Jesus' birth for Christianity).[76] Though the crusades were largely a religious expedition, they also appealed to the love of adventure, the hope of gain, and the desire to escape debt, punishment for crime or daily boredom.[77] They were, generally, organized and led by kings and nobles of families with crusading histories.[78] The first Crusade (1096-1099) was led by the French nobles or the Normans from Sicily.[79] In three organized armies they moved across Europe, reaching Constantinople by the end of the year. It is not surprising that the Crusaders were reluctantly received at Constantinople.[80] This was because the emperor, Alexius Comnenus, had asked for some mercenary fighters and not three armies approaching the city. He feared that the Crusaders might capture and plunder Constantinople. After much discussion, the Byzantines ferried the Westerners across to Asia Minor to begin their long march toward Syria and Palestine.[81]

With their woollen and leather garments, their heavy armour and pack animals, the Crusaders suffered heavily.[82] The leaders quarrelled over fiefs in the lands they took. If the Turks had not also been quarrelling, weak, and disunited, the expedition would have failed.[83] The succession of deaths in both the key power centre of the Islamic world,

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[74] Christie, *Muslims and Crusades*, 67.

[75] Christie, *Muslims and Crusades*, 69.

[76] A. Laiou, ed., *Urbs Capita: The Fourth Crusade and Its Consequences* (Paris: Lethielleux. Services, 2005), 78-81.

[77] J. Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A History*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Continuum, 2005), 28.

[78] Lars Kjær, "Conquests, Family Traditions and the First Crusade," *Journal of Medieval History* 5 (2019): 553-579.

[79] Alan V. Murray, *The Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: A Dynastic History, 1099–1125* (Oxford: UPR, 2000), 156.

[80] Murray, *The Crusader Kingdom*, 145.

[81] Murray, *The Crusader Kingdom*, 147.

[82] Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A History*, 31–57.

[83] Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 33.

namely the Seljuk and Fatimid empires, occurring around the same time had a devastating impact.[84] Religious chasm permeated Islamic life at every level of society. The ideological and political enmity between Fatimid Ismaʿili Shiʿites and the Seljuk Sunnis was deeply entrenched. The loss of all effective leadership and the rampant sectarian suspicion and hostility within Islam provoked disorientation and angst.[85] The religious identity of the Muslims of Syria and Palestine was not uniform but antagonistic. Being mostly Sunni, these lands also contained some *Shi'ite* communities.

The Crusaders captured Antioch (when) using the treachery of a Turkish office and after some quarrel, they marched on to Jerusalem.[86] Condition improved when they reached the seacoast. Fleets of ships from the Italian cities of Genoa and Pisa brought them re-enforcement, supplies and siege with much machinery.[87] Palestine was captured after a short siege (when), the Crusaders took revenge on the inhabitant and massacred their territory. The Crusaders set up three small states namely: the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the Principality of Antioch and the County of Tripoli.[88] With the establishment of these small states, trade with Europe was brisk. Muslims and Christians lived in close relations and grew to respect each other. Many Christians adopted Eastern customs and preferred Eastern food and clothing.

Subsequent crusades were undertaken probably to consolidate and re-enforce the initial gains. The second crusade (1147-1149) took place after the Turks recaptured the kingdom of Palestine.[89] In this crusade, Louis VII of France and Emperor Conrad III of Germany led armies to the Holy Land. The second crusade was a total failure because of much quarrelling over fiefs among the various leaders. In 1187 news reached Europe that Jerusalem had been recaptured by the famous Muslim leader Saladin.[90] Western Europe's response was the famous

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[84] Judith Herrin, *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire* (Princeton - Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 256.

[85] Herrin, *Byzantium*, 33-36.

[86] Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (London: Penguin, 2006), 77.

[87] Tyerman, *God's War*, 89.

[88] John France, *Victory in the East: A Military History of the First Crusade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 11–16.

[89] France, *Victory in the East*, 45-48.

[90] Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (London: Penguin, 2006), 77.

third Crusade (1189-1192) led by three kings: Richard the Lion Hearted of England, Philip Augustus of France and Frederic Barbarossa of Germany. Each started at the head of a great army to regain the Holy Land.[91] Again, there was a failure. Frederic Barbarossa rambled while on the way and most of his army turned back.[92] Philip and Richard quarrelled; Philip took his army home to try to take English land in France. Richard might have gained the whole kingdom of Jerusalem several times by diplomacy, but he preferred to go on an adventure.[93] In the end, he made no gains worth mentioning. It is estimated that 300,000 people, Christians and Muslims lost their lives in the third crusade. This was the last major expedition. There were eight crusades in all but none of the later one was on the scale to compare with the third.[94]

Implications for Twenty-First Century sub-Saharan Africa

Religious Secularism

The religious environment and experiences of contemporary sub-Saharan Africa are no different from that of Western and Eastern Europe in the medieval period. In other words, even though different periods are at stake in both circumstances, one can note striking similarities in terms of the role religion plays in Europe in the Middle Ages and in contemporary Africa. As already noted, the main religions of the Middle Ages exerted enormous impact and dictated the pace for the future. Christianity, headed by the Pope in Rome and the Patriarch in Constantinople, was a major force. Though the Arabs succeeded in using the Arabic language as a medium of exchange, Islam was at the very heart of their civilisation. Even though twenty-first-century Africa is characterised by secularization, globalisation and modernity, religion remains the main driving force too. Africa has embraced secularism in its religious terms. Thus, the impact of Secularisation on the religiosity of the African people cannot be left out of the discussion of Christian-Muslim exchanges on the African continent.

With the overwhelming embrace of modern Western systems such as education and law as well as their attendant secular philosophy by

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[91] Tyerman, *God's War*, 89.
[92] David Abulafia, *Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor* (Oxford: University Press, 2002), 67-78.
[93] Abulafia, *Frederick II*, 63.
[94] Abulafia, *Frederick II*, 63.

both Christians and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, scholars such as I. M. Lewis asserted that many Africans would eventually become secular in their view of life.[95] Though one can find some signs of this secular system, notable among them being constitutional governance in sub-Saharan Africa, it is appropriate to disagree with those who argue that the obvious consequence of this secular attitude is the gradual adoption of religion as "personal religious allegiance"[96] and so eventual elimination of religion entirely from public life. Many Muslims and Christians have adopted Islam or Christianity as a personal religion which has a bearing not only on their private but also on their daily and public life. This is because many in sub-Saharan Africa still regard religion as the heart and soul of their culture and most importantly in the sense of spirituality[97] which as a prevailing system ought to have a significant influence on every activity of daily life.

Writing on secularism and its impact on the religiosity of the African people, Ghanaian Theologian, Kwame Bediako, argues that secularism has not translated into irreligiosity in Africa stating that: "...African Christians have, on the whole, avoided any significant secularisation of their outlook. New knowledge in science and technology has been embraced, but it has not displaced the basic view that the whole universe in which human existence takes place is fundamentally spiritual."[98] In this way, Bediako adds his voice to those who still do not see a clear dichotomy between the secular and the spiritual in the African worldview of life. Secularism does not seem to be undermining religiosity in sub-Saharan Africa.

Religion Verses Politics

The gains achieved from religious wars in the Middle Ages were not only religious but also largely socio-political. Though the Arab-Islamic invasions were largely religious in nature, one cannot overlook the economic importance of the many cities such as Constantinople,

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[95] I. M. Lewis, ed., *Islam in Tropical Africa*, 2nd ed. (London: Hutchinson University Press, 1980), 91.

[96] John Trimmingham, "Phases of Islamic Expansion and Islamic culture zones in Africa," in *Islam in Tropical Africa*, ed. I.M. Lewis (Oxford: International African Institute, 1966), 130.

[97] G. Montilus, *Dompim: The Spirituality of the African People* (Nashville: Winston-Derek, 1989), 78.

[98] Kwame Bediako *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press, 1995), 176.

Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Al-Andalus, and Persia which were brought under the political control of the Arab minority. Many Arab religious towns such as Mecca, Medina, Damascus, and Kūfa, also became major political, economic and cultural centres. The need to regain the Holy Land for Christian pilgrimages and to bring the Eastern Churches back to papal control were often cited as the central reasons for the Christian aggression on Muslim territories in the East. One cannot also play down the overwhelming importance of socio-political motives of mainly helping out the Byzantium power to gain back its lost territories especially those occupied by Muslims.[99] Thus, it is not out of place to state that socio-political reasons were presented in religious terminologies and motives to justify both Arab-Islamic invasions and Christian Crusades.[100]

Both Arab invasions and the crusades produced aggressive encounters in which religion and politics came face to face. However, it is not out of place to distinguish between the two. In the Crusades, one could observe the case of religion appropriating politics to further its interests by galvanizing the kings of Europe with promises of a better life in heaven. We find the case of politics appropriating religion to advance political interest in Arab invasions. In the name of spiritual *jihad,* territories were permanently taken over in conquered lands. In twenty-first-century Africa where religious context is significantly plural, the unique roles of religion and politics should be clearly defined for regional peace and security. Religion and politics must be made to relate in a way that would advance the general interest of societies and humanity. The case of religion appropriating politics to advance its course and the politicization of religion for political gains should have no place in the religiously plural and secular dispensations of twenty-first-century Africa. These two major sectors of society must be allowed to find their equilibrium as well as function independently in the democratic dispensations of the countries.[101]

Formulation of Polemic Claims

The period of the Middle Ages is one of significant formulation and fortification of religious claims, structures, and philosophical theories

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[99] J. M. Gaudeul, *Encounters & Clashes* (Rome: PISAI, 2000), 108-110.

[100] Hillenbrand, *The Crusades*, 50.

[101] Ayubi, *Political Islam*, 8.

in both Islam and Christianity against each other. During the Arab invasions, the religious position and the central role of the Khalifa, The Qur'an and the Ahadith were firmly consolidated concerning the non-Islamic religions. Islamic doctrines about Allah, Angels, prophets, pilgrimages and philosophies also saw significant clarity, and their uniqueness to Christian ones was strongly affirmed and communicated. The crusades, for instance, also helped strengthen the role of the papacy, for it was the Popes who largely organized, preached and financed them. The tithing and the indulgences which were collected for the crusades later became a regular source of income for the papacy and Christendom at large. The two Christian churches were, for the first time after the great split in 1054 AD, more firmly united and were able to exercise a greater moral influence over the people against the non-Christians. Thus, the crusades claimed an important role in unifying the Christian world against other religions, particularly Islam.[102]

However, the development of defined beliefs and doctrines of Christianity and Islam unfortunately also contributed to the rapid development of polemics and apologetics which have characterized Christian-Muslim relations. Attempts were made, in both written and verbal debates, to punch holes in the beliefs and claims of the other people, regarding them as fake, the works of Satan and incapable of leading humanity to God. With religious polemics and apologetics, both Christians and Muslims protected their faith, prevented the apostasy of some of their members, and minimized the strength of the missionary efforts on the other side.[103] The development of anonymous writings not only demarcated or defined the boundaries of the two religions but also sadly set Christianity and Islam against each other. Nevertheless, great damage was done to Christian-Muslim relations, which generated suspicion and acrimony.[104]

The Arab-Islamic invasions and its counter Europe-Christian crusades which highlighted existing doctrinal battles failed to nurture trust. Rather, they engendered suspicion between Christians and Muslims which often contribute to general insecurity and derailed structures of peaceful co-existence even on the African continent.[105] Christians and

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[102] France, *The Crusades*, 204
[103] Goddard, *A History*, 57.
[104] Gaudeul, *Encounters & Clashes*, 58.
[105] Hillenbrand, *The Crusades*, 66.

Muslims of sub-Saharan Africa cannot but strive to understand the polemic statements of the Medieval world in their socio-political context and learn appropriate ways of interpreting them for their contemporary, religiously plural environments.

Open-minded Attitude

The Middle Ages also present the world with open-mindedness which has enormous implications for the inter-religious encounters in twenty-first century Africa. Eastern Europe, under the Sassanid authorities and later by the Arab invaders, produced a plural context which was critical to the flourishing of ideas of religions and cultures for the integral development of the society. Even though Zoroastrianism was the main religion of the Sassanid dynasty and Islam that of the Arab/Islamic rule, other religions such as Nestorian Christianity and Judaism existed and contributed significantly to the society. The convocation of ideas of religion, culture and politics as well as the diversity which ensued brought in significant progress unknown at the time.[106]

Crusaders came to the East with Christian exclusivist tendencies which was the position of the Christian West at the time. They found out, to their amazement, that Christians, Muslims and Jews in the East had managed to live in Jerusalem, Syria and Egypt peacefully for many years often compromising their religious superior mentalities for the common good. Carole Hillenbrand, a professor of Islamic History at the University of Edinburgh, contends that the Crusaders had a difficult task dealing with and managing the open-mindedness and the plurality of the East.[107] The religious and cultural plurality of Eastern Europe in the Medieval period were so strong that both the Arabs and the Crusaders could not but adapt for their own survival and advancement. The cultural and religious plurality of the contemporary sub-Saharan African countries, safe-guarded in recent times by national constitutions with entrenched provision for freedom of religion and associations must produce the open-minded attitude needed for

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[106] Bat Ye'or, *The Decline,* 55.
[107] Hillenbrand, *The Crusades*, 68.

proper and effective Christian-Muslim encounters, relations and progress on the continent.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have engaged a discussion on various encounters of religions in the Middle Ages in the midst of changing socio-political contexts. The dominance of Christianity in Western Europe under the authority of the Papacy constantly undermined the general population led by nobles and kings. The role of Charlemagne, who took up control of most of Western Europe, in consolidating the papacy and Christianity as the only religion cannot be underestimated. However, Eastern Europe, though largely Christian, took up a religiously plural nature after the Great Schism of 1054 A.D. This socio-religious plural context of the East was so resilient that it succeeded in pushing back the extremist influence of the two main religious invasions (the Arab invasion and the Crusades). The religious encounters and attitudes identified in the Medieval periods have enormous implications for Christians and Muslims in the increasingly secularized and religiously pluralistic sub-Saharan Africa.

In dialoguing with each other, Christians and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa would have to find a way of dealing with the obstacle of self-sufficiency in their plural and highly sophisticated context. The problem with religious self-sufficiency is that it creates the false sense that both Islam and Christianity have nothing to learn from each other. It also assumes that each religious tradition knows the other better than the practitioners themselves. Through the discussion above, Muslims and Christians may well be surprised at how their medieval counterparts co-existed, and indeed on many occasions collaborated for continual survival in the East.

The globalization and secularization of the twenty-first century offer opportunities for Christian-Muslim encounters in the sub-region. Many sub-Saharan African countries have adopted national constitutions which are underpinned by secular ideologies of freedom of religion and associations. The entrenched constitutional provision of religious liberty provides equal rights for citizens in a religiously plural environment. Thus, the socio-political and religious environment of the twentieth-first century does not support extreme, negative sentiments, and aggressive invasions for absolute control of particular

lands and societies. It does not also demand the adoption of indifferent attitudes toward people of other religious or cultural backgrounds. Rather, it calls for positive and open-mindedness in both religious and social encounters.

There is a growing need to dispel the cloud of misunderstanding existing between Christians and Muslims so that light may shine, without distortion or hindrance, on the unavoidable relationship between them. Christians and Muslims have a cause to ponder on the ideological heritage which their conquests, control, and influence have left in the Near East and the rest of the world today.[108] This necessary reflection could evolve remedies and assurances for the many 'doubters' who still believe that there can be no peace between these two world systems, but only the temporary suspensions of hostilities for reasons of necessity or expediency. This is against the background that in Africa, particularly sub-Sahara Africa we have a situation where the population made up of Christians and Muslims intermingle quite freely, even as members of the same families. Christians and Muslims have been living together without much tension right from the beginning of Christianity and Islam.

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[108] Hillenbrand, *The Crusades*, 68.