

# Religious Diversity in the Middle East and its impact on patterns of global Interaction

Ugwoegbu, Edmund Ugochukwu<sup>1</sup>, Umeh Lucy Chinwe<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Religion, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, United States

<sup>2</sup>Department of International Relations, Godfrey Okoye University, Thinkers Corner, Enugu State, Nigeria

**Abstract:** Religion has remained the key to understanding politics in the Middle East and it has a pronounced impact in the global society at large. The three monotheistic religion namely Christianity, Islam and Judaism originated in the Middle East with Islamic religion predominating. The estimated population of over 411 million includes 13 million Arab Migrants as of this year 2021 was 90% Muslims with religious diversity existing within the Islamic realm and also among the 10% of non-Muslims in the region. This study dissected religious diversity in Middle East using Structural Functionalism theory, documentary method and content analysis of varieties of religion which appears to be a regular feature of the modern complex society. It therefore discovered Middle East as the hub of conflict/terrorism due to its highly diversified nature when it comes to religion and the more diverse its religious population, the more violent its domestic conflict tend to be. However, it recommended that all the diverse religious population should embrace ecumenism and unification of the complex structures that will perform cordial functions of accommodation of the diverse religions in order to avert conflict among the difference religions that exist within the Middle East geographical area.

**Key Words:** Religious, Diversity, Muslims, Christianity, Judaism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The strife between Israel and Palestine today has been identified by scholars as a continuation of the ancient strife between Judaism and Islam.<sup>1</sup> Religion becomes therefore, a nuclear energy for the destruction of the minorities in the Middle East.

This study looks at Religious diversity in the Middle East and its patterns on global interaction. It's an effort to look at the various religious affiliations in the Middle East, and then how these affiliations have impacted positively or negatively in global interaction. Why people have clung to particular religions and how such religions have helped in cursing so much pain not only to the minorities in the region, but has put the world in a state of panic due to the proliferation of religious beliefs which are contrary to the acceptable standards of human existence. How Islamism has been misunderstood by so many and this act has led to the killing and destruction of particular sects who don't share such beliefs with such groups. Terrorism is a brain child of such groups like ISIS in Iraq, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, AL Qaeda in Palestine, Boko Haram in Nigeria and the likes, are

consequences of lose Islamic groups who failed to understand the true meaning of Islam. This study therefore, will look at these possibilities in order to justify how these impact on patterns of global interaction.

*Does Race play any role in the Middle East?*

History shows that the Middle East has been the junction or settling point of so many peoples and as such, the birthplace of so many religions and sects<sup>2</sup>. It was a region with considerable tolerance among its pluralistic sects until the fall of the Ottoman Empire (unification body before secession) in about 70years ago. This led to the rise of new nation states and for this diversity, the region collapsed into the present anomalies and conflicts. The inception of these independent nations gives rise to the severe threats and instabilities as witnessed in the Middle East today, in most cases between minorities and religious majorities.

Albert Hourani( 1961) traced the historical foundations of peoples' life in the Middle East beginning from the Ottoman's Empire to a present anchor, in his book: "*Race, Religion and Nationalism.*" He notes that, notwithstanding the diverse ethnic and religious affiliations, the conflicts then cannot be equated with what it is now. According to him: "Race has never had the importance it has had in the west because there has always tended to be a propensity for peoples to intermix, whether be Turks, Persians, Arabs, Mongols, etc."<sup>3</sup> He explains that race was not really an issue in the Middle East rather, Islam stresses religious affiliation which was key to distinguishing between peoples of the region. It was on the secondary level of ethnicity that conflicts in the Middle East came to resemble racial conflict elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

The Ottoman Empire delivered the *status quo* for a peaceful co-existence in the entire empire. A stable political order founded on religious affiliation though conforming to the Islamic model. Muslims were the majority; Islam becomes the state religion with the *Sultan* as the leader of *ummah* or

<sup>2</sup> James Clark, *Frequent Incompatibilities: Ethnic and Religious Diversity and the Nations of the Middle East*. Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, 22, no 1 and 2(2002), 36-42.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Hourani, *Race, Religion and the Nation State: A Vision of History* (Beirut: Khyat, 1961), 71.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 72( ethnicity defined as "communities of which members have shared a historical experience long and profound enough to give them a significant degree of identity: in language...in modes of thought and feeling, and in physical characteristics."

religious community. This approach allows the minorities to govern themselves accordingly, holding unto their religious rules.

Ernest Gellner, (1984) noted that a social anthropologist who has so many books on understanding of Muslim to his name explains that, it was the Ottoman's strength that eventually gave power to the *millets* (minorities) or quasi national communities<sup>5</sup>. During the Ottoman period, relationships collapsed over time leading religious communities into becoming independent nation states. At this point, inherited religious affiliation surpassed religious belief in importance, and the word *millets* gradually assumed the meaning of a nation.<sup>6</sup>

National sentiments gradually became part of the life of the states comprising the Ottoman Empire but not just the key factor. Other existing qualities different from religion were also noted like language, common ancestry, tribal affiliation, and the age long distinction drawn among the three major races of Islam: Turks, Persians, and Arabs<sup>7</sup>. These varied groups intermingled in the empire and had a mixture without much dangers.

*What led to the deterioration of the Ottoman Empire?*

The influx of western ideas caused the eventual deterioration of this empire and the eventual collapse. According to James Clark: "Nationalistic ideas migrated into the region with expatriates returning from studying in the West and flourished with the emergence of the new commercial and industrial classes which by nature of their occupations, had greater contact with Europeans<sup>8</sup>". This consequently led to thinking along Western lines, especially in terms of nationalism<sup>9</sup>. The crumbling of an empire which has seen to the life of its people for about 500 years becomes imminent at this point, as things fall apart and the center could no longer hold. The Greeks revolted in Wallachia and Moldavia in 1821, which ignited the fire of separation in the region, leading other non-Muslim groups in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to find their way. Serbia in 1878, Romania in same year and Bulgaria in 1908.

At the collapse of the empire, nationalist groups emerging as a result of this sorted for territorial boundaries and the likes. The founding of the nations no longer recognizes the minorities as it used to be, as culture and polity were congruent and minorities were absorbed, leading to expulsion, extinction and wiping as the case may be (Jews in Egypt, Turkey, Syria and the other parts of the middle east were dealt with) of the *millet* groups (Christians, Orthodox and Jews). The minorities were preyed upon by the larger Muslim

groups, leading to extermination and migration of many Jews, Orthodox Catholics, Coptic and other Christian groups.

There are a lot to talk about here but I have to keep to my page limits. I have to take a critical look at the religious diversities proper, having dug into the genesis of the point of discourse.

Religious Diversity in the Middle East.

It is true that in Middle East today, one boasts of a considerable number of Christians, nevertheless, the region is noted for its more Muslim affiliation. Some states already make it clear by identifying their nations as Islamic. The Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. According to Robert Lee and Lihi Ben Shitrit:

*By current convention, the word Islamic suggests direct inspiration from religion, as in Islamic ritual or Islamic art; Muslim states are those where the majority of citizens are Muslims, those who submit to God; and Islamists are those groups and individuals who invoke Islam in their pursuit of social and/or political ends, according to prevailing academic conventions. Writers often refer to the activities of Islamists as "political Islam," and call that fraction of Islamists who endorse the use of violence in their cause "radical Islamists." We will use "Islamists" to refer to Muslims who are committed to the social and political applications of Islam but label as "Islamic" the groups and associations they organize in the name of Islam.<sup>10</sup>*

This helps us understand the reference made to Muslims and that made to the religion itself. The population of the Middle East including North Africa as of 2011 was 90% Muslims, with about 322 million inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> Diversity exists within the Islamic realm and then the 10% of non-Muslims in the region.

The major divisions among Muslims of the Middle East is between the Sunni Muslim and the Shiite Muslims. This division dates to the controversy following the Prophet's death in 632A.D and the succession authority. The Shiites holds that leadership authority should have passed to the cousin of the Prophet Ali Ibn Talib, who was the husband of the Prophet's daughter Fatima. For the Shiites, it is only the descendants of Ali who have the right to leadership in the Islamic community (*umma*). Robert Lee writes:

*Prophet was succeeded by three other companions (Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman) before Ali became the caliph following the assassination of Uthman. Ali's reign was brief and violently contested. After Ali's assassination at the hands of a hardline*

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Gellner, Muslim Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Hourani, Race, 75.

<sup>7</sup> James Clark, 36-42.

<sup>8</sup> James Clark, 36

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Lee and Lihi Ben Shitrit, Religion, Society and Politics in the Middle East, op cit.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

*Muslim faction in 661, Muawiya, who had earlier waged a battle against Ali, came to power and established the Umayyad dynasty. Hussein, Ali's second son, led a rebellion against the Umayyads but was defeated and killed in 680 in the city of Karbala in Iraq, becoming a martyr honored by Shiites to this day. Shiites believe that select descendants of Ali called imams were deprived of their rightful claim to leadership by the ruling dynasties that have held power over the Muslim world since the death of Ali. In the Twelver version of Shiite doctrine, the twelfth imam, al-Mahdi, is believed to have gone into a state of occultation—a temporary absence or disappearance—in 874 and is expected to return to reign over the umma in future<sup>12</sup>.*

It is therefore very clear that Islam in itself has so many issues to be sorted out. The violence notable in Islam is not a new thing rather an inherent challenge faced by the religion itself.

For the Sunnis, they claim to have followed the *Sunna* (the life and righteousness of the prophet and his companions). They accept the three successors of the prophet and the others who does not have any blood relationship with Muhammad. The greater percentage of the Muslims in the Middle East today are *Sunnis* except in countries like Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain who have a more pluralistic Shiite population. The Twelvers are more in Shiism while the other smaller sects found in the middle Easter Islamism are, Ismailis, Zaidis who have a different interpretation of the imamate doctrine. Others are the ruling Alawites in Syria, the Alevis in Turkey who combine both Shiite and Sunni traditions. Robert Lee has this more to say:

*There are four main schools of Islamic jurisprudence that represent the diversity of interpretive traditions in the region: sThe Hanafi, Shafii, Maliki, and Hanbali schools. Sufism constitutes an important tendency within both Sunni and Shiite versions of Islam, further diversifying religious practice; it offers a more mystical approach to religious experience and focuses on prayer, meditation, and ecstatic rituals that are meant to induce closeness with God. Sufism's syncretic ability to draw on local, non-Islamic traditions has made it especially popular in Asia and Africa, and has helped the spread of Islam in these regions.<sup>13</sup>*

The history of the plurality of Islam in the Middle East is such a controversial one, but the key argument is that Both Sunni and Shiite trace their roots to Muhammad. The Middle East nevertheless have about 80% of Sunnis to Its credit.

With Arab exoduses to the west, north and south, the territories occupied by non-Muslims like Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians and other polytheistic groups, the Byzantine Empire and Sasanian Iran, were all suppressed by the growing number of Muslims through high birth rate and invasion. Much of today's religious diversity in the Middle East including North Africa is a result of the pre-Islamic religious demography of the region.<sup>14</sup> The Muslim regimes at first tried to allow the minorities practice their faith. Nevertheless, they were expected to pay poll taxes to the government, and their worship places must be small as compared to Muslim worship places. They were not actually given their freedom as they became second class citizens and do not enjoy enough accommodation as the other citizens.

Opposition to Zionism in twentieth and twenty first centuries saw heavy attacks on Jews who were expunged from Muslim dominated areas in the Middle East. The Jewish communities in Syria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya have all disappeared.

*Many emigrated to Israel, others to some other countries as majority were also killed. Today the Jewish community of Egypt consists of fewer than 200 individuals. In Morocco, the largest Jewish community in an Arab country counts only about 3,000 to 4,000 members. Non-Arab Iran and Turkey retain larger Jewish communities—about 20,000 each—but their size and influence relative to the wider populations are minuscule. The creation of Israel and subsequent waves of Jewish immigration from Europe and Russia have, however, increased the total number of Jews in the region. There are currently 5.7 million Jews in the state of Israel<sup>15</sup>.*

Christians in the Middle East also suffer from persecutions and so many have emigrated today. In Egypt, Coptic Christians are about 8-10%, and in Lebanon, Maronite Christians are about 20-25% of the population including other smaller Christian sects. Generally in the middle East, there is a considerable number of Christians ( Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Protestant Groups) while other religions like Budhism, Druze, Baha'is, Hinduism maintain small presence in the region.

*How does this mode of operation impact on global interaction today?*

Reading through history, one notes a lot of reasons why some Muslims find it very difficult to co habit with people of different religions in a world of religious diversity. Effort at the extermination of non-Islamic religious groups is still a concept been undertaken by few Muslims today. Religious diversity therefore impacts on global interaction in so many ways but this study will focus on two major areas of concern

<sup>12</sup> ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

in our world today: The high rate of terrorism and the high rate of emigration from the Middle East.

#### *Terrorism:*

On the 11 of September 2001, the United States witnessed an attack at the world trade center in New York which remains a point of reference in the United States effort in fighting terrorism in the world. The attack was attributed to Osama Bin Laden and his terrorist group who vowed to keep the United States and Its citizens restless due to the key role they play in international politics. So many accolades went to them from other terrorist groups promising the U.S and the rest of the infidels, a restless life.

For this attack and considering all past attacks on Christians and government regimes who had openings to the West which was as the case maybe, an unwanted situation by extremist Muslims, the UN and Its member states needed a strategy in order to put global terrorism to a stop. The Bush administration proclaimed a doctrine of preemption as a core part of its administration. A situation where suspected rogue or terrorist groups are attacked once the signs are obvious that they will be attacking either Muslim groups or non-Muslim groups, whether it is in the United States or elsewhere. Evidence of their existence at any point is enough to ignite strikes against such groups. This is one of the reasons why Iraq was attacked because of suspicion that Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. At the end, they never had it but Hussein for pride and protection of his sovereignty, could not negate the accusations leading to the invasion of Iraq. The War actually is not justified and is still under criticism from so many quarters. Efforts are being made so that these terrorists are not able to reach out to uranium and the likes which could help them manufacture weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

In order to quell terrorism and the likes, the United Nations Security Council in late 2001 proposed a new doctrine which will help to protect citizens from wicked Islamic regimes, who by fighting the West tend to rubbish their citizens. This new doctrine is called "The Responsibility to Protect," which teaches that UN member states have a responsibility to protect the lives, liberty, and basic human rights of their citizens, and that if they fail or are unable to carry it out, the international community has a responsibility to step in<sup>16</sup>. In line for this R2P, another principle was proposed which deals directly with terrorism and governments who does not have internal checks. This doctrine is called: "The Duty to Prevent," this is because such states continue in the proliferation of wmd which is a threat to global peace. Countries like Iran, Iraq, were key players in the UN checks. These groups can provide access to terrorist groups, it is gravest when the states pursuing wmd are closed societies headed by rulers who menace their own

citizens as much as they do their neighbors and potential adversaries<sup>17</sup>.

The duty to prevent seeks to control the proliferation of WMD and people who acquire them. It calls on the international community, to act early in order to be effective and develop a menu of potential measures aimed at particular governments and finally, it should be exercised collectively, through a global or regional organization.<sup>18</sup> Terrorism as a consequent of religious extremism has rocked the world and rocking the world now.

In 1998, the United States Embassy in Kenya was attacked and on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2015, a Kenyan University was attacked by Al-Shabaab, a franchise group of Al Qaeda killing 147 Christian students. It is still same target, like in the Middle East, to extinguish other religious groups from the rest of the world. Al Qaeda battles in Palestine and there are always attacks upon attacks on Israel, though the fight leaves them more vulnerable. In Nigeria, Boko Haram has become a trade mark parading its wickedness in Churches, Public places, Mosques and so on without stress. ISIS in the Middle East has butchered more Christians than ever in that part of the world, leading to excessive emigration of Christians to Europe. We keep counting? On the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2015, 21 Coptic Catholics were shown been slaughtered in a video purportedly done in a river near Tripoli<sup>19</sup>. These are sad stories consequent to the diversity of religious affiliations and the understanding of these Jihadist groups, not just from the Middle East but the world at large. It has actually made so many people today, not excluding Muslims to associate Islamism with violence.

#### *Emigration.*

The attitude of the majority Muslims in the Islam dominated Middle East opens doors to the minority religious groups who have become preys to the larger community to run for their lives. Emigration from history has been the attribute to the minorities in the Middle East especially after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. It is still the present scenario as Christians in the Middle East are persecuted and rights to their religious affiliations have been denied them.

In Syria for example, Mount Lebanon is presented as the meeting point where Christians and Muslims in seventeenth century confronted themselves, leading to high exodus of Christians to Egypt, Europe and others, United States. The story is not different today as Christians persecuted in Syria and Iraq exile to Europe and some to America. The problem is not emigrating, but how to emigrate as Christians are targets and if you cannot renounce, you will be denounced and put to death as an infidel. There is a clarion call therefore, by the Church to all governments for an open arms in providing homes and shelters for immigrants from different parts of the

<sup>16</sup> Lee Feinstein and Anne-Marie Slaughter, A Duty to Prevent. Foreign Affairs journal, January/February, 2004, 137.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

world. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of September, 2015, Pope Francis addresses Hispanic Immigrants and other immigrants from the rest of the world in United States, telling them not to be discouraged notwithstanding the oppression from certain world leaders. He pleads for an open arm in receiving immigrants, pointing to the fact that he was once an immigrant having his roots from Italy but raised in Argentina. All these said, it is nevertheless, very challenging in dealing with immigrants as they affect the general life of the receptive government.

#### *Few challenges as a result of emigration.*

British immigrant diversity is used to explore the problems of emigration as a consequence of religious diversity in the Middle East and the world at large. Peter Ackroyd's (2017) noted that the monumental London describes the city, as a city of assorted immigrants<sup>20</sup>. According to him, since the early 1990s, there has been a considerable increase of immigrants in the UK. For this reason, one of the key challenges is that the immigration acts had to be upgraded in order to accommodate new immigrants. A notable increase in the number of people from crisis zones seeking Asylum needed to be addressed in order to appropriate these fellows. The Asylum and Immigration Acts of 1993, 1996, 1999, the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, the Asylum and Immigration Act 2004 and the Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Bill 2005<sup>21</sup>. These amendments and adjustments are because of the proliferation of immigrants into the UK.

The net inflows of people into the UK since 1994 till date has been terrific. In the early 1990s, it used to be a maximum out flow but presently, due to strife and crisis situations, there is an inflow of people into the UK. Annually, immigrants to Britain were at 171,000, but in 2000, it reduced to about 151,000 people. In 2003 and 2004, there was an increase to about 222,600. Statistics records that in 2004, there were about 2,857,000<sup>22</sup> immigrants in UK without British passports and who were born outside Britain.

Migration therefore poses great challenges to individual States but nevertheless, it is important for such immigrants to be appropriated and accommodated in all States. The above statistics, not negating food for these immigrants, serve as an example to what the rest of the nation's suffer in order to incorporate immigrants who run for their lives from cruel and extreme Islamist groups.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted structural functionalism theory propounded by Almond Gabriel in the 1970s as framework for analysis. Structural Functionalism is employed as a theoretical framework so that possible ways of survival of a system can be discovered. The analysis is primarily directed towards the

amount of change at the structural level that a system can accommodate in order to foster cooperation and progress with a society.

#### *Application of the Theory*

Varma (1975, p.46) opined that, structure refers to those arrangements within the system which perform the functions. A single function may be fulfilled by a complex combination of structures, just as any given structural arrangement may perform functions which might have different kinds of consequences for the structure

Varma (1975, p.46) opined that, structure refers to those arrangements within the system which perform the functions. A single function may be fulfilled by a complex combination of structures, just as any given structural arrangement may perform functions which might have cordial kinds of consequences for the structures.

Since Middle East is highly diversified in religion with different clashing structures and functions, it is now very necessary to try unification of this structures via ecumenism, where Christianity as a religious structure will have to accommodate Muslims and Judaism irrespective of their differing faith and Muslims with their largest population in the Middle East will do same to the other two religions. This will simply yield a complex combination of structural arrangements that will perform cordial functions that will avert conflict of one religion terrorizing the instead it will accommodate every religions faith.

## III. CONCLUSION

The world is too large to accommodate all humans no matter your religious affiliation. The attitudes and actions of some groups in the name of religion cannot be entertained again. It is the function of all humans to make sure that doors are closed to terrorism which is an extremist way of showcasing religion.

The government of the UN needs our collaborative support in the fight against terrorism especially through vigilant watch in order to put a stop to proliferation of the materials for weapons of mass destruction. The world powers who presently have such equipment like, United States, Russia, France, China, and United Kingdom and then, India and Pakistan are on check and cannot use them again. Apart from these, the proliferation treaty suggests and holds that nations are no longer allowed to reach out to these materials enabling to weapons as they are dangerous. In the communality of our existence, we need to stand as checks to the proliferation of these materials as terrorists' clamor for them as a weapon to deal with adversaries. States are called to fortify their borders as these materials could be smuggled across borders. There is a massive need for hypertechnology machines for detecting fissile materials.

In line with this, we need to extend open arms to emigrating brothers and sisters from other parts of the world, knowing

<sup>20</sup> Steven Vertovec, Super Diversity and Its implications, Ethnic and Racial Studies (2007) 30:6, 1024-1054.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

that the world is large enough for us. We need to encourage Love of neighbor above all else.

Finally, this study looked at Religious diversity in the Middle East and its impact on patterns of global interaction. It's an effort to look at the various religious affiliations in the Middle East and then how these affiliations have impacted positively or negatively in global interaction. Why people have clung to particular religions and how such religions have helped in cursing so much pain, not only to the minorities in the region, but has put the world in a state of panic due to the proliferation of religious beliefs which are contrary to the acceptable standards of human existence. How Islamism has been misunderstood by so many and thus leading to the killing and destruction of particular sects who don't share such beliefs with such groups. Terrorism is a brain child of such groups like ISIS in Iraq, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, AL Qaeda in Palestine, Boko Haram in Nigeria and the likes, are all consequences of lose Islamic groups who failed to understand the true meaning of Islam. This study therefore, had a good conversation at these possibilities in order to justify how these impact on patterns of global interaction.

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