

Maryam Jameelah's Discourse on the role of Christianity in the Constitution of the Modern West

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Abstract

In the modern western civilization, religion has lost its rightful place in the lives of most people. The Reformation and Renaissance movements played a pivotal role in creating the chasm between religion and society. Modern Western civilization did not emerge in a sudden moment rather than the process took several centuries. The modern West traces its descent from the pagan civilizations of Greece and Rome. In the third century, Roman emperor Constantine embraced the faith of Christian faith that changed the course of the Roman Empire. Christendom played a significant part in the destiny of Europe. Maryam Jameelah (formerly: Margret Marcus) produced extensive literature on Western civilization. Jameelah explores the role of Christianity in the formation of the Modern West. Although the modern West has strayed from religion, Christianity claims its fair share in the constitution of the Modern West. This research study aims at analyzing the assertion of Christianity in the shaping of the Modern West in the light of Maryam Jameelah's discourse.

Key Words: Christianity, Constitution, Modern West, Roman Empire, Jameelah, Civilization

Western civilization traces its genealogy to the ancient Greek and Roman civilization. Besides, the "Graeco-Roman" civilization; Christianity is another source of Western civilization. The followers of Jesus unified themselves in the frame of the "Church" in Rome. Christians faced persecution and oppression in paganist Rome, however; through the establishment of the "Church" Christianity started out its political success in Rome.¹ Christianity met with its zenith at the point when the Roman emperor Constantine embraced the Christian faith. The fall of the Roman Empire inaugurated a new era of the middle ages in Europe. Medieval Europe was under the influence of the Catholic Church. This period of about a thousand years comprised the hegemony of Christendom in Europe. It was in the fifteenth century that the authority of the Church was challenged by some Christian scholars; they embarked on a Reformation movement which transformed later into "Protestantism" and culminated in the "Renaissance" of Europe. This was a period in the history of Europe when Europe started to identify itself as separated from religion and embraced a new course of modern Western civilization. In this research study the role of Christianity in the formulation of Western civilization, both in the Catholic and the Protestant ways will be analyzed.

Christian Rome

Christendom got an official foundation in the Romans when Constantine in 305 A.D. embraced the Christian faith on the political foundations. Hilaire

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Belloc uses the idea of a “Catholic Church” instead of “Christianity”, which was adopted by the Roman Empire as its official religion. Belloc’s famous words are “Europe is Church, and Church is Europe.”² Belloc thinks it was the “Christian Church”, which was responsible for the conversion of the Roman Empire into Christianity. Constantine rose to the throne of Caesar with the support of the Christian community; therefore, he made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. Nevertheless, he assumed a dual policy towards religion, where he constructed the Church in the country, so he constructed temples as well. During this period, Roman paganism was embedded in the Christian religion. The sincere followers of the religion were of the opinion that true religion will defeat the pagan customs of Rome, says Draper. He says, the amalgamation of Roman paganism created the conflict between science and religion. The belief in Trinity was founded upon the pagan traditions of Egypt.³ Randall also presents similar views that Trinity was developed by Clement, Origen, and Athanasius, in Alexandria.⁴ Thus, the Christian faith lost its originality in Rome and got the shades of Roman and Greek paganist ideas. It was no more the same faith which was propagated by the disciples of Jesus.

Middle Ages or Medieval Europe

Christian Church got its foot in Rome during the rule of Constantine. He summoned the council of Nicaea to decide the matter of Christian cannons, where the council resolved the issue of heresy, and Arianism was declared as heresy. Constantine’s successors intervened in this matter to a larger degree, and Caesar was seen as the supreme head of the Church. It seemed that secular and spiritual authority would be planted in the Emperor. Christianity under the influence of Roman cults adopted a different position towards women. Women were deprived of the power matters of the Church. Virginity for men and women became a praiseworthy trait. Constantine’s nephew “Apostate” tried to restore the pagan traditions of Rome. Later, Emperor Theodosius banned every kind of pagan worship within the Roman Empire. The Church hierarchy was as well built during the fourth century. By the fifth century, the Roman Empire had yielded to external forces. A new era was commencing, and Christian intellectuals articulated a new outlook on the world which remained dominant up till the sixteenth century.⁵ The Western people during the last period of the Roman Empire started to identify themselves as associated with a distinct civilization. Western civilization was different from other civilizations like Islamic civilization. During the Renaissance of Europe, the intelligentsia recognized this civilization with Christianity and the Graeco-Roman civilization.⁶ Christianity throughout the thousand years continued the primary identification of the Western culture.

The principal fathers and priests of the Church, whose teachings guided the followers of Christendom till the second arrival of Christ were: Jerome (c. 340-420), Ambrose (c. 340-397), and Augustine. Jerome took the initiative to

translate the Bible into Latin from Hebrew and Greek, which became a standard translation of the Bible. Ambrose's endeavors were related to defining the relationship between the secular imperial authority and the sacred authority of the Church. He asserted that the emperor was answerable to the Church regarding matters of the faith. Augustine was the disciple of Ambrose, and he is considered the most influential religious personality in Christendom after Christ. Augustine's teachings were not just significant for the medieval Church, but also equally significant for modern Catholicism, and even Martin Luther founded his thoughts along the teachings of Augustine.⁷ Christendom flourished greatly in the Middle Ages of Europe, and it imparted great influence on the outlook of Europe and constituted the identity of the West on the basis of Christendom.

Maryam Jameelah states that Roman Catholic Church enjoyed supreme authority in Europe between the period of the fall of the Roman Empire till the Renaissance. This period in the history of Europe is known as the "Middle Ages", which had its own distinct civilization which was dissimilar from the pagan civilization of Greece and Rome. The civilization of the Middle Ages had few attributes similar to Greece and Rome's culture, and it could be called "Western" only on the basis of geographical location.⁸ The same notion is demonstrated in the "Age of Saints" that the saints of the sixth and seventh centuries in which bishops, monks, and missionaries all were included tried their level best to convert the contemporary barbarians to Catholicism, and while acting so they made the medieval Europe, a Europe which they ensured was in effect a Christian society.⁹ The principal accomplishment of medieval times was the upshot of the profound contemplation and patience by the negation of the self for the sake of man and God. These achievements took place in an aura of a cultured society.¹⁰ The Christian society of the early middle ages was divided into three orders; firstly; clerics who were heads of the Church; prelates, fathers, rectors, and doctors were included in this order, secondly; a class of monks, nuns, and hermits who sacrificed the world for the sake of God, and thirdly; laymen and women who would indulge themselves in the world and world affairs. The same division of the Christian society transformed into two main classes in the late middle ages, namely; clergy and laity. This division eventually developed as the class structure of modern society.¹¹ The social organization of Western society into clerics and laity became a permanent social milieu of the modern Western culture, which subsequently developed into secularism. Whereas medieval times are characterized by different kinds of superstitions, similarly, the study of medieval times is essential to have a better understanding of the modern world. Many institutions, technologies, ideas, and cultural practices of the modern world have their roots in medieval times.¹² Clifford Backman names a few of these which were present during medieval age as such, "Parliamentary government, banks, algebra, mechanical clocks, trials by jury, women playwrights, polyphonic music, universities, paper mills, citizen armies,

distilled liquor, medical dissection, the novel, law schools, eyeglasses, the modern calendar, insurance....”¹³ Thus, the importance of the medieval times in the formation of the modern age can be assessed by the above-mentioned technologies and institutions of medieval centuries.

Christendom and the Western Civilization

Christendom continued as the official faith of the citizenry of Europe even after the fall of the Roman Empire. At present, what is called civilization, it was the cluster of beliefs and practices that dominated Europe or the dwellers of Europe, and it is synonymous with Christendom.¹⁴ As far as the scholarly construal of Western civilization is concerned, Christendom has been a basic element of Western civilization. Christianity formed Western civilization in numerous critical ways. Christian philosophy built up the holiness of the individual believer and called for compliance to a power (Christ) higher than any mainstream ruler (Caesar), thoughts that further refined and upheld the idea of freedom under law. Christian foundations, especially the papacy of the Roman Catholic Church in its progressing conflicted with the Heavenly Roman Head and regional rulers, handed down to the West the possibility of a partition, and in this manner a division of power. The Western people would use the term “Christendom” for their civilization before the advent of the Enlightenment in Europe.¹⁵ Hence, the term Western civilization was coined in the West, when the Europeans abandoned their religious identity after Industrialization and the Enlightenment. Christian Church, especially the Roman Catholic Church is viewed by many scholars as the root of ignorance and rigidity during the mediaeval ages of Europe, whereas Thomas E. Woods in his book “How the Catholic Church built Western civilization” demonstrates the standpoint akin to Backman that Western civilization stands obligated to the Catholic Church more than anything else, the university framework, altruistic and charitable institutions, international law, the sciences, vital legislative principles, and many other things. As a matter of fact, Church constituted the Western civilization. Woods believes that Church absorbed the customs and traditions of the Greeks and Romans. The Church disavowed none of these conventions, and in reality, consumed and gained from the best of them. What is striking, though, is the manner by which, in mainstream culture, the Church’s contributions have gone generally unnoticed.¹⁶ Similarly, Robinson sheds light on the contribution of the churchmen in the making of Western civilization, He states that the influence of ecclesiastics can be viewed in the literate class of Europe, which was held to the churchmen for six or seven centuries after the decline of the Roman Empire. Therefore, it was inevitable that all the books that were written during this era were authored by the priestly class. The churchmen enjoyed supremacy in the realms of intellectual, artistic, and literary manners. Even the civil governments had to bank upon the clergy for the establishment of public documents and declarations. The courts of kings were not imaginable without the presence of

priests and monks, who would also do the duties of the ministers for the kings. In this manner, the clergy assumed the position of the guardians and promoters of the civilization.¹⁷ Thus Woods and Robinson depict the Church's influences in the formative phase of Western civilization in their analysis, they believe, the contributions of the Church stand unparalleled in the construction of modern Western civilization. Woods's analysis is similar to *Jameelah* to some extent, as both believe that the civilization of the Middle Ages was different than the pagan cultures of Greece and Rome. Still, Woods presents the view that the Church purified the evil customs and assimilated the good conventions of the ancient classical culture.

Church and the Science

In the history of Europe, the medieval times Europe is doomed with the pejorative remarks of the "dark ages". Jameelah says that no other word in the English language got such a derogatory meaning as "medieval". When a Westerner comes across this word, his mind immediately turns towards the "Dark Ages" of savagery, ignorance, feudalism, and delusions. When a European wants to point out someone as backward, he tags it as "medieval". The civilization of Europe during the Middle Ages was entirely predicated upon the religious canons, and Roman Catholic Church was its custodian.¹⁸ Such was a religious milieu of Europe between the 12th to 16th centuries when certain scholars asserted their scientific breakthroughs which were against the long-settled beliefs of the Church, a wave of furor in the religious ranks surmounted, which took up the prosecutions and persecutions against such scholars and it resulted in the segregation of the religion and the science.

In 1507, Copernicus authored a book "On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Bodies." He presented the idea of the revolution of the earth, he did not put out his book for thirty-six years due to the fear of the ecclesiastic circle, since; the idea was contradictory to the established belief of the Church. Copernicus published his book in 1534, and his fears came true when the Inquisition condemned it as a heresy. The Church authorities employed logical contemplations while condemning Copernicus, for the Copernican system would force out the earth from her pivotal position in the cosmos, as seen by the Church.¹⁹ Despite the rejection of the Copernican system of the Church, Copernicus' endeavors did not go in vain, rather it triggered the research-oriented minds, and they further developed a Copernican system and made a contribution to the history of science.

Galileo made further observations on the basis of the Copernican system, and through his telescope, he discovered the phases in other planets, which further negated a prior theory of self-illumination of the planets. According to Aristotelian science, the planets are not subject to decay or change, but the discoveries of Galileo caused a great shock to the settled theory of Aristotelian science when he discovered the valleys, mountains on the planets and spots on

the sun. Galileo's discoveries proved the truth of the Copernican system and triggered great apprehensions in the Church. Finally, Church blamed Galileo for heresy, impersonation, and atheism. Inquisition summoned him under the allegation that he taught against the scriptures that the earth revolves around the sun. He was forced to deny his thoughts, which he did by the compulsion of the Church authorities. Galileo could not hold himself from the affirmation of truth for a long time, and eventually in 1632; he published his book "The System of the World." He was again arrested and presented before the Inquisition, this time was put into prison where he died away, and was even denied burial in the Christian graveyard.²⁰ It was not merely a defeat of the Church or religion, in fact, it was the defeat of ancient Greek philosophy and science which the Church had adopted for many centuries as the religious epistemology. The Church responded to Copernicus on the basis of Greek science, logic, and philosophy. Hence, it was not the defeat of religion in comparison to science; rather it was the defeat of ancient science in face of the modern science.²¹ Therefore, the established notions of the Church regarding the pivotal position of the earth in the universe faced a setback by the heliocentric theory presented by Copernicus and proved by Galileo and others. The mistreatment and persecution offered by the Church towards the learned person of that age created a sense of alienation in the Western mind regarding religion.

Protestantism

The unrestricted influence of the Church and Popes created discontent among the multitudes of Europe. The atrocities of the Pope even resulted in an uprising among the ranks of the clergy. The ambitions of the Popes of Rome had no limits in the medieval period of European history, as rightly depicted in "A Complete History of the Popes of Rome", the pride of the popes, and their voracious aspiration found in supreme rulers intense and every now and again submissive helpers, in imposing upon the general population their repulsive wishes in overpowering the frail, in magnifying their estates, and finally in achieving so incredible a stature of boldness, that they called themselves the delegates of God upon earth, and arrogated the privilege of giving ceaselessly kingdoms, ousting sovereigns, and partitioning the world.²² The authority of the Pope had overpassed the powers of old Roman and Byzantium dictators, established upon the ecclesiastical seat, delegated with a triple tiara of "pride, hypocrisy and fanaticism" encompassed by professional killers, prisoners, and courtiers yielded themselves to a wide range of intemperance.²³ Individual instances of the outrages of popes are not few; Pope Roderick Borgia is considered the most dreadful among all other popes. A corruption up to this point unknown, a voracious rapacity, a rampant ambition, mercilessness more than savage, such were the terrible characteristics of Roderick Borgia, chosen as a pope by the title of "Alexander the sixth". His interests were unbridled to the point that, having become enchanted of a dowager who had two little girls, not

content with the mother, he bowed the girls additionally to his cravings; he brought about one of them to be put in a convent and proceeded with his incest with the most beautiful, whom they call Rosa Vanozza. She bore him five kids.²⁴ Such are the glimpses of the bleak picture of the supremacy of the Pope, which in the future not just altered the destiny of Christianity, but also the fate of Religion in the premises of Europe.

Jameelah says that Protestant theology considers salvation is based upon the faith. It is only faith, which will grant salvation to humanity in the Hereafter, whereas noble deeds and moral values have nothing to do with redemption. Similarly, Jameelah says that Lutherans cut off the connection of ethics with Divine instructions. Thus, Lutherans were free to live as they deemed fit without having any reference to God. Protestant theology made religious faith a private matter of an individual in which religion has no role to play in communal life. The effect of this Protestant approach manifested itself in the Sunday attendance of the Church, and the rest of the week is set aside for mundane progress.²⁵

It was the unrestrained authority of the Church, which caused a reformation movement in the sixteenth century in the fullest sense. The Reformation prior to the sixteenth century existed in the work of St. Francis of Assisi, Valdes (founder of the Waldensians), Jan Hus, and John Wycliffe spoke against the different proportions of the church in the centuries before 1517. In the 16th century, Erasmus of Rotterdam, a great humanist scholar, was the master exponent of Catholic reform; he emphasized the Christ as the model of excellence. It was Martin Luther who took a firm stand against the sale of "indulgences" by Church. He presented his famous ninety-five theses in which he condemned the system of 'indulgences' and denied the authority of the pope over purgatory, and declared that the doctrine of the merits of the saints had no origin in the Bible. He demonstrated his belief in the sole say-so of the scripture, which is enough to get the 'justification' and faith, is the source of salvation not the Bishop of Rome.²⁶ Luther held that 'indulgence' had no importance and a poor man should expend his money on his bread and butter instead of purchasing the 'indulgence'. He propagated that a man who repents of his sins will get full remittance from his sins and guilt as well on the basis of his faith.²⁷ It was the reformation movement which laid the foundation of Protestantism in Christendom.

The Church of Rome rejected Luther's ninety-five theses, a Papal Bull was prepared against him in June 1520, and he was excommunicated by the Church of Rome. It was ordered to burn the books of Luther, and he should renounce his opinions. Luther instead of submitting to Papal Bull burnt it away and refused to retreat from his views and ideas. He was given the opportunity to clear his position in the Diet of Worms, but at the time of his attendance in the Worms, he refused to discard his opinions. He was declared a heretic by the Imperial Edict of Worms, yet he remained to save due to the backing of the

Elector of Saxony and the strong support of the public opinion. Afterwards, Luther spent nine months in the castle of Wartburg, thereon; he translated the New Testament from Greek to the German language, and this proved the beginning of his translation of the complete Bible, which left a great mark on the language and thought of German people.²⁸ Luther did not stop his efforts to spread his ideas among the masses even after the censure from the Church. Protestantism was a novice interpretation of Christendom. Basically, Protestantism was a religious movement, but gradually it transformed into a widespread movement. Protestantism left indelible marks on the history of Christendom; it was responsible to loosen the hold of religion on the public at large.²⁹ Lutheran interpretation of the Bible unbolted a new course for the laity, which severed the relations of the laity with the clergy.

Luther said that what separated him from past reformers was that they assaulted the life of the Church, while he went up against its teachings. While they condemned the transgressions of churchmen, he was baffled by the entire academic plan of redemption. The "Church" showed that man could offer reparations for his transgressions through confession and absolution in the sacrament of penance. Luther found that he couldn't recollect or even perceive the majority of his transgressions, and the endeavor to discard them one by one resembled attempting to cure smallpox by picking off the scabs. For sure, he trusted that the entire man was sick.³⁰ The central doctrines of Protestantism were against the precepts of the Catholic Church, which allege that every Christian receives the equal right of interpreting the Bible without the help of the church. The relationship between humankind and God has come to an end till the second arrival of Christ. No one holds the spiritual privilege to decide the societal status of any human being. Therefore, temporal success is also a mark of success in the Hereafter. Freedom, equality, and rationality became the social norms and values of Western civilization, as an upshot of the doctrines of Protestantism.³¹ At present, the time had ripened for Western civilization to set off the garb of religion, where the absence of spiritual authority did not allow any room for ethical and moral values to sustain a connection with transcendental guidance. Renaissance in the West was not the name of some single movement; rather it was the combination of revival and revolution in the different realms of human life. Reformation, Protestantism and the Industrial Revolution were part of the whole fabric which made possible the Renaissance in the West.

Renaissance

Christendom was the religion which was carried to the Western man in the middle ages. The dogmas which were taught to the Christian masses in the name of Christianity were not the original precepts of Jesus Christ.³² The Christian dogma of the Trinity was incomprehensible to the masses on a logical basis. The clergy had every right to interpret the Word of God. The laity had to

bank on the clergy for the performance of rituals, and the former had to confess their sins in front of later in order to get salvation. The term Holiness was special for the clergy. Asceticism was the spiritual extremism to attain spiritual or intellectual elevation by the renunciation of worldly pleasures. This dogma of asceticism inculcated the thought of the impracticality of religion. The impractical ethical and moral values like “unlimited forgiveness and patience” further confirmed the idea of the impracticality of religion among the Christian masses. After Saint Paul, the idea of the annulment of “Shariah” got popularity which infused the idea that sticking with the injunctions of religion is not indispensable. The dogma of “redemption” says that the crucifixion of Jesus gave deliverance to a man from sins. This dogma further elaborated this notion among the Christians that shunning sins is not necessary, since; salvation is readily available. A bird's eye view of the basic dogmas of Christianity makes a coherent depiction of the fact that the beliefs of Christendom created a bifurcation of clergy and laity. Therefore, four centuries ago Western intelligentsia revolted against Christendom. The Western intelligentsia was not ready to accept a religion which was against human reason. The Western intelligentsia and clergy conflicted with each other in both the realms of academia and politics. This conflict culminated in the defeat of clergy. The Western man accepted the notion of “rationality” as a basic value, and it became a general impression that human behavior must be predicated upon reason, not on religion; thus, it was the dawn of the Renaissance in the Western world.³³

Jameelah also shows a similar view regarding the torchbearers of “Enlightenment” who believed in human reason and science as the elements of human prosperity on the planet earth. They had a firm belief in the magical key to science, which can transform the earth into a virtual paradise. The proponents of the Renaissance were equally hopeful that liberty, social and economic parity together with universal peace would rule over the universe in the near future.³⁴ In fact, the Renaissance in Europe was the dominance of human reason, which is the core notion of Humanism. The Renaissance took a whole scale change in every realms of human affair in Western civilization. It established an end of the middle ages in Europe and embarked on a new era of enlightenment.

The “Renaissance” in Europe was the resurrection of the ancient Greek and Roman culture.³⁵ Hutton Webster is of the view that initially, the Renaissance started from the revival of classical art and culture. In addition, it was Italy, which proved the home of the Renaissance. It found broad acknowledgment and the most extreme improvement in Italy.³⁶ However, Lynn Thorndike does not seem to agree with the idea of the rebirth of classical culture in Italy, he reflects that many characteristics of modern civilization had already started in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.³⁷ The revival of classical culture in the fifteenth century introduced radical changes in Western civilization. It was

the birth period of Western civilization, which supplanted the dominance of Christendom in Western nations.

Critical Analysis and Conclusion

Jameelah's discourse focuses on the point that the civilization of medieval times had the dominant features of religion, whereas the modern Western civilization traces its genealogy from the pagan Greek and Roman civilization, and many Western scholars demonstrate the modern Western civilization as the rebirth of the "Graeco-Roman" civilization. Thus, modern civilization is distinct from the civilization of the middle ages in Europe. Modern Western civilization is the name of the revival of the "Graeco-Roman" culture in the West. Christianity played a critical role in the formation of modern Western civilization. It was a gap of a thousand years between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance, which is called by the name of the dark ages in the history of Europe. In the popular literature and mass media of Europe, the medieval ages of Europe have been branded as the age of ignorance and savagery. Before the advent of modern Western civilization, the Western people used the term of "Christendom" or the "European Civilization". Ruthless Papal authority in the medieval ages and the illogical twisted beliefs of Christianity are mainly responsible for the decline of Christendom in the West. Protestantism, which was started as the reformation movement and culminated in the Renaissance in Europe proved the last nail in the Coffin of Christendom. Protestantism detached man from the superhuman guidance. Nevertheless, Catholic Church claims her due share in the development of modern civilization, as many notions of the modern civilization, like; modern languages, classic literature, university framework, and science were present in the medieval times. The Renaissance or the Age of Reason in Europe inaugurated a new epoch of secularism, humanism, materialism, and Modernism. Now, modern man has lost the connection with God and employs the mechanical techniques of Science and technology for its material well-being, while religion has become an icon of superstition and ignorance across the globe. This attitude paved the way for an absolute materialistic society in Europe.

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