

The Case for the Crusades¹

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INTRODUCTION: A POPULAR NARRATIVE

In the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center by Muslim terrorists, frequent mention was made of the Crusades as a basis for Islamic fury. It was argued that Muslim bitterness over their mistreatment by the Christian West can be dated back to 1096 when the First Crusade set out for the Holy Land. Far from being motivated by piety or by concern for the safety of pilgrims and the holy places in Jerusalem, it is widely believed that the Crusades were but the first extremely bloody chapter in a long history of brutal European colonialism.

More specifically: that the Crusaders marched east, not out of idealism, but in pursuit of lands and loot; that the Crusades were promoted “by power-mad popes” seeking to greatly expand Christianity through conversion of the Muslim masses² and thus the Crusades constitute “a black stain on the history of the Catholic Church;” that the knights of Europe were barbarians who brutalized everyone in their path, leaving “the enlightened Muslim

culture ... in ruins.”³ As Akbar Ahmed, Chair of Islamic studies at American University in Washington, DC, suggested: “the Crusades created a historical memory which is with us today—the memory of a long European onslaught.”⁴

Two months after the attack on New York City, former president Bill Clinton informed an audience at Georgetown University that “Those of us who come from various European lineages are not blameless” vis-à-vis the Crusades as a crime against Islam, and then he summarized a medieval account about all the blood that was shed when Godfrey of Bouillon and his forces conquered Jerusalem in 1099. That the Crusades were a crime in great need of atonement was a popular theme even before the Islamic terrorists crashed their hijacked airliners. In 1999, the *New York Times* had solemnly proposed that the Crusades were comparable to Hitler’s atrocities or to the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.⁵ Also in 1999, to mark the 900th anniversary of the Crusader conquest of Jerusalem, hundreds of devout Protestants took part in a “Reconciliation Walk” that began in Germany and ended in the Holy Land. Along the way the walkers wore T-shirts bearing the message “I apologize” in Arabic. Their official statement explained the need for a Christian apology:

Nine hundred years ago, our forefathers carried the name of Jesus Christ in battle across the Middle East. Fueled by fear, greed, and hatred ... the Crusaders lifted the banner of the Cross above your people ... On the anniversary of the First Crusade ... we wish to retrace the footsteps of the Crusaders in apology for their deeds ... We deeply regret the atrocities committed in the name of Christ by our predecessors. We renounce greed, hatred and fear, and condemn all violence done in the name of Jesus Christ.⁶

And, of course, in February 2016, in response to criticisms of his unwillingness to identify recent terrorist attackers as Muslims, President Barack Obama said to those attending the National Prayer Breakfast: “And lest we get on our high horse and think this is unique to some other place, remember during the Crusades ... people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ.”

A LONGSTANDING NARRATIVE

These are not new charges. Western condemnations of the Crusades originated in the “Enlightenment,” that utterly misnamed era during which French and

British intellectuals invented the “Dark Ages” in order to glorify themselves and vilify the Church. Hence, Voltaire (1694-1778) called the Crusades an “epidemic of fury which lasted for two hundred years and which was always marked by every cruelty, every perfidy, every debauchery, and every folly of which human nature is capable.”⁷ According to David Hume (1711-1776) the Crusades were “the most signal and most durable monument to human folly that has yet appeared in any age or nation.”⁸ Denis Diderot (1713-1784) characterized the Crusades as “a time of the deepest darkness and of the greatest folly ... to drag a significant part of the world into an unhappy little country in order to cut the inhabitants’ throats and seize a rocky peak which was not worth one drop of blood.”⁹ These attacks reinforced the widespread “Protestant conviction that crusading was yet another expression of Catholic bigotry and cruelty.”¹⁰ But the notion that the Crusaders were early western imperialists who used a religious excuse to seek land and loot probably was originated by Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), who claimed that the Crusaders really went in pursuit of “mines of treasures, of gold and diamonds, of palaces of marble and jasper, and of odoriferous groves of cinnamon and frankincense.”¹¹

During the twentieth century, Gibbon’s thesis was developed into a quite elaborate “materialist” account of why the Crusades took place.¹² As summed up by Hans Mayer, the Crusades alleviated a severe financial squeeze on Europe’s “knightly class.” According to Mayer and others who share his views, at this time there was a substantial and rapidly growing number of “surplus” sons, members of noble families who would not inherit and whom the heirs found it increasingly difficult to provide with even modest incomes. Hence, as Mayer put it, “the Crusade acted as a kind of safety valve for the knightly class ... a class which looked upon the Crusade as a way of solving its material problems.”¹³ Indeed, a group of American economists recently proposed that the Crusaders hoped to get rich from the flow of pilgrims (comparing the shrines in Jerusalem to modern amusement parks) and that the pope sent the Crusaders east in pursuit of “new markets” for the church, presumably to be gained by converting people away from Islam.¹⁴ The prolific Geoffrey Barraclough wrote: “our verdict on the Crusades [is that the knightly settlements established in the East were] centers of colonial exploitation.”¹⁵ It is thus no surprise that a leading college textbook on Western Civilization informs students that “From the perspective of the pope and European monarchs, the crusades offered a way to rid Europe of

contentious young nobles ... [who] saw an opportunity to gain territory, riches, status, possibly a title, and even salvation.”¹⁶ Or, as the popular writer Karen Armstrong confided, these “were our first colonies.”¹⁷

Thus, it is the accepted myth that during the Crusades: *an expansionist, imperialistic Christendom brutalized, looted, and colonized a tolerant and peaceful Islam.*

A DIFFERENT NARRATIVE

These claims have been utterly refuted by a group of distinguished contemporary historians.¹⁸ They propose that the Crusades were precipitated by Islamic provocations, by many centuries of bloody attempts to colonize the West, and by sudden new attacks on Christian pilgrims and holy places. Although the Crusades were initiated by a plea from the pope, this had nothing to do with hopes of converting Islam. Nor were the Crusades organized and led by surplus sons, but by the heads of great families who were fully aware that the costs of crusading would far exceed the very modest material rewards that could be expected—most went at immense personal cost, some of them knowingly bankrupting themselves to go. For example, Godfrey of Bouillon sold the entire province of Verdun and also heavily mortgaged his province of Bouillon to finance his participation. Moreover, the Crusader kingdoms that the knights established in the Holy Land, and which stood for two centuries, were not sustained by local exactions, but required immense subsidies from Europe. In addition, it is utterly unreasonable to impose modern notions about proper military conduct on medieval warfare—both Christians and Muslims observed quite different rules of war. Even so, the Crusaders were not nearly as brutal or bloodthirsty as they have been portrayed. Finally, claims that Muslims have been harboring bitter resentments about the Crusades for a millennium are nonsense—Muslim antagonism about the Crusades did not appear until about 1900 in reaction against the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the onset of actual European colonialism in the Middle East.

Now for the details.

Provocations

Muslims began raiding Christian areas in the lifetime of Muhammad. Then, a year after his death, Muslim invasions began in earnest when their forces

entered Syria, then a Christian province of the Eastern Roman Empire. Muslim forces soon won a series of battles, taking Damascus and some other cities in 635, and by 636 the Byzantine army was forced to abandon Syria. Next the Arabs marched into the Holy Land—Jerusalem was taken in 638, Caesarea Maritima in 640. From there Muslim armies invaded Christian Egypt, taking Cairo; Alexandria fell to them in 642. A major Muslim Empire now ruled most of the Middle East and was spreading along the North African Coast—then a major Christian region. Thirty years later the Empire stretched past Tangier and reached the Atlantic. By 714 much of Spain was occupied. Soon major thrusts were made into France before the Franks managed to repel the Muslim forces in 732 at Tours, little more than 100 miles south of Paris. In 831 Muslim forces invaded Sicily and held it until 1072, and in 846 they sacked Rome and then withdrew to rule over southern Italy for the next two centuries. Thus, by the time of the First Crusade, Christendom had been fighting a defensive war with Islam for more than 450 years!

It seems very odd that those who are so vociferous about the misery and injustice imposed by Europeans on their former colonial empires, fail to admit any such consequences of Muslim imperialism. But, in fact, Muslims were brutal and intolerant colonialists. In any event, the Crusades were fundamentally defensive and it is against this general background of chronic and longstanding western grievances that the very specific provocations for the Crusades must be considered. These involved the destruction of, and threat to, holy places in Jerusalem and the murder, torture, enslavement, robbery, and general harassment of Christian pilgrims.

In 1009, at the direction of Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim, Muslims destroyed the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem—the splendid basilica that Constantine had erected over what was believed to be the site of the tomb where Christ lay before the Resurrection. Worse yet, the Muslims attempted to destroy the tomb itself, leaving only traces of the hollow in the rocks. As word of the desecration of the holiest of all Christian shrines reached Europe, it prompted considerable anger and concern among the informed elites. But the crisis soon passed because Al-Hakim was assassinated and some semblance of religious tolerance was restored in Jerusalem, thus permitting resumption of the substantial flow of Christian pilgrims. Indeed, the value of the pilgrim traffic probably was the primary factor in the very liberal policies that had prevailed in Muslim-controlled Jerusalem through

the centuries. Despite the great distances involved and the limited means of transportation, pilgrimages to Jerusalem were surprisingly common. In the first of his famous three volumes on the Crusades, Sir Steven Runciman reported “an unending stream of travellers poured eastward, sometimes travelling in parties numbering thousands, men and women of every age and every class, ready...to spend a year or more on the [journey].”¹⁹ A major reason for going to the Holy Land was the belief that a pilgrimage would absolve even the most terrible sins. Thus, many pilgrims came all the way from Scandinavia—some even from Iceland. As Runciman explained, the Norse “were violent men, frequently guilty of murder and frequently in need of an act of penance.”²⁰

But then, later in the eleventh century, everything changed again. The Seljuk Turks, recent converts to Islam, became the new rulers of Asia Minor, pushing to within 100 miles of Constantinople. Perhaps because they were new to Islam, or perhaps because they were still semi-nomadic tribesmen untainted by city-dwelling, the Turks were unflinchingly intolerant. There was only One True God and his name was Allah, not Yahweh or Jehovah. Not that the Turks officially prohibited Christian pilgrimages, but they made it clear that Christians were fair game. Hence, every Anatolian village along the route to Jerusalem began to exact a toll on Christian travelers. Far worse, many pilgrims were seized and sold into slavery while others were tortured, often seemingly for entertainment. Those who survived these perils “returned to the West weary and impoverished, with a dreadful tale to tell.”²¹

Anger and anxiety about the Holy Land continued to grow. It is important to understand just how vivid was the image of the Holy Land to sincere medieval Christians. It was where Christ and the disciples had lived, and to an almost palpable degree still did. In the words of Robert Payne, in Palestine Christians “expected to find holiness in a concrete form, something that could be seen, touched, kissed, worshipped, and even carried away. Holiness was in the pathways trodden by Christ, in the mountains and valleys seen by Christ, in the streets of Jerusalem where Christ had wandered.”²² In Jerusalem, a Christian could even climb the hill on which the cross had borne the Son of God. But no longer.

It was in this climate of opinion that Alexius Comnenus, Emperor of Byzantium, wrote from his embattled capital to the Count of Flanders requesting that he and his fellow Christians in the West come to the rescue.

In his letter, the Emperor detailed gruesome tortures of pilgrims and vile desecrations of churches, altars, and baptismal fonts. Should Constantinople fall to the Turks, not only would thousands more Christians be murdered, tortured, and raped, but “the most holy relics of the Saviour,” gathered over the centuries, would be lost. “Therefore in the name of God ... we implore you to bring this city all the faithful soldiers of Christ ... in your coming you will find your reward in heaven, and if you do not come, God will condemn you.”²³

When Pope Urban II read this letter he was determined that it be answered in deeds. He arranged for a great gathering of clergy and laity in the French city of Clermont on November 27, 1095. Standing on a podium in the middle of a field, and surrounded by an immense crowd that included poor peasants as well as nobility and clergy, the pope gave one of the most effective speeches of all time. Blessed with an expressive and unusually powerful voice, he could be heard and understood at a great distance. Subsequently, copies of the speech (written and spoken in French) were circulated all across Europe.²⁴

The pope began by graphically detailing the torture, rape, and murder of Christian pilgrims and the defilement of churches and holy places: “Many of God’s churches have been violated ... They have ruined the altars with filth and defilement. They have circumcised Christians and smeared the blood on the altars or poured it into baptismal fonts. It amused them to kill Christians by opening up their bellies and drawing out the end of their intestines, which they then tied to a stake. Then they flogged their victims and made them walk around and around the stake until their intestines had spilled out and they fell dead on the ground ... What shall I say about the abominable rape of women? On this subject it may be worse to speak than to remain silent.”

At this point Pope Urban raised a second issue to which he already had devoted years of effort—the chronic warfare of medieval times. The pope had been attempting to achieve a “Truce of God” among the feudal nobility, many of whom seemed inclined to make war, even on their friends, just for the sake of a good fight. After all, it was what they trained to do every day since early childhood. Here was their chance! “Christian warriors, who continually and vainly seek pretexts for war, rejoice, for you have today found a true pretext ... If you are conquered, you will have the glory of dying in the very same place as Jesus Christ, and God will never forget that he found you in the holy battalions ... Soldiers of Hell, become soldiers of the living God!”

Now, shouts of “*Dieu li volt!*” (God wills it!) began to spread through the crowd and men began to cut up cloaks and other pieces of cloth to make crosses and to sew them on their shoulders and chests. Everyone agreed that next spring they would march to Jerusalem. And they did.

It has often been suggested that we should not trust the pope or the emperor on what was taking place in the Holy Land. Perhaps they were misinformed. Perhaps they were lying to arouse a military venture for reasons of their own. James Carroll has even suggested that the pope cynically used the Muslims as threatening outsiders in order to unite the European princes “against a common enemy.”²⁵ But as Runciman pointed out, Europeans, especially the nobility, had trustworthy independent information on the brutalization of the Christian pilgrims—from their own relatives and friends who had managed to survive. Even had the pope and emperor been cynical propagandists, that would not alter the motivation of the Crusaders, for that depended entirely on what the knights believed.

Economic Aspects of the Crusades

Had there been a financial squeeze on the knightly class, about the last thing they would have done was march off on a Crusade to the Holy Land. As Peter Edbury explained, “Crusading was expensive, and the costs were borne by the crusaders themselves, their families, their lords and, increasingly from the end of the twelfth century, by taxes levied on the Church in the West.”²⁶ Even the many Crusader castles and the garrisons by which Christians held portions of the Holy Land for two centuries were not built or sustained by local exactions, but by funds sent from Europe. Indeed, the great wealth of the knightly crusading orders was not loot, but came from donations and legacies in Europe.²⁷ All told, “large quantities of Western silver flowed into the crusader states.”²⁸ The Crusades were possible only because this was not a period of economic decline, but one of *growth* “which put more resources and money into the hands of the ruling elites on Western Europe.”²⁹

Moreover it was not “surplus” sons who went. Because the “cost of crusading was truly enormous”³⁰ only the heads of upper class households could raise the money to go: it was kings, princes, counts, dukes, barons and earls who enrolled, led, and paid the expenses for companies of knights and infantry.³¹ Even so, they raised the needed funds at a very great sacrifice. Many sold all or substantial amounts of their holdings, borrowed all they

could from relatives, and impoverished themselves and their families in order to participate.³² As for making up their losses by looting and colonizing in the Holy Land, most of them had no such illusions—indeed, most of them had no plans to remain in the East once the fighting was done, and all but a small garrison did return home.

Why They Went

The knights of Europe sewed crosses on their breasts and marched East for two primary reasons, one of them generic, the other specific to Crusading. The generic reason was their perceived need for penance. The specific reason was to liberate the Holy Land.

Just as it has today, the medieval Church had many profound reservations about violence, and especially about killing. This created serious concerns among the knights and their confessors because war was chronic among the medieval nobility and any knight who survived for very long was apt to have killed someone. Even when victims were evil men without any redeeming worth, their deaths were held to constitute sins,³³ and in most instances the killer enjoyed no obvious moral superiority over the victim—sometimes quite the reverse. Consequently, knights were chronically in need of penance and their confessors imposed all manner of acts of atonement. Confessors sometimes required a pilgrimage to a famous shrine, and for particularly hideous sins, a journey all the way to the Holy Land.

As already noted, pilgrimages to Jerusalem were remarkably common for several centuries before the First Crusade. Thousands went every year, often in large groups—for example, in 1026 a group of 700 persons from Normandy made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and along the way they were joined by many other groups of Western pilgrims.³⁴ A major reason pilgrimages were so common was because the knights of Europe were both very violent and very religious. Thus, when Count Thierry of Trier murdered his archbishop in 1059, his confessor demanded that he undertake a pilgrimage, and he went.³⁵ Perhaps the most notorious pilgrim was Fulk III, Count of Anjou (972-1040), who was required to make four pilgrimages to the Holy Land, the first as penance for having his wife burned to death in her wedding dress, allegedly for having had sex with a goatherd. All things considered, four pilgrimages may have been far too few, given that Fulk was a “plunderer, murderer, robber, and swearer of false oaths, a truly terrifying character of

fiendish cruelty ... Whenever he had the slightest difference with a neighbor he rushed upon his lands, ravaging, pillaging, raping and killing; nothing could stop him.”³⁶ Nevertheless, when confronted by his confessor Fulk “responded with extravagant expressions of devotion.”³⁷

Thus the call to Crusade was not a call to do something novel—no doubt many knights had long been considering a pilgrimage. Indeed, the pope himself had assured them that Crusading would wash away all their sins and, at the same time, they could rescue the Holy Land, including Christ’s tomb, from further damage and sacrilege at the hands of the enemies of God. It was an altogether noble and holy mission, and the knights treated it as such. The Burgundian Stephen I of Neublans put it this way: “Considering how many are my sins and the love, clemency and mercy of Our Lord Jesus Christ, because when he was rich he became poor for our sake, I have determined to repay him in some measure for everything he has given me freely, although I am unworthy. And so I have decided to go to Jerusalem, where God was seen as man and spoke with men and to adore the place where his feet trod.”³⁸

Had the Crusaders not been motivated by religion, but by land and loot, the knights of Europe would have responded earlier, in 1063, when Pope Alexander II proposed a crusade to drive the infidel Muslims out of Spain. Unlike the Holy Land, Moorish Spain was extremely wealthy, possessed an abundance of fertile lands, and was close at hand. But hardly anyone responded to the pope’s summons. Yet, only about thirty years later, thousands of Crusaders set out for the dry, impoverished wastes of faraway Palestine. What was different? Spain was not the Holy Land! Christ had not walked the streets of Toledo, nor was he crucified in Seville.

So finally, on June 7, 1099, and against all odds, the Crusaders arrived at Jerusalem. Of the original forces numbering perhaps 130,000, disease, privation, misadventure, desertion, and fighting had so reduced their ranks that the Crusaders now numbered only about 15,000, although Muslim historians placed their numbers at 300,000.³⁹ Those who reached Jerusalem were starving—having long since eaten their horses. Nevertheless, following a brief siege, on July 15, 1099 the badly out-numbered Crusaders burst into the city. Thus, after about 460 years of Muslim rule, Jerusalem was again in Christian hands, although it was nearly destroyed and depopulated in the process.

The Crusader Kingdoms

With Jerusalem in their possession, and having defeated a large Egyptian army sent to turn them out, the Crusaders had to decide what to do to preserve their victory. Their solution was to create four kingdoms—-independent states along the Mediterranean Coast. These were the County of Edessa, named for its major city; the Principedom of Antioch, which surrounded the city of Antioch in what is now southern Turkey; the County of Tripoli was just south of the Principedom and named for the Lebanese coastal city of that name; and the Kingdom of Jerusalem, an enclave on the coast of Palestine roughly equivalent to modern Israel.⁴⁰

Unlike the other three kingdoms, Edessa was land-locked. When the main body of Crusaders marched south in 1098 to attack Antioch, Baldwin of Boulogne led a smaller force east to Edessa and managed to convince Thoros, the ruler of the city (who was a Greek orthodox Christian), to adopt him as his son and heir! When Thoros was assassinated by angry subjects, Baldwin took over. Edessa was the first Crusader state (founded in 1098) and the first to be retaken by Islam (1149).

Crusaders captured the city of Antioch in 1098 after a long siege during which the knights ran so short of supplies that they ate many of their horses. Almost immediately after the Crusaders had taken the city, a new Muslim army appeared and laid siege to the knights. Against staggering odds, Bohemond of Taranto led his troops out from the city and somehow defeated the Muslims—subsequent accounts claim that an army of saints had miraculously appeared to help the knights. Following this victory, Bohemond named himself prince. The area remained an independent state until 1119 when it was joined to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. In 1268 Antioch fell to an army led by Baybars, Sultan of Egypt, whose troops killed every Christian they could find.

The County of Tripoli was the last of the four Crusaders states to be established—in 1102. It came into being when Count Raymond IV of Toulouse, one of the leaders of the First Crusade, laid siege to the port city of Tripoli. When Raymond died suddenly in 1105, he left his infant son as heir so when the knights finally took the city the County became a vassal state of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. It was captured by Mameluke forces in 1289.

By far the most important and powerful of the Crusader states was the Kingdom of Jerusalem, which was also known as Outremer, the French word for “overseas” (*oultre-mer*). Initially that term applied to all the Crusader states,

but it came to refer primarily to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Like the other states, Outremer was never a European colony, it being fully independent. Godfrey of Bouillon, who led the capture of Jerusalem, was installed as the first ruler, with the title Defender of the Holy Sepulcher. Godfrey was chosen not only for his integrity, but also for his military talent which was just as well since no sooner was he in command than he was confronted by a very large Egyptian army intent on recapturing Jerusalem. Rather than shelter his outnumbered forces behind the walls of the city, Godfrey marched them out for a night attack that found the Egyptians sleeping and defeated them with a great loss of life.

This terrible defeat long deterred Muslim leaders from mounting new attacks. The Muslim historian Ibn Zafir recorded “reproachfully: ‘He [the Egyptian vizier] had given up hope of the Syrian coastline remaining in Muslim hands and he did not personally wage war against them after that.’”⁴¹ This was fortunate for the Crusaders, since following their victory over the Egyptians, nearly all of the forces of the First Crusade boarded ships and sailed home, leaving the Outremer to be protected by a small company of about 300 knights and perhaps 2,000 infantry.⁴² Eventually their ranks were substantially reinforced by two knightly religious orders in which “monastic discipline and martial skill were combined for the first time in the Christian world.”⁴³ The Knights Hospitaller were founded initially to care for sick Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. Eventually, the order kept its “medical” name, but in about 1120 expanded its vows from chastity, poverty, and obedience to include the armed protection of Christians in Palestine. The Knights Templar originated as a military religious order in about 1119. Hospitallers wore black robes with a white cross on the left sleeve, the Templars wore a white robe with a red cross on the mantel. The two orders hated one another quite intensely, but together they provided the Kingdom of Jerusalem with a reliable force of well-trained soldiers who built and garrisoned a chain of extremely well-sited castles along the frontiers of the Kingdom.

Nevertheless, the existence of the kingdoms remained perilous, surrounded as they were by a vast and populous Muslim world. For many years, whenever the Muslim threat loomed especially large, new Crusades were mounted in Europe bringing fresh troops east in support of the Crusader kingdoms—and then went home again. Eventually, Europeans lost their fervor to defend the “Holy Land” and Islamic forces began to eat away at the Crusader areas. Still,

that the Kingdom of Jerusalem lasted until 1291, when its last fortress at Acre fell to a huge Mameluk army, seems a remarkable achievement.

As already noted, not only the defenders, but most of the funds for all of this came from Europe.⁴⁴ Both of the knightly orders established many religious houses in Europe from which they not only sent young recruits, but a constant, substantial flow of cash, some of it raised by productive the activities of the houses—each owned great estates including some towns and villages—but most of it was donated by wealthy Europeans. About seventy years after the conquest of Jerusalem, the trade routes from Asia shifted to pass through the Kingdom's ports. This seems to have enriched Genoa and Pisa (and perhaps Venice), since these cities controlled maritime trade on the Mediterranean, but it had little impact on the general economy of the Kingdom and surely played no role in motivating Crusaders.⁴⁵ Thus, the Crusader states “remained dependent on Christendom for men and money, endured as long as Christendom retained enough interest to keep supplying them, and withered and collapsed when that interest was lost.”⁴⁶ Since a colony is normally defined as place that is politically directed and economically exploited by a homeland, the Crusader states were not colonies⁴⁷—unless one places a high material value on spiritual profits.

Nevertheless, the Crusaders made no attempt to impose Christianity on the Muslims. In fact, “Muslims who lived in Crusader-won territories were generally allowed to retain their property and livelihood, and always their religion.”⁴⁸ Consequently the Crusader kingdoms always contained far more Muslim residents than Christians. In the thirteenth century some Franciscans initiated conversion efforts among Muslims, but these were based on peaceful persuasion, were quite unsuccessful, and soon abandoned.⁴⁹ In fact, the Church generally opposed any linkage between Crusading and conversion until the issue arose during the “Crusades” against Christian heretics in Europe.⁵⁰

Crusader “War Crimes”

In the last paragraph of his immensely influential three-volume work on the Crusades, Sir Steven Runciman regretted this “tragic and destructive episode.” The “high ideals” of the Crusaders “were besmirched by cruelty and greed ... by a blind and narrow self-righteousness.”⁵¹ In the wake of Runciman's huge work, many more historians adopted the tradition that the Crusades pitted a

barbarian West against a more sophisticated and more civilized East. Thus, the emphasis has been given to evidence that the Crusaders were brutal, blood-thirsty, religious zealots.

It is the massacre subsequent to the fall of Jerusalem that is taken as certain proof that the Crusaders were brutal even for their era and especially so in comparison with their Muslim opponents. Following a short, siege the Christian knights took the city by storm and this is said to have been followed by an incredibly bloody massacre of the entire population. Unfortunately, these claims were written by Christian chroniclers “eager to portray a ritual purification of the city.”⁵² Did it really happen? The chroniclers’ accounts seem farfetched—streets don’t run knee-deep in blood—but it seems likely that a major massacre did occur. However, it is important to realize that according to the norms of warfare at that time, a massacre of the population of Jerusalem would have been seen as justified because the city had refused to surrender and had to be taken by storm, thus inflicting many casualties on the attacking forces. Had Jerusalem surrendered as Crusaders gathered to assault the walls, it is very likely that no massacre would have occurred. But, mistakenly believing in their own military superiority, the Muslims held out. In such cases commanders (Muslims as well as Christians) believed they had an obligation to release their troops to murder, loot, and burn as an example to other cities that might be tempted to hold out excessively long in the future. Thus, Muslim victories in similar circumstances resulted in wholesale slaughters too.

The remarkable bias of so many western histories of the Crusades could not be more obvious than in the fact that massacres by Muslims receive so little attention. As Robert Irwin pointed out, “In Britain, there ha[s] been a long tradition of disparaging the Crusaders as barbaric and bigoted warmongers and of praising the Saracens as paladins of chivalry. Indeed, it is widely believed that chivalry originated in the Muslim East. The most perfect example of Muslim chivalry was, of course, the twelfth-century Ayyubid Sultab Saladin.”⁵³ In fact, this is not a recent British invention. Since the Enlightenment, Saladin has “bizarrely” been portrayed “as a rational and civilized figure in juxtaposition to credulous barbaric crusaders.”⁵⁴ For example, in 1898, Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm visited Damascus and placed a bronze laurel wreath on Saladin’s tomb. The wreath was inscribed: “From one great emperor to another.”⁵⁵

Much has been made of the fact that Saladin did not murder the Christians when he retook Jerusalem in 1187. Writing in 1869, the English historian Barbara Hutton claimed that although Saladin “hated Christians ... when they were suppliants and at his mercy, he was never cruel or revengeful.”⁵⁶ But neither Hutton nor most other modern, Western sympathizers with Islam have had anything to say about the fact, acknowledged by Muslim writers, that Jerusalem was an exception to Saladin’s usual butchery of his enemies. Indeed, Saladin had planned to massacre the knights holding Jerusalem, but offered a safe conduct in exchange for their surrender of Jerusalem without resistance (and unlike many other Muslim leaders, he kept his word). In most other instances Saladin was quite unchivalrous. Following the Battle of Hattin, for example, he personally participated in butchering some of the captured knights and then sat back and enjoyed watching the execution of the rest of them. As told by Saladin’s secretary, Imad ed-Din: “He [Saladin] ordered that they should be beheaded, choosing to have them dead rather than in prison. With him was a whole band of scholars and sufis and a certain number of devout men and ascetics; each begged to be allowed to kill one of them, and drew his sword and rolled back his sleeve. Saladin, his face joyful, was sitting on his dais; the unbelievers showed black despair.”⁵⁷ It thus seems fitting that during one of his amazing World War I adventures leading irregular Arab forces against the Turks, T. E. Lawrence “liberated” the Kaiser’s wreath from Saladin’s tomb and it now resides in the Imperial War Museum in London.

Not only have many western historians ignored the real Saladin, they have given little or no coverage to Baybars (also Baibars), Sultan of Egypt, although he is much more celebrated than Saladin in Muslim histories of this period. When Baybars took the Knights of the Templar fortress of Safad 1266, he had all the inhabitants massacred even though he had promised to spare their lives during negotiations.⁵⁸ Later that same year his forces took the great city of Antioch. Even though the city surrendered after four days, Baybars ordered all inhabitants, including all women and children, killed or enslaved. What followed was “the single greatest massacre of the entire crusading era”⁵⁹—it is estimated that 17,000 men were murdered and tens of thousands of women and children were marched away as slaves.

Since Count Behemund VI, ruler of Antioch, was away when this disaster befell his city, Baybars sent him a letter telling him what he had missed: “You

would have seen your knights prostrate beneath the horses' hooves, your houses stormed by pillagers ... You would have seen your Muslim enemy trampling on the place where you celebrate Mass, cutting the throats of monks, priests and deacons upon the altars, bringing sudden death to the Patriarchs and slavery to the royal princes. You would have seen fire running through your palaces, your dead burned in this world before going down to the fires of the next."⁶⁰

The massacre of Antioch is seldom reported in the many apologetic western histories of the Crusades. Karen Armstrong did report this massacre, but attributed it to "a new Islam" that had developed in response to the dire Crusader threat and with a "desperate determination to survive." Armstrong also noted that because Baybars was a patron of the arts, he "was not simply a destroyer ... [but also] a great builder."⁶¹ Even so, Armstrong's evaluation of Baybars is faint praise compared with that of the Muslims. An inscription from about 1266 calls him: "the pillar of the world and religion, the sultan of Islam and the Muslim, the killer of infidels and polytheists, the tamer of rebels and heretics ... the Alexander of the age."⁶² Many other inscriptions also compare him with Alexander the Great.

Of course, even though most of the Crusaders went to war for reasons of faith and at considerable personal cost, few of them adopted a religious lifestyle. They ate and drank as well as they were able and most of them routinely violated many commandments, especially those concerned with murder, adultery, and coveting wives. Moreover, they did not disdain the spoils of battle and looted as much as they were able—which wasn't much when balanced against the costs of Crusading. And of course they were often cruel and blood-thirsty—after all they had been trained from childhood to make war, face to face, sword to sword and Pope Urban II called them "Soldiers of Hell." No doubt it was very "unenlightened" of the Crusaders to be typical feudal warriors, but it strikes me as even more unenlightened to anachronistically impose the Geneva Convention on the Crusaders while pretending that their Islamic opponents were either U.N. Peacekeepers or hapless victims.

Rediscovering the Crusades

Karen Armstrong would have us believe that the Crusades are "one of the direct causes of the conflict in the Middle East today."⁶³ That may be so, but

not because the Muslim world has been harboring bitterness over the Crusades for the past many centuries. As Jonathan Riley-Smith explained: “One often reads that Muslims have inherited from their medieval ancestors bitter memories of the violence of the crusaders. Nothing could be further from the truth. Before the end of the nineteenth century Muslims had not shown much interest in the crusades ... [looking] back on [them] with indifference and complacency.”⁶⁴ Even at the time they took place, Muslim chroniclers paid very little attention to the Crusades regarding them as invasions by “a primitive, unlearned, impoverished, and un-Muslim people, about whom Muslim rulers and scholars knew and cared little.”⁶⁵ Moreover, most Arabs dismissed the Crusades as having been attacks upon the hated Turks, and therefore of little interest.⁶⁶ Indeed, in the account written by Ibn Zafir at the end of the twelfth century, it was said that it was better that the Franks occupied the Kingdom of Jerusalem as this prevented “the spread of the influence of the Turks to the lands of Egypt.”⁶⁷

Muslim interest in the Crusades seems to have begun in the nineteenth century, when the term itself⁶⁸ was introduced by Christian Arabs who translated French histories into Arabic—for it was in the West that the Crusades first came back into vogue during the nineteenth century. In Europe and the United States “the romance of the crusades and crusading” became a very popular literary theme, as in the many popular novels of Sir Walter Scott.⁶⁹ Not surprisingly, this development required that, at least in Britain and America, the Crusades be “de-Catholicized.”⁷⁰ In part this was done by emphasizing the conflict between the Knights Templar and the Pope, transforming the former into an order of valiant anti-Catholic heroes. In addition, there developed a strong linkage between the European imperial impulse and the romantic imagery of the Crusades “to such an extent that, by World War One, war campaigns and war heroes were regularly lauded as crusaders in the popular press, from the pulpit, and in the official propaganda of the British war machine.”⁷¹

Meanwhile in the East, the Ottoman Empire was fully-revealed as “the sick man of Europe,” a decrepit relic unable to produce any of the arms needed for its defense, which highlighted the general backwardness of Islamic culture and prompted “seething anger”⁷² against the West among Muslim intellectuals, eventually leading them to focus on the Crusades.

Thus, current Muslim memories and anger about the Crusades are a

twentieth century creation,⁷³ prompted in part by “post-World War I British and French imperialism and the post-World War II creation of the state of Israel.”⁷⁴ It was the last Sultan of the Ottoman Empire to rule with absolute authority, Abdulhamid II (reigned from 1876-1909), who began to refer to European Crusades. This prompted the first Muslim history of the Crusades, published in 1899. In the introduction, its author, Sayyid Ali al-Hariri, noted that: “The sovereigns of Europe nowadays attack our Sublime Empire in a manner bearing great resemblance to the deeds of those people in bygone times [the Crusaders]. Our most glorious sultan, Abdulhamid II, has rightly remarked that Europe is now carrying out a Crusade against us.”⁷⁵

This theme was eagerly picked up by Muslim nationalists. “Only Muslim unity could oppose these new crusades, some argued, and the crusading threat became an important theme in the writings of the pan-Islamic movement.”⁷⁶ Even within the context of Muslim weakness in the face the modern West, Islamic triumphalism flourished; many proposed that through the Crusades the “savage West ... benefited by absorbing [Islam’s] civilized values.” As for Crusader effects on Islam, “how could Islam benefit from contacts established with an inferior, backward civilization?”⁷⁷

Eventually, the brutal, colonizing Crusader imagery proved to have such polemical power that it eventually drowned out nearly everything else in the ideological lexicon of Muslim antagonism towards the West, except, of course, for Israel and paranoid tales about the world-wide Jewish conspiracy.

CONCLUSION

The Crusades were not unprovoked. They were not the first round of European colonialism. They were not conducted for land, loot, or converts. The Crusaders were not barbarians who victimized the cultivated Muslims. The Crusades are not a blot on the history of Christianity. No apologies are required.

¹ This is a somewhat revised version of Chapter 13 of my *The Triumph of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2011) which was based on my *God’s Battalions* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

² Robert B. Ekelund, et al., *Sacred Trust: The Medieval Church as an Economic Firm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

- ³ Quotes from Thomas F. Madden, "The Crusades in the Checkout Aisle," *Crisis Magazine* (April 12, 2002).
- ⁴ Andrew Curry, "The Crusades, the First Holy War," *U.S. News & World Report* (April 8, 2002): 36.
- ⁵ *New York Times* (June 20, 1999): Section 4, p. 15.
- ⁶ Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, www.religioustolerance.org/chr_cru1.htm
- ⁷ Quoted in Jean Richard, *The Crusades, c. 1071-c. 1291* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 475.
- ⁸ David Hume (1761), I:209.
- ⁹ Quoted in Richard, *The Crusades*, 5.
- ¹⁰ Jonathan Riley-Smith, "Islam and the Crusades in History and Imagination, 8 November 1898-11 September 2001" *Crusades* 2 (2003); 154.
- ¹¹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (6 vols.; London: Everyman's Library, reprint, 2010), Book VI: Chapter LVIII.
- ¹² Georges Duby, *The Chivalrous Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); John France, *Victory in the East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Hans Eberhard Mayer, *The Crusades* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).
- ¹³ Mayer, *The Crusades*, 22-25.
- ¹⁴ Ekelund, et al., *Sacred Trust*. This is one of the most inept and uninformed efforts at trying to apply economic principles by analogy that I have ever encountered.
- ¹⁵ Riley-Smith, "Islam and the Crusades in History and Imagination," 159.
- ¹⁶ Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization* (4th ed.; Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), 259.
- ¹⁷ Karen Armstrong, *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World* (2nd ed.; New York: Random House, 2001), xii.
- ¹⁸ Including: Alfred J. Andrea, Peter Edbury, Benjamin Z. Kedar, Thomas F. Madden, Edward M. Peters, Jean Richard, Jonathan Riley-Smith, and Christopher Tyerman.
- ¹⁹ Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades* (3 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 1:49.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:47.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 1:79.
- ²² Robert Payne, *The Dream and the Tomb: A History of the Crusades* (New York: Stein & Day, 1984), 18-19.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 28-29.
- ²⁴ Five major versions of the speech exist, each being incomplete, and there are several translations of each into English. I have selected excerpts from several versions.
- ²⁵ James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews—a History* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2001), 241.
- ²⁶ Peter Edbury, "Warfare in the Latin East," in *Medieval Warfare: A History* (ed., Maurice Keen; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 95.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ John Gillingham, "An Age of Expansion: c. 1020-1204," in *Medieval Warfare: A History* (ed., Maurice Keen; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 59.
- ³⁰ Thomas F. Madden, *A Concise History of the Crusades* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 12.
- ³¹ Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusaders, 1095-1131* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 29-30.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ³⁶ Richard Erdoes, *AD 1000: Living on the Brink of the Apocalypse* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 26.
- ³⁷ Riley-Smith, *The First Crusaders*, 28.
- ³⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 72.
- ³⁹ Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 54.
- ⁴⁰ Bernard Hamilton, *The Leper King and His Heirs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); John L. LaMonte, *Feudal Monarchy in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, 1100-1291* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932); Joshua Praver, *The Crusaders' Kingdom: European Colonialism in the Middle Ages* (New York: Praeger, 1972); Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Feudal Nobility and the Kingdom of Jerusalem, 1174-1277* (New York: Macmillan, 1973); Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*; Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusade* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006).
- ⁴¹ In Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, 77.
- ⁴² Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades*, 178.
- ⁴³ Madden, *A Concise History of the Crusades*, 49.

- ⁴⁴ Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades*, 179.
- ⁴⁵ Riley-Smith, *The First Crusaders, 1095-1131*, 17.
- ⁴⁶ Charles Issawi, "Crusades and Current Crisis in the Near East: A Historical Parallel," *International Affairs* 33 (1957): 272.
- ⁴⁷ Jonathan Phillips, "The Latin East 1098-1291," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades* (ed., Jonathan Riley-Smith; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 112.
- ⁴⁸ Madden, "The Crusades in the Checkout Aisle," 3.
- ⁴⁹ Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches Toward the Muslims* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, 3:480.
- ⁵² Thomas F. Madden, "The Real History of the Crusades," *Crisis Magazine* (April 1, 2002); also see Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades*, xv.
- ⁵³ Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and its Discontents* (Woodstock and New York: The Overlook Press, 2006), 213.
- ⁵⁴ Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades*, 351.
- ⁵⁵ Elizabeth Siberry, "Images of the Crusades in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades* (ed., Jonathan Riley-Smith; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 368.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.
- ⁵⁷ Quoted in Madden, *A Concise History of the Crusades*, 78.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 181-182.
- ⁶¹ Armstrong, *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World*, 448.
- ⁶² In Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, 230.
- ⁶³ Armstrong, *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World*, 448.
- ⁶⁴ Riley-Smith, "Islam and the Crusades in History and Imagination," 160-161.
- ⁶⁵ Edward Peters, "The *Firanj* are Coming—Again," *Orbis* (Winter, 2004): 6.
- ⁶⁶ Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, 4-5.
- ⁶⁷ In *ibid.*, 45.
- ⁶⁸ There was no Arabic term for "Crusades."
- ⁶⁹ Adam Knobler, "Holy Wars, Empires, and the Portability of the Past: The Modern Uses of the Medieval Crusade," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48 (2006): 310.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 310.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷² Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.
- ⁷³ Peters, "The *Firanj* are Coming—Again;" Riley-Smith, "Islam and the Crusades in History and Imagination."
- ⁷⁴ A. J. Andrea, "The Crusades in Perspective: The Crusades in Modern Islamic Perspective," *History Compass* 1 (2003): 2.
- ⁷⁵ Emmanuel Sivan, *Modern Arab Historiography of the Crusades* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, Shiloah Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1973), 12.
- ⁷⁶ Knobler, "Holy Wars, Empires, and the Portability of the Past: The Modern Uses of the Medieval Crusade," 320.
- ⁷⁷ Various Muslims quoted by Riley-Smith, "Islam and the Crusades in History and Imagination," 162.