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<u>Role of Christianity in Medieval Racism</u>

Christianity is a religion that is based on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. It is one of the three Abrahamic faiths, along with Judaism and Islam, and is monotheistic, meaning that it believes in only one God. In the present day, Christian philosophy emphasizes the idea of God's love, as well as respect and equality among people. However, during the European Middle Ages, Christianity was often used to justify social hierarchies and unequal treatment of different groups. This led to a lack of equality and social mobility within medieval European society. For instance, St. Augustine of Hippo, a prominent Church Father at the time, maintained that non-Christians were inferior and that slavery was an inherent part of the social structure.

Therefore, to explore how Christianity was a driving force in the racism scene during the Middle Ages, I will examine Geraldine Heng's "Race and Racism in the European Middle Ages" and the medieval Christian knightly romance, "The King of Tars" as my main sources. I will pay particular attention to how the medieval notion that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus led to their demonization and tagging with derogatory names, as well as how The King of Tars' frequent use of epithets like **"[1]hound**" to refer to black people had a significant impact on racial prejudices against people of color.

Middle-age Christian rulers were against marriages between people of different religions or races, which helped spread racism. *The King of Tars* romance, for example, recounts an angry reaction from the King when the Sultan of Damascus proposes marrying the King's daughter where he vows that;

> *"By He who died on the cross,*
> *I would sooner shed my heart's blood,*
> *And be killed in battle.*
> *I will never give her to a Muslim,*
> *For all the land I rule.*
> *Let the devil sooner hang him!"*[2] ***(King of Tars 40-45)***

It is noteworthy that the Sultan was forbidden from marrying the King's daughter only because of his race and religion. Although the King of Tars had the absolute power to choose the most suitable suitor for his daughter, this choice shouldn't have been made based on prejudice against certain races and religions as is clearly the case here. This outright act of hatred directed towards the Sultan because of his religion and skin color is evidence that medieval Christian doctrines on marriage encouraged racism.

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[1]Anonymous. "The King of Tars." Trans. Blake Hahn. Global Medieval Sourcebook. http://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/king-tars. Retrieved on November 28, 2022. Line 94,169,423,440,448,743,1097,1176,1178
[2]Anonymous. "The King of Tars." Trans. Blake Hahn. Global Medieval Sourcebook. http://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/king-tars. Retrieved on November 28, 2022.

In medieval times, non-Christians were expected to clearly identify themselves by the clothing they wore. In her book, "Race and Racism in the European Middle Ages," Geraldine Heng discusses the **Canon 68 decree,** which mandated that all Muslims and Jews wear distinctive clothing to identify them as such; this decree later became legislation in England known as the "Badge of Shame." As a means of humiliation, it was also a tangible mark—typically a piece of clothing—that was handed to criminals and other miscreants. This meant that in the eyes of Christians at that time, Jews, Muslims, and criminals were all seen as the same, and were not treated with any distinction. In addition, Jews were also prohibited from living among Christians through the **Statute of Jewry**, which created residential enclaves in 1275 that marked the start of the **ghetto.** As a result, Jews were not only robbed of their dignity but also of the right to proper housing. All these cases demonstrate how Christians' sense of superiority over Jews and Muslims drove them to engage in racist behavior.

Middle Ages Christians like Bernard of Clairvaux legalized the murder of Jews. He did this by writing the **Rule for the Order of Templars**, which is documented in Geraldine Heng's "Race and Racism in European Middle Ages." According to the decree, the killing of Jews was malicide rather than homicide, and their extermination was advantageous for society because it is analogous to purging the world of the devil. Jews consequently became simple prey for massacres inspired by extreme ideologies, and many were subjected to horrendous treatment in concentration camps. This highlights how the most repressive kinds of oppression were made legitimate by radical Christian views, creating a ubiquitous environment of racism.

In Ramey Lynn's "Black Legacies", Ramey discusses the risk of inter-religious marriages in medieval times and applies **Isidore's theory[6]** to suggest that "*the reproduction between a Christian and a Saracen[5] or Jew could cause unforeseen consequences[4]*". This mindset is reminiscent of the intense disapproval of interfaith and interracial relationships that predominated in the Middle Ages when most Christians feared the ramifications of such unions and devalued persons of other races and religions. Theories at the time that claimed interfaith marriages would have unintended hazards and implications fueled this anxiety. As a result, the fear of being cursed encouraged xenophobia and animosity toward religions other than Christianity, which largely contributed to the emergence of racism. Racism was also fostered by the Church of Rome, which preached that non-Christians were inherently inferior to humans and should be treated no differently than animals. This created a climate of fear and suspicion toward people of other religions, which eventually gave rise to a form of spiritual racism.

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[4]Obtained from Ramey, Lynn T.. *Black Legacies : Race and the European Middle Ages*, University Press of Florida, 2014. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cornell/detail.action?docID=1811743. Created from cornell on 2022-11-29 03:38:08.

[5]Saracean- "During the Early Middle Ages, the term "Saracens" became associated with the Arab tribes. The earliest known reference to the use of this term in relation to Islam dates back to the 7th century, in a Greek-language Christian document called the Doctrina Jacobi. This paper mentions the Saracens in the context of their religious beliefs and practices." Source: https://en.turkcewiki.org/wiki/Saracen

[6]**"Judicium dei"** is the judgment of God. Early Saxon and English law impiously reached the judgments on trials by ordeal, by physical combats etc. It was believed that the accused, if innocent, will be exculpated through divine intervention. Innocence was established if the "trial" produced no evidence of injury https://definitions.uslegal.com/j/judiciumdei/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CJudicium%20dei%E2%80%9D%20is%20the%20judgment,produced%20no%20evidence%20of%20injury.

There is a long history in medieval Christian literature of stereotyping members of racial minorities as devil worshippers and unfit for heaven. Think of "The Prioress Tale" by Geoffrey Chaucer as an illustration. A young Christian boy is murdered by Jews, and the tale chronicles the Virgin Mary exacting her vengeance on the boy's murderers. The story furthers the stereotype of Jews as violent, dishonest people by presenting them in a negative light. This stereotypical depiction of Jews, in which the devil's imagined mixing with Jewish culture serves as the pinnacle, has been around for a long time. Geoffrey Chaucer writes that the devil dwells in Jewish hearts and may give Jews orders on what to do;

"Our first foe, the serpent Satan, That has his wasp's nest in Jews' hearts[3].

At that time, seeing a Jew meant looking directly into the face of the devil, who needed to be cast out. This was the result of these perverse tales, and it strengthens my claim that Christian literature was really a factor in medieval racism.

The depiction of Jews in artwork commissioned by the church throughout the Middle Ages has been accused of fostering prejudice and antisemitism for centuries. Such artwork portrayed Jews as members of a race that "serves the devil," complete with horns, bulging eyes, and other attributes associated with Satan. These baseless claims incited anti-Semitism and laid the groundwork for numerous contemporary prejudices about Jews. The aim of these caricatures was to persuade others that Jews were wicked, thus justifying their mistreatment and exclusion. In addition, they were meant to instill dread and urge people to avoid Jews, thereby reducing the possibility of coalitions between Jews and non-Jews. Evidently, the church's efforts to spread antisemitism and racism were successful, as evidenced by the fact that Jews were persecuted and killed for centuries. This claim is backed up by Anthony Bailey in his book, **"*Representing and Misrepresenting Jews in Medieval Culture*,"** where he speaks of, *"In the Tring Tiles, a ceramic narrative of the childhood of Jesus made in England around 1300, the "Jewish" detractors have a range of crooked noses. And in the famous Holkham Bible Picture Book (London, British Library Add. MS 47682) of about 1325, the Jewish face appears in a variety of profile forms, often with a bulbous, bent, or snub nose (as in this example of Jesus debating with the Pharisees and Sadducees). And yet, at the time the Stammheim Missal was produced, it would be hard to prove there was a stable idea or stereotype of the Jewish nose—it would be more accurate to say that the bent or misshapen nose was a sign of sin, violence, and ugliness. The crooked nose allies Death with demons or the devil, as in the striking images from the St Alban's Psalter (London, British Library Arundel Ms 157, fol. 5v and fol. 6r) of the Temptation of Christ. This devil has similar features to Death, but is not "Jewish.[9]""*

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[3]*Obtained fromChaucer, Geoffrey, The Prioress' Prologue and Tale. (n.d.) Retrieved November 21, 2022, from https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/prioress-prologue-and-tale, line 558-560*

In conclusion, it is undeniably true that racism was brought about by a variety of circumstances, but one of the primary fuels to the fire was Christianity.

[9] Antony Bailey, Representing and misrepresenting Jews in medieval culture. Getty. (n.d.). Retrieved December12, 2022, from https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/outcasts/downloads/bale_misrepresenting_jews.pdf,pp2

In the Middle Ages, Christians were typically portrayed as the superior race. One example of this is seen in the King of Tars when the King and the Sultan of Damascus fight together to defeat the Muslims. It is striking how the author glorifies the decapitation of devout Muslims who had refused to convert to Christianity.

"There were captured thirty-thousand
Muslims both dark and black
And shut up in his prison.
They who would renounce his faith,
He let them become Christian men
With pious devotion;
They who would not be baptized
Were brought to a station
A mile outside of the town,
And Chrisitan men, without delay
*Struck off every one of their heads."[10]***(King of Tars 1225-1235)**

This was also evident in the crusades, as Christians sought to reclaim and defend the "Holy Land", often using violence and aggression against people of other races along the way. As a result, Christians in the Middle Ages typically developed a sense of supremacism and were indoctrinated to believe that they were superior to other, races. This claim is backed up in one of my secondary sources, *Black Legacies; Medieval epic abounds with examples of Christian right doing battle with pagan wrong.[7] To follow the logic of the epic, one would expect that in the epic battle of the seed, children would take after their Christian parent, showing the superior strength of the Christian seed— and thus Christian thought— over the Jewish or Muslim seed.[9]*

In his book "Representing and Misrepresenting Jews in Medieval Culture," Anthony Bailey suggests that Christians in the European Middle Ages were responsible for the mistreatment of Jews. Bailey argues that an intense anti-Jewish campaign was fueled by the depiction of Jews as being present at the Crucifixion and central to Christian devotion and practice. This idea is similar to the one presented in Geraldine Heng's book "Race and Racism in the European Middle Ages," which discusses the belief that Jews had a desire for Christian blood and that this may have stemmed from the idea that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus Christ. As a result, it is difficult to deny that Christianity played a role in the racial violence committed by Christians who saw themselves as being on a mission of 'payback' or 'sanctification.'

In conclusion, there are many ways that Christianity and racism interacted in the Middle Ages. While certain components of religion may be used to justify racism, others of Christian teachings and beliefs offered a chance to advance racial equality. The doctrines and practices of the Church at the time undoubtedly contributed to the spread of racism. However, the emphasis that Christianity places on interconnectedness, the fact that all people are one in Christ, and the obligation to love one's neighbor served as a basis for the advancement of anti-racism and the growth of solidarity among individuals from various racial origins. All things considered, Christianity did have a part in fostering racism in medieval times, and this paper has supplied facts since, as the saying goes, "A History written in blood cannot be erased by lies written in ink."

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[7]Ramey, Lynn T.. *Black Legacies : Race and the European Middle Ages*, University Press of Florida, 2014. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cornell/detail.action?docID=1811743.
Created from cornell on 2022-11-29 04:02:55.
[10]Anonymous. "The King of Tars." Trans. Blake Hahn. Global Medieval Sourcebook. http://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/king-tars. Retrieved on November 28, 2022.