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# Medieval Europe: The Myth of Dark Ages and the Impact of Islam

RABIA UMAR ALI

## Abstract

*The West as it stands today, has a long illustrious history of many feats, yet it makes a gruesome mistake of de-linking its past from a period of almost a thousand years by calling it the “Dark Ages”. In recent times this trend has undergone some change and efforts have been made to restore that period to a more respectable status. However, still the best that could be achieved in terms of nomenclature is “Middle Ages.” The present article is an endeavour to highlight the grandeur of the period that became the cause and source for later European developments on the one hand, and finding the reasons and factors responsible for the attempt to relegate the entire era as unworthy of notice and credit. Among one of those outstanding reasons was the rise, spread and influence of Islam, which for a very long period was the envy of the world, particularly in comparison to the so called “Dark Ages” of Europe. It came up with its own learning and culture, science and philosophy, medicine and statecraft, architecture and commerce that were unique in every way but were reluctantly accepted and hardly appreciated. Yet the impact could not be denied and remains a fact of history even if western authorship has continued to overlook the significance of it.*

Ever since the times of Greeks and Romans, thinkers and historians have looked at the west<sup>1</sup> from the standpoint of European “cultural experiences.”<sup>2</sup> In other words no matter how we look at the West, “its historic heartland is Europe.”<sup>3</sup> There is no other opinion as to the fact that it fathered and then

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<sup>1</sup> ‘West’ is a term that stems from the Greco-Roman tradition. It defines a particular region and by virtue of that represents a set of cultural norms, customs and ethnicities. Its first known use was somewhere before the twelfth century. It has a unique history that went through a variety of phases also interpreted variously at different points in time. Therefore, West as a concept has been used in the present work, both as an upper and a lower case simultaneously, mainly to demonstrate its existence, role and impact, through ages and from divergent perspectives.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Asad, *My Discovery of Islam* (London: Goodword Publishers, 2001), 3. It was earlier published under the title of *Road to Mecca* in 1954.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Roberts, *The Triumph of the West: The Origin, Rise and Legacy of Western Christendom* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 1985), 55.

mastered the art of living inherited by the entire west, even the non-European genre of it. But other influences on that mastery need to be acknowledged as well. To pursue that end, one major misconception that surrounds the medieval part of it must be addressed first, and that is the notion of considering it as the “Dark Ages.”<sup>4</sup> To consign a period of history by that particular taxonomy is to deny all that was of any value in that era. But we find volumes after volumes of works on the European Middle Ages, emphasizing upon the splendour of its art, the grandeur of its castles, the subtlety of its poetry and philosophical thought and that too by none other than western writers and historians themselves. The acceptance of this era as the period on which were built phenomenal movements like the Renaissance and the Reformation has been reawakening in certain academic quarters since the early twentieth century. But the general understanding is still that of Petrarch (1304–1374) who coined it in the 1330’s to denote the thousand years that had preceded his era as the “Dark Ages.” It has thenceforth come to be used as a term of disgrace and ignominy, thought of as a period of intellectual darkness, decadence and decline. The Latin expression for the “Dark Ages” *Saeculum Obscurum* was perhaps originally used for political turmoil in the tenth and eleventh centuries,<sup>5</sup> but later came to be synonymously used for the entire Middle Ages and not only for the early phase as some tend to believe. It had seemed to the Italian humanist Petrarch that the Roman Empire “had fallen to the barbarians and that barbarism had continued ever since.”<sup>6</sup> Surrounded by “dense gloom” and “sleep of forgetfulness”<sup>7</sup> Petrarch and his

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<sup>4</sup> The term “Dark Ages” was put in common use by the Enlightenment philosophers to denote an age between the fall of the Roman Empire to the earliest discoveries of the Renaissance. This period dominated by the Christian Church and the feudal lords, as they believed, was devoid of any great achievement and was marked by the retardation of human faculties. For them the lack of ‘secular achievement’ symbolized complete intellectual darkness, most vocal of them being Kant, Voltaire and a few others. The rise of ‘Humanism’ as the portent of Renaissance initiated the recovery of man that reached its climax in the eighteenth century, when the final disconnect with that ‘barbarous’ past occurred in the shape of enlightened philosophy and the ‘Age of Reason’ came to fully replace the ‘Age of Faith.’ Modern western Historiography, however, does not entertain this term fondly as it is not only misleading and inaccurate but also a distortion of history if seen in a universal context. The present article is an attempt to emphasize the said point and make an endeavour to remove the myth by according a rightful place to an equally productive period of history as assigned to other eras. The periodization of early, medieval and modern or the more recent categorization of pre-modern, modern and post-modern can suffice to represent the time frame of history.

<sup>5</sup> John C. Dwyer, *Church History: Twenty Centuries of Catholic Christianity* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1998), 155.

<sup>6</sup> H. G. Koenigsberger and Asa Briggs, *Early Modern Europe 1500–1789* (London: Longman Pearson, 1987), 9.

<sup>7</sup> “This sleep of forgetfulness will not last for ever. When the darkness has been dispersed, our

followers deemed the era to be devoid of the radiance and glow that had made antiquity such a glorious past and hence, his classic periodization of European history.

In fact, if viewed objectively it was mainly the paucity of historical records in comparison to earlier and later times that had led many to banish the medieval times as those of stunted growth and barbaric influence. But these written records even if few and far between cannot make an entire era “nasty and brutish.” Moreover, the vacuum, does not indeed count to much in view of the presence of the magnificent relics of art in the form of sculpture, paintings and above all architectural wonders. The Byzantine and Christian phases of Medieval art speak of a splendid heritage. The Romanesque carvings, the Brick Gothic structures, the murals, mosaics and frescoes boast of a great tradition in artistic virtues. No critique of western art is complete without the Bodiam Castle in England, the Cloisters of Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy, the Arch of Constantine in Rome, and the Inveraray Castle near Glasgow in Scotland. These are just a few that say a lot to reconsider the era as one of rich cultural standing. Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), Michelangelo (1475–1564), Titian (1485–1576), Raphael (1483–1520), Donatello (1386–1466), Brunelleschi (1377–1446), Alberti (1404–1472) and scores of others who lure hundreds and thousands to the museums and galleries of the modern west had much to derive from the medieval artistic spirit. Without such masterpieces as the *David*, *Moses*, the *Virgin and the Child*, the *Last Supper* and the Sistine Chapel wonders, any mention of Renaissance Art is incomplete. And a student of western art knows well where the dominant influence for their creation actually came from.

Furthermore, the construction of Gothic cathedrals that proliferated in the late Middle Ages became the centre of civic activities for the townspeople.<sup>8</sup> As lucrative economic venture for the builders and the artisans, the Cathedral culture gradually spread all over Europe. France was the pioneer in Gothic style from where it moved on to England. The Salisbury Cathedral was built from 1220 onward, exposing grandiose styles of architecture and exposing monastic features in a typical English tradition.<sup>9</sup> Moving on from such splendid architecture, instituting colleges and universities was another solid attribute of the Medieval times, the University of Paris being its finest and perhaps pioneering credit. One in Southern Europe at Bologna followed it. The trend became widespread and Oxford and Cambridge became important

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descendants can come again in the former (i.e. ancient Rome) pure radiance.” Petrarch, *Africa* IX, 533. As quoted by Koenigsberger and Briggs, *Early Modern Europe 1500–1789*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Laurie Schneider Adams, *A History of Western Art* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2011), 201.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

seats of learning for North European scholars and students in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, to be trailed by Prague, Cracow, Vienna and Heidelberg.<sup>10</sup> King's College, Cambridge stands as an illustrious example of medieval contribution to academic pursuits. Founded by Henry VI, in 1440, it also displays a unique Gothic architectural finesse, its elegance worthy of the cost involved.<sup>11</sup> Yet another of the glorious creations was the Magna Carta (Magna Charta Libertatum), a relic of Medieval times which gave Britain a new line in its constitutional history. It was the first document that initiated checks on the authority of the English King by his subjects, stating that his dictates will not be arbitrary and that no free man could be punished except by the law of the land. Considered to be one of the most important constitutional documents of all times, it still exists on the statute books of England and Wales and was the first in a long series of constitutional developments.<sup>12</sup> Diplomacy's origins as an interaction of representatives of countries can be traced back to the thirteenth century when the first embassies were established in Italy. Milan, Venice and Tuscany pioneered the institution of diplomacy. Milan was the first to send its embassy to France in 1455. A study of Modern European history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is mainly based upon an understanding of diplomatic ties, deals, alliances and treaties between major belligerents of outstanding conflicts and crises, the culture having been derived from the Middle Ages.

Despite the richness and diversity in its achievements and activities, Medieval Europe struggles to acquire a respectable position in the periodization hierarchy. The barbarians, that disrupted the political unity of Europe,<sup>13</sup> carry much of the burden of the "Dark Ages" to be so consigned. The Roman Empire, as Gibbon (1737–1794) toils to explain in six volumes, was an exhausted entity. That it outlived its grandeur, became a victim to incompetent imperial authority, had split up in the eastern and western zones, expanded vastly, almost infinitely and had succumbed to civil strife are all reasonable, valid justifications for the inglorious end but interestingly historians have always thrived in the invasion theory. In doing that, they hardly realize how a combination of all these factors could have destroyed any

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<sup>10</sup> Carlton J. H. Hyaes, Marshal Whithead Baldwin and Charles Woosley Cole, *History of Western Civilization* (McMillan: New York, 1964), 247–249.

<sup>11</sup> Adams, *A History of Western Art*, 216.

<sup>12</sup> In 2005, Lord Woolf described it as the first in a series of instruments that now have a special status such as 'Habeas Corpus Act,' 'the Bill of Rights,' 'the Petition of Rights' and 'the Act of Settlement.' "Magna Carta: A Precedent for Recent Constitutional Change," *Judiciary of England and Wales Speeches*, June 15, 2005, accessed in September 2010 from [www.judiciary.gov.uk](http://www.judiciary.gov.uk)

<sup>13</sup> Koenigsberger and Briggs, *Early Modern Europe 1500–1789*, 15.

civilization at any time in history. The barbarians were just a welcome figure in the chaos that had been building up for centuries. The condemnation of their frequent and prolonged inroads stands in an almost complete oblivion to the fact that there was much of value for Europe in the socio-cultural and political traditions of the barbarian onslaught.<sup>14</sup>

The historical periodization of Europe might be artificial, inaccurate or not even required. That can be overlooked. Its greatest flaw lies in the landmarks used to denote those events such as the erroneously used term "Dark Ages" or the conventional usage of such turning points as the Renaissance and Reformation. The question is were they as distinctive as their interpretation suggests, because much before their time movements of a similar nature had already occurred. Many "Renaissances" before the fifteenth century and many reformers before the sixteenth century had left their deep imprint on the cultural face of Europe.<sup>15</sup> To take one example, the Carolingian Renaissance invariably contributed hugely to the recovery of a sense of the past by adopting classical models<sup>16</sup> and was an indispensable bridge between the early and modern European civilizations. Charlemagne gave it a structure on which the foundations of Europe as a continent were laid.<sup>17</sup> Europe was practically defined long before its inhabitants had any idea of belonging to a political entity.<sup>18</sup> And this in itself was no small feat. The Western civilization survived by the "skin of its teeth" on the vigour and might of this medieval European cultural movement.

It can hardly be denied that no two epochs in the history of the world can ever be of the same nature. Rise and fall, decline and ascent are inherently the essence of time. What the Greeks and the Romans stood for need not necessarily be the fortune and destiny of the following times. In varying degrees each age has its own accomplishments and feats to bequeath to posterity. Thus, no matter how solid and complex the Greco-Romans were, they were fragile, fell a prey to the forces and circumstances of time and were

<sup>14</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972), 9.

<sup>15</sup> In fact a whole series of Renaissances reached back down to the ninth century. And as for Reformation the Church corruption had inspired many reformers before Martin Luther (1483–1546) in eras earlier to the sixteenth century, to name only two, John Huss (1369–1415) in Bohemia and John Wycliff (1328–1384) in England. Geoffrey Barraclough, *Turning Points in World History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Roberts, *The Triumph of the West*, 60–61.

<sup>17</sup> Bertrand Russell who in his *A History of Western Philosophy* has profusely used the term "Dark Ages" for all the same reasons that its application entails, acknowledges the fact that Charlemagne was able to 'diminish the darkness' of the age through his cultural endeavours. *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979), 391.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.



destroyed.<sup>19</sup> And then who can say that there was no injustice, cruelty or superstition in the Greek and Roman worlds.<sup>20</sup> Even at its peak i.e. the fifth century B.C., much of what stands as Greek grandeur, was not devoid of “pride and arrogance,” of “irrational fears” that dominated the political life of the city-states, and very interestingly “disbelief in the supernatural and the teaching of astronomy” were indeed “indictable offenses in Athens.”<sup>21</sup> Perhaps there is no time in antiquity that can be singled out “when corruption was excluded from the law courts and the tax system.”<sup>22</sup> But their opulence outmatched the little instances of brutalities and depravities that were practiced in the society. Not all today would condone, endorse or emulate the crude and totalitarian Spartan system. Yet the west thrives on its Greek heritage.

The arrival of the Middle Ages was more of a continuity than a sharp break. It must now be agreed that late antiquity was already looking very different from Classical Rome and very distant indeed from the Greeks. The vastness of the domain and the associated problems of administration, the civil strife of the nobility and the rise of Christianity as an alternative source of authority had fractured the foundations of a once mighty Roman Empire. What followed was more in the nature of a decline of absolute authoritarian rule than the arrival of a new era. In other words the result of the ending possibilities of a growingly unruly empire were manifesting themselves and since they could not match with the climax of the bygone traditions, it was disowned and labelled as a “Dark Age.” The seeds of this decline are to be located in the Roman times. The disruptive elements in that once great civilization led to fateful consequences for generations of western Europeans.

But, perhaps, the main reality that existed behind the “Dark Ages” terminology came with the philosophers of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. The ascendancy of “reason” and with it the abhorrence for orthodoxy, something that the Middle Ages were believed to be deeply seeped in, strengthened the idea. Religion took the back seat and all those stages of human existence that had some recourse to faith became an altogether unacceptable verity. The Enlightenment only served to strengthen the idea. It was religion, and in this particular instance the Catholic Church with its rampant corruption and growing exploitation in the Middle Ages that also

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<sup>19</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Civilization: A Personal View* (London: John Murray, 1969), 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Roberts, *The Triumph of the West*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Chadwick, “Envoi: On Taking Leave of Antiquity,” in John Boardman, Jasper Griffin and Oswyn Murray, eds., *The Oxford History of the Classical World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 809, for details see, 807–829.

became the base for Catholic Reformation in the sixteenth century and later inspired many to become the “personal enemies of the Almighty.” And for it the basis had been already given by the rational approach of the Scientific Revolution and its corrected version of universe theories and cosmological views. Interestingly Newton became the first of the Enlightenment thinkers. Though maybe he was himself not aware of the limits to which the entire thought would be stretched by the beneficiaries of his beliefs in the shape of an altogether absolute challenge to religious authority.

It was not only the religion of Christianity and its hold on and of the society that has made it such a ‘bad thought’ to be relegated to the rear end of human memory. There was another force, Islam, a robust faith that had risen from the deserts of Arabia and the medieval period of a once exuberant continent was made ‘darker’ by its splendours.<sup>23</sup> In a couple of decades its spread and ultimate occupation of certain significant Central European strongholds such as Spain and Sicily, knocking on the doors of other more central nations as well, would lead to greater and far more impressive borrowings. There is little doubt that the west Europeans gained immensely from their Byzantine and Muslim neighbours in the shape of ideas, goods and practices.<sup>24</sup> Clinical instruction,<sup>25</sup> ship-building, musical notations, strides in alchemy and metaphysics, astronomical breakthroughs, Arabic numerals, gun-making, double entry book-keeping, precise geometric precision in painting, all were adopted and later adapted to European requirements. Al-Khwarizmi (780–850), a ninth-century Muslim mathematician from Khivah, along with his colleagues and followers raised mathematics to a level that Europeans of Medieval times were dumbstruck by his brilliance, and his magic of “unlocking all planes of the universe.”<sup>26</sup> He had been dead for three hundred years when his works came to be translated into Latin, particularly his feats in geometry for which the Greeks had been mistakenly revered so far.<sup>27</sup> After his book on calculation was translated in Latin in Toledo, numbers all over Europe came to be regarded as “Toledo numbers” opening new paths of

<sup>23</sup> Robert Fossier, introduction to *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Middle Ages 950–1250* ed. Robert Fossier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), 1.

<sup>24</sup> J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 137.

<sup>25</sup> Clinical instruction was not started as a practice in Europe till 1550. Hospitals as institutions where the sick are looked after came with the Crusades and the Arabs are the pioneers. The first known hospital in Europe has been traced back to 1500 in Strassburg with a resident historian. Watt, *The Influence of Islam*, 67.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Hamilton Morgan, *Lost History: The Enduring Legacy of Muslim Scientists, Thinkers and Artists* (Washington: National Geographic, 2007), 90–92.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 91–92.



learning and research in the west.<sup>28</sup> And though the Europeans had “never seen anything like his books, building on the even older classics,” they conveniently forgot the man, ceased to credit him for what he had done and even if some remember him, they “deny that he had been great” — the “disenfranchised inventor and the lucky beneficiary.”<sup>29</sup> In the tenth century emerges another scientist from Basra, Ibn al-Haytham (965–1040) whose optical theories gave Copernicus (1473–1543), Roger Bacon (1214–1294) and Galileo (1564–1642) the base to understand the relationship of earth with the heavenly bodies.<sup>30</sup> A pioneer in early form of Calculus and “reaching out to the very limits of higher physics, he seems to be aware of gravity itself,” writing about the “attraction of masses six hundred years before Galileo and Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727).”<sup>31</sup> Likes of these great scientists, philosophers and artists lived their worthy existence and influenced Europe in a variety of ways. Most important in the present context of debate is the influence of Ibn Sīnā (980–1037), one of the leading, the most famous and influential philosophers of all times, with more than four hundred and fifty treatises to his credit, whose “linking of theology with physics and metaphysics,” opened up new avenues in theological writings in Latin, later imitated by many in the west.<sup>32</sup> His contributions in medicine led to many new approaches in medical science and practice to the extent that their imprint on modern day western medicine cannot be disguised.

Without Arabs, European science or philosophy would not have developed the way it did and of course *without* the Greek transmitters, as is generally believed.<sup>33</sup> In many cases it was the Islamic influence that set in motion the factors leading to the “emergence of modern science.”<sup>34</sup> If today science has come to mean ‘modern western science’ only,<sup>35</sup> this notion came to be developed as a transition of centuries and the authors of this process can hardly be sidelined from the ultimate chronicle of success. It must not be forgotten that at the time of Muslim zenith both in arts and sciences, in agriculture, geography and warfare, the west had virtually nothing to offer.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Roberts, *The Triumph of the West*, 94.

<sup>29</sup> Morgan, *Lost History*, 91–92.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 104–105.

<sup>32</sup> Watt, *The Influence of Islam*, 69.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>34</sup> Roberts, *The Triumph of the West*, 94.

<sup>35</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), 238.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 221.

Renaissance and post-Renaissance established long ago.<sup>37</sup> Later champions of an 'enlightened' Europe could not easily digest so much borrowing from another culture, particularly from their "Saracen enemies"<sup>38</sup> who had not only occupied Sicily and parts of southern Italy but threatened Rome itself<sup>39</sup> if not driving actually, as Gibbon writes "into the mouth of Thames."<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the fact remains that the fall of the once grandiose Roman Empire came about as a result of the Arab conquest of Syria, Egypt, North Africa and then Southern Spain and Sicily; clearly "the Mediterranean was no longer a Roman lake."<sup>41</sup> The western Christendom was saved and able to survive into a political entity by the failure of any further Arab conquests. It is not difficult to understand why it led quite a few in the western mould of thought, to very conveniently forget and relegate the entire era to historical obscurities and misconceptions.

This illustrates a very interesting feature regarding the medieval times of Europe's fascination with, and borrowings from Islamic culture, science and philosophy. An entity which had so profoundly influenced them to an extent that "they had to learn all they could from the Arabs before they themselves could make any further advances,"<sup>42</sup> also had its dangers of dominating, if left uncontrolled and unguarded. And the guards came down in the form of the great revival of Greco-Roman splendor or more specifically termed as the Renaissance. It was a return to the originals because such a 'renewal' seemed "desperately needed"<sup>43</sup> in the wake of the achievements and influence of Islam on European thought, in all its cultural and intellectual manifestations. A distortion of the image of Islam was a natural corollary that emerged between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries, when at the same time efforts were made to portray Christianity as a religion of peace, rational persuasion, even "of asceticism, mortifying all carnal desires."<sup>44</sup> This continued as a means to minimize if not nullify the impact of Islamic science and philosophy that had undoubtedly given "Europe a new conception of the world."<sup>45</sup> This somewhat 'negative' activity of detracting from Islam the credit of so much learning

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 104–105.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, 18.

<sup>40</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (Maryland: Wildside Press, 1914), 6: 16.

<sup>41</sup> Chadwick, "Envoi," 828.

<sup>42</sup> Watt, *The Influence of Islam*, 43.

<sup>43</sup> Roberts, *The Triumph of the West*, 39.

<sup>44</sup> For a detailed understanding of how Islam and its image came to be distorted in the western European thinking, from the twelfth century even down to the present times, see Watt, *The Influence of Islam*, 72–80.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 78.

would have been difficult without providing a suitably attractive alternative, and this came in the shape of an appeal to Europe's classical past.<sup>46</sup> Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) was reborn and adopted as an indigenous tradition to fill the gap and confront the rise of Islam, but here too, mainly through the commentaries of Ibn Rushd (1126–1198); Dante's (1265–1321) *Divine Comedy* attempted to create a sharp distinction between Islam and Christianity, but he also could not avoid the dominant influence, as his conceptions and symbols seem to be derived from Islamic sources.<sup>47</sup>

To extend the argument a little further, Crusades stand today in the memory of Western Europe as a fight against the infidel, a war upon the 'wicked race'<sup>48</sup> and a labour of love to recover holy lands. For the most part, however, it needs to be remembered that few were motivated by this spirit. After the initial rounds, particularly the first crusade,<sup>49</sup> the material aspect of crusading against the enemy became the overwhelming aspiration for which several holy wars were waged. Also was there the desire of the Pope for peace in the Catholic lands and for providing an outlet for the energies of the contented and satiated youth of the nobility whose increasing wealth "feeling of buoyancy and self-confidence"<sup>50</sup> often led them to get involved in skirmishes over petty issues: hence the venture *deus lo volt* (God wants it) was launched in 1095 in Clermont.<sup>51</sup> Even if we refrain from debating the motives or objectives of the crusading movement, the fact remains that this one episode brought the two cultures in direct, even if belligerent, contact with each other and opened for them unlimited avenues of interaction. Though the Latin culture had little to offer to the Muslims, and the impact of the crusaders was 'remarkably slight' on the countries they had ruled,<sup>52</sup> Europe, on the other hand, assimilated a "fair number of cultural acquisitions."<sup>53</sup> Arabic words like "bazaar," "tariff," "arsenal," "algorithm," "algebra," were taken by the Latin tradition by the Islamic influence, but more particular was the case in

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Asad, *My Discovery of Islam*, 6.

<sup>49</sup> From the battle cry of a 'Just war' by Urban II, down to the last crusades the motives and objectives of the waging Catholic armies varied from a unity of purpose to a conflict of interest, even to the extent of widespread changes in the 'crusading practices.' Asad, *My Discovery of Islam*, 122.

<sup>50</sup> Watt, *The Influence of Islam*, 55.

<sup>51</sup> Norman Housely, *Contesting the Crusades* (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2006), 6.

<sup>52</sup> The ruling Crusaders "never formed more than a dominant minority of western European Catholic—barons, clergy, and merchants with their various retainers and subordinates...With the departure of the Crusaders, these lands were easily reincorporated into the Islamic society and politics." Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, 24–25.

<sup>53</sup> Nikolas Jaspert, *The Crusades* (London: Routledge, 2003), 166.

decorative arts and skills such as 'metal work,' "ceramics," "textiles" and "leather" that the impact is more perceptible.<sup>54</sup> For several centuries, Spain, Sicily and southern Italy remained "strongly imbued" with the Muslim culture.<sup>55</sup> So strong was the influence that it lasted long after the period of Muslim rule had declined. It is believed that for centuries after the Crusades had ended, westerners, both merchants and pilgrims travelled to the Muslim lands, and treaties and alliances continued between the rulers of Muslim and western states.<sup>56</sup> During these centuries, Western Europe confronted the Islamic civilization with a "feeling of inferiority" in science, technology, philosophy, to some extent in military capability and strength and invariably in material prosperity.<sup>57</sup> Western medicine, to cite a single instance, could not have evolved without the "effects of crusades,"<sup>58</sup> and though the source of this dominant "effect" might appear as a reluctant admittance in western scholarship, it does span the pages of medieval European annals.

Western Europe might have gained tangible war gains in the crusades against the "infidels" as the Muslim opponents were termed, but it also did provoke a new image of itself by interacting with and assimilating much of what the Islamic culture stood for and had to offer. For almost more than two hundred years the "Franks and Muslims were in close and daily contact with one another in Syria and Palestine, often in battle but often, also, in trade and diplomacy, and even in alliance."<sup>59</sup> Indeed it was through the crusading movement that a "spirit hungry" west stumbled upon the concept of a politico-religious and cultural unity,<sup>60</sup> with Europe ultimately finding its soul.<sup>61</sup> Islam was able to prove its cultural superiority over the west,<sup>62</sup> even if many fail to realize or accept that today.<sup>63</sup> Though by 1600 Crusades had shrunk to a former shadow of itself,<sup>64</sup> both in vitality and impact, it had given

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 166–167.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>56</sup> Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Watt, *The Influence of Islam*, 82–84.

<sup>58</sup> Housely, *Contesting the Crusades*, 144.

<sup>59</sup> Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, 24.

<sup>60</sup> Before the Crusades Europe lacked a single ground that could elevate it to the level of one nation, having divergent identities of being divided into classes, tribes and states. The concept of "Christendom" removed barriers of Franks, Saxons, Germans, Burgundians, Normans, Lombards and Sicilians, and from a medley and collage of races with scarcely anything in common, they rose to the level of a cultural concept that was 'Europe.' Asad, *My Discovery of Islam*, 4–7.

<sup>61</sup> Watt, *The Influence of Islam*, 56.

<sup>62</sup> Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1999), 611.

<sup>63</sup> Watt, *The Influence of Islam*, 84.

<sup>64</sup> Asad, *My Discovery of Islam*, 142.

to Europe what it had not achieved even in the much revered classical past i.e. a commonality of purpose and identity, along with a strong sense of self-awareness,<sup>65</sup> that was possible only by coming in arms against a much developed and advanced cultural existence. The modern definition of Europe in cultural, political, material and even in geographical terms owes much to factors from outside,<sup>66</sup> and the dominant strain was that of Arab Islam.

The list of feats and defeats can go on, yet no time in history can boast of any one of these ventures. Disturbances and violent outpourings of man or nature have always attended human existence irrespective of time and place. The Black Death (1346–52)<sup>67</sup> or the Hundred Years War (1337–1453) did cast an ugly shadow on the living of the Medieval Europeans taking them decades behind their times, yet what period in history is devoid of such calamities and devastations? No doubt with bad harvests, failing crops, severe winter and famine recurring decade after decade, the population was reduced to one third in early fourteenth century. Recovery was slow for years to come,<sup>68</sup> but it was not the doomed end. Transport, commerce and industry had already begun to revive. Most of the European coasts were connected, by the year 1500, through a network of strong seaworthy ships, with interregional specialization and exchange gaining unprecedented momentum. Not only this but more and more people had begun to enter the market.<sup>69</sup> The inspiration might have been Chinese, Byzantium or for that matter even Muslim, but the Europeans were adopting practices from their interaction and encounter from more sophisticated and skilled peoples around them. This contributed to their stability and growing strength. It fostered progress more in Europe also because the society of the occident displayed greater flexibility and adaptability than did China, Africa or the Muslim World. This obviously distinguished Western Europe from other better advanced societies of the time, where traditional ways of thought, belief and practice were intensely

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<sup>65</sup> Europe had not experienced such a strong sense of collective consciousness ever before, and nothing compared to the enthusiasm fostered by the first crusade has been seen ever since. Ibid., 6.

<sup>66</sup> Roberts, *The Triumph of the West*, 65.

<sup>67</sup> In the Black Death also known as the great Plague, the continent lost almost a quarter of its population. Its agriculture, its cities and trade all shrank “drastically,” yet the living standards of the great mass of the population improved. The economy got a boost, wealth increased and there began a new period of expansion leading to prosperity, when diseases and their fatal impacts lessened and population began to grow. In consequence military conquests led to an extension in the dominions of princes and their soldiers, thus giving to the middle ages a new pleasant blessing coming in the disguise of a deadly epidemic. Koenigsberger and Briggs, *Early Modern Europe 1500–1789*, 12–13.

<sup>68</sup> McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, 139.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 139–140.

fostered and defended.<sup>70</sup> It was an age of change and not of decay or decline though it goes without saying that “every sort of change was out of control in Europe.”<sup>71</sup> The Middle Ages proved the dictum and contrary to generally held belief had begun to shape into an entity worthy of its glorious past.

A period so rich in virtually all aspects of existence cannot be relegated to the fate of a retarded and impeded era. Yet the idea of Europe as the only civilization that ever existed, has reigned dominant in scholarly minds for a long time. This condescending attitude was bound to produce a distorted perspective, not only of self-superiority but also of the rest belonging to a ‘lower grade of existence.’<sup>72</sup> To many the history of the world amounted to “in the last resort to little more than an expanded history of the world.”<sup>73</sup> The argument of this article is not to glorify a particular culture or demean and belittle other epochs in the past. In fact, the classical times of Europe and their grandeur have perhaps not been surpassed even today. What has to be corrected is the notion that there hardly was a period known as the “Dark Ages” and also the belief that there was no other period that could boast of any cultural progression in any other part of the world. It is indeed a failing on the part of the historian of the west to have not been able to name the period adequately and to omit the presence of a contemporary thriving civilization that was in many ways a lender than a borrower. European civilization in particular and the western in general, does a lot of discredit to its present ascendant nature by denying the phases of evolution and downplaying its linkage with other cultures in the past that were indeed in many ways its benefactors. This inability has led many to fall in the trap of a mistaken nomenclature, using “dark” for “medieval” ages, and of considering the world to be generally devoid of any tangible progress then, since Europe was itself in a state of ‘slumber.’ The tendency of the west to adjudge by its standards all that is and was of value, in intellectual concepts, social norms, ethical valuation and philosophical and scientific growth<sup>74</sup> reflects a basic incapability to understand the ebb and flow of time which is the spirit and essence of historical instruction. The western notion of unbridled superiority thus makes its own past a victim consigned to, in this case, deliberate obscurity.

This approach, moreover, also fails to comprehend that the fascination of the Renaissance and the inspiration of the Reformation itself came from the immediate past. They were, as already explained above, not movements in a

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Asad, *My Discovery of Islam*, 3.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.



vacuum, moving from classical antiquity to descend upon modern times. Institutions of the European Middle Ages helped nourish and nurture their evolution into near sacred phenomenon. No philosophical or theological debate is complete without the broad structural edifice provided to the world by these unique occurrences with historical roots in the entire realm that is called "past," and not a specific part of it. Even if the medieval period was an interlude between Roman glory and early modern times, those one thousand years were rich enough to sustain the link between a glorious past and a tolerant, rational and progressive future. After all, when in the nineteenth century Englishmen began rebuilding the Parliament Houses when the Westminster Palace had been burnt down, they did so in a typical medieval panache, turning to Gothic and Stone style.<sup>75</sup> The masterpieces of Michelangelo, Da Vinci and Rafael had to borrow Christian themes to become eternally famous. The grounding of medieval thinking and the spirit of medieval adventure was thus necessary for change and progress that led to the discovery of new lands and the engendering of new ideas. The "age of discovery" lies on the final brink of the Middle Ages; hence Columbus stumbling on a whole new continent.

Finally, if Europe did take a turn, it was not the fifteenth century when it started peeping out in the so-called liberated era of the humanist venture. Because then Europe was still one of the so many much advanced and developed civilizations, as the Chinese, the Indian, the Islamic and the African.<sup>76</sup> Not before the eighteenth century could it boast of a new cultural outlook when the fruits of Reformation, the gains of colonization and the triumphs of Scientific Revolution began to create an environment convenient for the Enlightenment to shake the foundations of a conservative, hitherto unchanged scenario. It came as a boon or as a bane is another debate, yet it figured out clearly the contours of a new world that within no time flung itself into a truly revolutionary mode, where change would not remain confined to thought, but where heads would roll and destinies decided by strength of sword. And with it, the fashionable yet erroneous jargon of a Eurocentric approach would also fade out into a new world order dominated by new contenders and new ideologies.



<sup>75</sup> Roberts, *The Triumph of the West*, 36.

<sup>76</sup> Barraclough, *Turning Points in World History*, 17.