



ROLE OF RELIGION IN SHAPING MEDIAEVAL SOCIETY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

Name: Akansha Rajoria
Designation: Student
Institute: Amity University Noida

ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the importance of religion in mediaeval civilization through a comparative analysis of Christianity and Islam. It explores how both religions shaped diverse aspects of mediaeval society, such as social institutions, governance, art, and culture. Christianity, with its centralised Church, had a significant impact on European politics and society, whereas Islam, through its vast caliphates, incorporated many cultures and built sophisticated administrative systems. The study also dives into interreligious wars such as the Crusades and the Reconquista, emphasising their deep consequences and the resulting cultural exchanges. This comparative research emphasises the long-term impact of these two major religions on the historical and cultural evolution of mediaeval society.

INTRODUCTION

The Middle Ages, also known as the Mediaeval Period, lasted from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries in Europe. Religion had a significant impact on society, culture, and politics at the time. In this essay, we'll look at how religion shaped the Middle Ages. Christianity was the main religion during the Middle Ages, and the Catholic Church played an important role in mediaeval society. The Church was a powerful political and social organisation whose influence reached throughout Europe. The Pope was the spiritual leader of the Catholic Church and wielded considerable political influence. The Church also exercised influence over many elements of daily life, such as education, marriage, and morals. Religion influenced the art and architecture of the Middle Ages. Gothic cathedrals, such as Notre Dame in Paris and the Cathedral of Chartres, were built during this time period.

These vast structures were intended to inspire awe and devotion among the faithful, and they frequently featured exquisite stained glass windows and sculptures depicting religious events.

In addition to Christianity, Islam also played a significant role in the Middle Ages. The Islamic empire was vast, spanning from Spain to India, and its cultural and intellectual achievements influenced the development of Europe during the medieval period. Muslim scholars made significant contributions to mathematics, science, and philosophy, and their works were translated into Latin and Greek, influencing European thought. Religion also shaped the social structure of the Middle Ages. Christianity and Islam both promoted the idea of the divine right of kings, which held that rulers were appointed by God and had a duty to govern justly. This concept was used to justify the power of monarchs and reinforced the social hierarchy of medieval Europe.

NEED OF THE STUDY

The study of religion's influence in moulding medieval civilisation through a comparative analysis of Christianity and Islam is critical for a number of reasons. For first of all, it provides a better understanding of how these two main religions shaped the social, political, and cultural landscapes of their respective regions at a pivotal moment in history. Secondly, by exploring the tensions and exchanges between Christianity and Islam, the study demonstrates the complex nature of inter-religious dynamics that have had long-term consequences for modern nations. Finally, this study contributes to the larger field of historical studies by providing insights into how religious beliefs and institutions can influence society change and evolution.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study's research methodology consists of a comparative historical analysis of primary and secondary sources on Christianity and Islam during the medieval period. Primary sources include religious scriptures, historical documents, and architectural evidence, whereas secondary sources are scholarly papers, books, and critical studies. The study takes a thematic approach, focusing on essential topics such as religious doctrines, social values, cultural expressions, and inter religious conflict. The study's goal in evaluating these elements across both religions is to uncover similarities and variations in their societal impacts. This methodology allows for a thorough understanding of religion's influence in medieval civilisation.

Christianity in the Middle Ages

The Church was the centre of life in mediaeval Western Europe. Almost every community had a church building. Larger towns and cities had cathedrals. Church bells rang the hours, invited people to church, and warned of danger. The church was the hub of communal activity. Religious services were held multiple times per day. Churches also served as venues for town meetings, plays, and concerts. Merchants had stores on the square in front of the church. Farmers sold their goods in the square, which also hosted markets, festivals, and fairs.

Christian belief was so popular at this time that historians refer to it as the “Age of Faith.” People looked to the Church for an explanation of world events. Storms, illness, and starvation were viewed as divine punishments. People had hoped that prayer and religious devotion would protect them from such calamities. They were considerably more anxious about what happened to their souls after death. The Church taught that those who accepted its teachings would receive salvation, or the salvation of their souls.

3.2 The Christian Church Takes Shape...

The Christian religion is one of ancient Rome’s most important legacies. Christians are followers of Jesus, who, according to Christian tradition, was crucified on a Roman cross in the first century CE. Christians believe that Jesus was God’s son, that God sent him to Earth to rescue humanity from sin, and that he rose from the dead following his crucifixion.

Initially, the Romans persecuted Christians because of their beliefs. However, the new religion continued to spread. In 313 C.E., the Roman emperor Constantine issued a proclamation allowing Christians to freely practise their religion. Christianity was adopted as the Roman Empire’s official religion in 395 CE.

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, all Christians in Western Europe belonged to a single church, known as the Roman Catholic Church. Following the fall of Rome, the Church became increasingly important in society. It was one of the few connections individuals had to a more stable era. The Church offered leadership and, in certain cases, organised food delivery. Monasteries, or monastic communities, sheltered refugees and visitors. Monks also copied and preserved old manuscripts, contributing to the survival of both new and ancient knowledge. The expansion of monasteries and missionary preaching helped to convert new people to Christianity.

Organisation of the Roman Catholic Church Over time, Church leaders created an organisation based after the structure of the previous Roman government. By the High Middle Ages, they had established a system in which all clergy members held a rank. The Roman Catholic Church’s top head was the pope, who served as the bishop of Rome. He received assistance and advice from high-ranking clergy known as cardinals. The pope appointed cardinals, who stood just below him in the Church hierarchy. Archbishops followed next. They presided over huge or important areas known as archdioceses. Bishops oversaw districts known as dioceses from magnificent cathedrals. Within each diocese, priests served local communities known as parishes. Every parish has its own church building.

Church’s Increasing Power During the Middle Ages, the Church rose to considerable economic power. By 1050, it was Europe’s largest landholder. Monarchs and wealthy lords gave land as presents. Some land was stolen forcibly. The mediaeval Church expanded its wealth by collecting a tithe, or levy. Each person was supposed to contribute one-tenth of their earnings, produce, or labour to the Church.

The Church also gained significant political power. Latin, the language of the Church, was Europe’s only common language. Church leaders were frequently the only ones who could read. As a result, they served as trusted scribes and counsellors to monarchs..

3.3 Sacraments and Salvation in the Middle Ages

Most mediaeval Europeans believed in God and the afterlife, in which the soul lives on after the body dies. The Church argued that people acquired salvation, or access into heaven and eternal life, by adhering to the Church's teachings and behaving morally. Failure to do so sentenced the soul to perpetual misery in Hell. For believers, hell was a real and dreadful place. Many artworks depicted its torments in graphic detail, including fire and devils.

The Church taught its members that receiving the sacraments was a necessary aspect of achieving salvation. Sacraments were sacred rites that Christians believed would grant them grace, or a particular blessing from God. The sacraments commemorated the most significant events in a person's life.

THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS
Baptism: Entry into the church. To cleanse a person of sin, a priest pours water gently over his or her head at the baptismal font, the basin that holds the baptismal water.
Confirmation: Formal declaration of belief in God and the church.
Eucharist: A central part of the mass, the church service in which the priest consecrates (blesses) bread and wine. In Catholic belief, the consecrated bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ.
Matrimony (marriage) : A formal union blessed by the church. After being married by a priest, a couple signs their names in a registry, or book of records.
Holy Orders: The sacrament in which a man becomes a priest.
Penance: Confession of sins to a priest in order to receive God's forgiveness. Today Catholics call this sacrament reconciliation.
Extreme Unction: A blessing in which a person in danger of death is anointed (blessed with holy oil) by a priest. Today this rite is known as the sacrament (or anointing) of the sick.

3.4 Pilgrimages and Crusades

During the Middle Ages, religious beliefs inspired many people to engage in exceptional acts of devotion. For example, most Christians wished to embark on a pilgrimage at some time in their life. Pilgrims travelled considerable distances to holy sites such as Jerusalem (where Jesus died) and Rome. They also visited churches with relics, which are saints' body parts or belongings. Canterbury Cathedral in England was a popular pilgrimage site.

Pilgrims participated on these travels to demonstrate their devotion to God, as an act of penance for their sins, or in the hope of being healed of a disease. A pilgrimage required great dedication because the journey was demanding and frequently hazardous. Most pilgrims went on foot. Because robbers posed a continual threat, pilgrims frequently grouped together for protection.

Sometimes they even hired an armed escort. Local authorities constructed special roads and bridges alongside popular pilgrimage routes. Monks and nuns established hostels, or unique guest residences, spaced a day's travel apart.

A second sort of exceptional duty was participating in the Crusades. The Crusades were a series of military missions to the Holy Land, as Christians referred to it. This region of the Middle East was conquered by Muslims in the seventh century. Jerusalem, formerly considered a holy city by Jews, Christians, and Muslims equally, became a Muslim city. Between 1095 to 1270, Christians in western Europe carried out three Crusades to reclaim Jerusalem and other pilgrimage sites in the region. Some people went on Crusades to pursue fortune, while others sought adventure. Others went with the notion that doing so would ensure their salvation. Many Crusaders behaved out of deep faith.

3.5 Art and Architecture

During the Middle Ages, most art was created for religious reasons. Paintings and sculptures depicting Jesus and Christian saints were placed in churches to aid in worship. Because most people did not know how to read, art served to portray the story of Jesus' life in an understandable way. Cathedrals, the huge buildings presided over by bishops, were the pinnacle of mediaeval art and architecture. (The word cathedral comes from the Latin word *cathedra*, meaning "the throne upon which a bishop sits".) Cathedrals were designed to evoke awe. For centuries, these were the tallest structures in any community. Often, they were taller than today's 30-story buildings. Most were designed in the shape of a cross, with a long centre section called the nave and shorter side sections known as transepts.

Cathedrals constructed between 1150 and 1400 were Gothic in architecture. Gothic cathedrals were built to appear to be rising to heaven. Outside, there are stone arches known as flying buttresses. The arches distributed the enormous weight of the rising roof and walls more equally. This construction method allowed for taller, thinner walls, and more windows.

The vast interior of a Gothic cathedral was lined with pillars and ornamented with holy motifs. Beautiful stained-glass windows let in vibrant light. Stained-glass windows are created by arranging pieces of coloured glass in a certain pattern. The images on mediaeval stained-glass windows were frequently used to teach Bible stories.

Cathedrals were visual representations of Christian devotion. They were largely built by hand by hundreds of artisans and craftsmen over several years. A cathedral took an average of 50 to 100 years to finish. In some cases, the work lasted more than 200 years.

3.6 Education

During the Middle Ages, most education took place in monasteries, convents, and cathedrals. This pattern was created by Charlemagne, who encouraged the Church to teach people how to read and write. During his reign, intellectuals created a new style of writing that made reading easier. Scholars began to employ lowercase letters rather than all capital letters, like the Romans did. We are still using this technology today.

In mediaeval times, the clergy were the most likely to receive an education. The majority of students at Church schools were noble sons pursuing careers in the priesthood. They spent a lot of time memorising prayers and Bible verses in Latin.

Beginning in the 1200s, cathedral schools gave way to universities. Students in universities learned Latin grammar and rhetoric, logic, geometry, mathematics, astronomy, and music. Books were handwritten and extremely rare at the period, thus teachers frequently read to their students.

Ancient books were highly regarded at universities, although the Church was occasionally concerned about them. The Church taught people to live by faith. Ancient writers, such as the Greek philosopher Aristotle, preached that reason, or logical thought, leads to understanding. Church officials were concerned that studying such works might cause people to question their beliefs.

3.8 Monks, Nuns, and Mendicants

Religion was vital to all Christians during the Middle Ages. Some men and women, however, made solemn promises to commit their lives to God and the Church.

The Monastic Way of Life Monks were males who joined monasteries, groups dedicated to prayer and devotion to other Christians. This manner of life is known as monasticism. Men become monks for a variety of reasons. Some sought refuge from war, illness, or immorality. Some people come to study. Some were drawn to a quiet life of prayer and service.

Saint Benedict was responsible for the development of the monastic style of life in Western Europe. In the sixth century, he established a monastery in Italy. His disciples became known as Benedictines. They obeyed Benedict's "rule," or directions. Benedictines took three serious vows or promises: poverty (no property), chastity (never marrying), and obedience (to their masters).

Monks devoted their lives to prayer, study, and work. They attended eight church services per day. Other responsibilities included looking after the destitute and sick, teaching, and copying holy literature. Most monasteries were self-sufficient, thus monks spent a lot of time working. They farmed their land, managed their gardens, reared livestock, and made clothes.

MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC SOCIETIES

- People in mediaeval Muslim culture held varying amounts of influence based on their religious views, ethnicity, gender, and social standing.
- Non-Muslim groups included a protected class known as dhimmis, who were required to pay a special fee for protection known as the jizya.
- During the first century of Muslim governance, Arab Muslims were given priority over non-Arab Muslims, known as mawali.
- Women's lives differed widely based on their social condition and political situation.
- Villages and metropolitan areas, where tribal states were more prevalent, had distinct political and economic structures.

Religious differences

Religious identity was a significant part of life. Non-Muslims and Muslims from various traditions had diverse experiences, and there is much scholarly discussion about whether non-Muslims were persecuted or treated relatively fairly in Muslim countries. There is no clear solution; the treatment of non-Muslims varies greatly depending on the circumstances. Non-Muslims were generally free to practise their religions and exercise some autonomy in managing their own internal affairs and commercial activities. As a protected class known as dhimmis, they were granted certain liberties in exchange for paying a special tax known as jizya and accepting Muslim rule.

However, non-Muslims did not always have the same legal and social benefits as Muslims. They were sometimes restricted in their clothing, public religious displays, professions, and places of worship. They also faced additional taxes and tariffs. Additionally, non-Muslim men were not permitted to marry Muslim women. However, these limits were not routinely implemented. Harassment and exploitation of non-Muslims was frequently increased during periods of political and economic crisis.

Nonetheless, Christians and Jews were frequently integrated into society and held positions in governmental, artistic, and scientific organisations. Non-Muslims gradually built contacts with the caliphate. They were able to secure beneficial policies that guaranteed them freedom to practise their religion. This cooperation also helped with the construction and repair of churches and monasteries. In some ways, the loss of the Byzantine Empire enabled Christianity to thrive in the Muslim world, but in different forms than under the Byzantine Empire. The official religion of the Byzantine Empire was Orthodox Christianity, which was officially hostile to other Christian beliefs. As a result, while Greek Orthodox Christians opposed Muslim control, other Christians, such as the Nestorians, were uncertain. Christianity spread over the Caspian area and Central Asia while under Muslim authority.

Many people ultimately converted to Islam for various reasons. Some converted because they believed it was right, while others did so to avoid higher taxes or prejudice. Some converted to rise in government positions. Populations converted slowly, and by the eleventh century, Muslims were likely a slight majority in the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Egypt.

WOMEN, GENDER AND FAMILY

Women from all socioeconomic strata had a level of legal and financial independence that was rare in other civilizations at the time. Women were able to manage their own wealth, invest, trade, initiate divorces, and inherit possessions. According to some schools of thought, women inherited less than men and were required to have male guardians to commence marriage. Women did not serve as judges in legal cases, and their testimony was not as valued as that of their male colleagues.

While Islamic scripture and tradition established ethical principles for women and families, how these ideas were applied varied across political circumstances. Pre-Islamic Arab culture had a strong influence on early Islamic cultures; families were arranged around a patriarchal clan with a common male ancestor. Families were led by the oldest male family member.

However, centuries later, during Mamluk control, society was structured radically differently, with individuals wielding greater influence. Women in this atmosphere might move through society more independently.

Political and economic organisation

Following the disintegration of the Abbasid caliphate, the formerly huge empire was ruled by a number of fragmented governmental organisations. As a result, mediaeval Islamic culture was administered by dozens of separate dynasties, caliphates, and tribal republics, each with their own unique political, social, and economic framework. This was a time of decentralisation, and the government was a distant entity for the majority of the population.

The urban elite, wealthy merchants, and land-owning families wielded the most sway over religious and economic institutions. The most powerful people in rural areas were landowners and tribal rulers.

In regions where the military was made up of mamluks or ghilman, like as Baghdad, the government was primarily concerned with organising and funding this foreign military class. The government either collected taxes from people and gave regular salaries to the troops, or it compensated the military through land grants known as iqta. This worked successfully at times, but unorganised or naïve methods occasionally resulted in prolonged periods of societal unrest. Land grant holders operated as landlords to the farmers who worked on their land, collecting revenue from them. They spent some of the money to keep the irrigation systems running. It is unclear if the farmers were required to pay taxes or rent, but they were essentially tenants of the landlord.

Art & Architecture:

Islamic history spans a long time and a huge geographical area. It is organised into dynasties or periods of rule. The Umayyad Period (661–750 CE) is recognised as the oldest phase of Islamic art. As Islam grew, it integrated elements of existing art and architecture into its language. During the Umayyad Period, imagery and architectural styles were borrowed from Byzantine and Persian sources. Consider a mosaic, or work of art made of tile or glass, from the Dome of the Rock, one of Islam's oldest structures. The mosaic, with its flattened space, defined outlines, and ornamental jewel-like aspect, is similar to Byzantine art, but lacks human figures.

As Islamic civilization extended over the Middle East, Europe, and Asia, the art developed a distinct style. During the Abbasid Period (750-1258 CE), Islamic painters created their own styles, such as geometric and foliate, or leaf-like, motifs. These elements gradually combined to form the arabesque, an elaborate spiralling interlaced motif unique to Islamic art.

Islamic Architecture

Islamic architecture consists of two major types of buildings. The first is a place for prayer known as a mosque. Mosques were often designed with enormous central domes and semi-circular arches for entrances. They also had minarets, which were tall, thin structures with

stairs leading to a balcony from where prayer was called five times every day. Minarets were intended to be seen from a distance as a symbol of Islam. Inside, the walls and surfaces were ornamented with décor that had no reference to animal or human shapes.

Another significant structure in Islam is the madrasah, which served as both a religious and legal school. Madrasah architecture evolved throughout time and varied by geographical location, but they were typically four-sided constructions with a huge central court. An example of this is the Agha Bozorg Mosque and Madrasah in Kashan, Iran, which depicts illustrations of mosque architecture, with its characteristic dome and minarets, as well as the madrasah, which is located in the lower half of the image and has an open courtyard.

Characteristics of Islamic Art

Islam was a powerful religious and cultural movement, and practically all Islamic art and architecture are influenced by one central concept. They don't display any pictures of living creatures out of devotion for Allah, or God. The lack of a direct depiction of nature in art, particularly of people or animals, is known as aniconism. As previously stated, the majority of Islamic art prohibits the portrayal of living beings. It makes use of different design elements instead. The art of calligraphy, or writing, is among the most basic. Calligraphy is attractive and symbolic in Islamic art because it relates to the notion of sharing God's word with the populace. Foliate or vegetal imagery, which depicts leaves, vines, or other plants in artistic ways, is also very common.

Inter-religious Conflicts and Interactions Between Christianity and Islam in Medieval Society

The mediaeval period was characterised by extensive inter-religious conflicts and contacts between Christianity and Islam, two of the most powerful religions of the time. These encounters were formed by a combination of religious enthusiasm, political ambitions, and economic interests, resulting in both long-running confrontations and important discussions. This section delves into important conflicts like the Crusades and the Reconquista, as well as interactions via trade, intellectual exchanges, and cultural influences.

The Crusades (1096–1291)

The Crusades were a series of military operations launched by the Latin Church to recover Jerusalem and other holy places in the Near East from Muslim rule. The Crusades, which lasted from the late 11th to the 13th century, were motivated by religious reasons such as the need to secure pilgrimage routes and safeguard Christian holy places, as well as political and economic factors such as Christian territorial expansion and the quest of wealth.

First Crusade (1096–1099): The First Crusade was undertaken in response to Pope Urban II's call for Western Christians to support the Byzantine Empire against the Seljuk Turks and regain Jerusalem. This Crusade succeeded with the seizure of Jerusalem in 1099, creating various Crusader nations in the Levant, including the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The victory of the First Crusade was a watershed moment for Christian troops, but it also set the foundation for continued confrontation with Muslim nations.

Subsequent Crusades: The Second Crusade (1147-1149) attempted to regain territories lost to Muslim armies but failed. The Third Crusade (1189-1192), led by nobles like Richard the Lion-heart, aimed to retake Jerusalem after it was captured by Saladin in 1187. Although it failed to recapture Jerusalem, it did negotiate an agreement that allowed Christian visitors to visit the holy sites. The later Crusades, particularly the disastrous Fourth Crusade (1202-1204), which sacked Constantinople, moved from their original religious goals, demonstrating the complicated interplay between religious and secular movement.

Impact of the Crusades: The Crusades had a deep and long-lasting impact on both Christian and Muslim societies. The Crusades helped Christians develop a feeling of religious unity and identity, but they also introduced European countries to new cultures, technology, and information from the Islamic world. For Muslims, the Crusades were viewed as invaders that necessitated defence and counterattacks, resulting in a strengthening of Muslim unity under leaders such as Saladin. The Crusades also fuelled religious animosities, leaving a legacy of distrust and warfare between the two religions.

The Reconquista (8th century–1492)

The Reconquista was a lengthy process of Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from Muslim rulers who had seized control of much of the country following the Umayyad conquest in the early eighth century. This period was characterised by intermittent conflict, fluctuating alliances, and major cultural exchanges.

Early Reconquista: The Reconquista began with small Christian enclaves in the north of the peninsula, which steadily expanded southward. Key successes, such as the Battle of Covadonga (about 722), in which Christian forces defeated Muslim forces, marked the beginning of the Reconquista. Christian kingdoms like as León, Castile, Aragon, and Portugal played important roles in the progressive reclaiming of territory over time.

Cultural and Social Impact: The Reconquista had a tremendous impact on the cultural and social landscape of the Iberian Peninsula. While it resulted in the loss of Muslim political authority, it also brought about times of tolerance known as *convivencia*, in which Christians, Muslims, and Jews socialised, traded, and shared information. However, the Reconquista included periods of persecution and forced conversions, particularly at the end, culminating in the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain in 1492 and 1502, respectively.

Intellectual and Cultural Interactions

Despite the hostilities, the mediaeval period saw substantial intellectual and cultural contacts between Christian and Muslim nations, which were made possible by trade, diplomacy, and the transmission of knowledge.

Transmission of Knowledge: One of the most meaningful contacts took place inside the area of intellectual communication. In cities like Toledo, intellectuals translated works of Greek and Arabic history into Latin, which played an important role in information transfer. This included books on philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and mathematics that Muslim academics had preserved and built on during the Islamic Golden Age. Figures like as Ibn Sina

(Avicenna) and Al-Khwarizmi left an indelible mark on European science and philosophy, substantially influencing the Renaissance and Scientific Revolution.

Trade and Commerce: Trade connections across the Mediterranean and along the Silk Road encouraged economic exchanges between Christian and Muslim merchants. These trade networks not only allowed for the flow of items like as spices, textiles, and precious metals, but they also promoted cultural and technological interactions. These connections brought innovations from the Islamic world to Europe, including the astrolabe, paper, and some agricultural techniques.

Diplomacy and Alliances: Diplomatic connections and rare alliances also influenced Christian-Muslim interactions. For example, during the Crusades, Christian and Muslim kings formed alliances against mutual opponents. The complex political landscape of the mediaeval period frequently required pragmatic coalitions that surpassed religious borders.

Final Reflection

Through a comparative study of Christianity and Islam, we discover a dynamic interplay of influence, conflict, and cooperation. Both religions had a great impact on their respective communities through their doctrines, institutions, and cultural representations. Christianity's centralised Church exercised tremendous socio-political power, influencing European governance and social institutions while dealing with internal theological disagreements and external threats such as the Crusades. Islam, through its large caliphates, brought many civilizations together under sophisticated administrative structures while also facing its own obstacles, such as the Sunni-Shia division and invasions.

The Crusades and the Reconquista were examples of Interreligious conflicts that not only represented important times of violent participation but also promoted intellectual and cultural connections, especially through trade and knowledge translation. These exchanges fostered future advancements and enhanced both Muslim and Christian civilizations.

The long-lasting impact of these religious dynamics from the Middle Ages demonstrates the significant and enduring impact of Islam and Christianity on the historical course of their own civilizations as well as the global community. The time frame demonstrates how religious influence is multifaceted, involving both collaboration and conflict, and how it continues to impact modern interreligious and geopolitical ties.

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