

A New Look at the Crusades

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Introduction

As a Christian Apologist, I often engage people who are atheist or of different faiths. If we talk long enough, the topic of the Crusades is bound to come up. In this paper, I would like to present a view of the Crusades that goes against the commonly held beliefs of most people.

This paper will focus on the First Crusades. It will examine the Crusades from a traditional view and then from a historical view. Both views will then be evaluated.

Traditional View

This is the most popular and politically correct version of the Crusades.

Background

The Crusades are often portrayed as the ultimate example of everything that is wrong with the west in general and Christianity in particular. The Crusaders are accused of ushering in a horrible period of intolerance and violence at the hands of Christians and European imperialists. For example, Western apologist for Islam Karen Armstrong writes:

On the eve of the second Christian millennium, the Crusaders massacred some thirty thousand Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem, turning the thriving Islamic holy city into a stinking charnel house. For at least five months the valleys and ditches around the city were filled with putrefying corpses, which were too numerous for the small number of Crusaders who remained behind after the expedition to clear away, and a stench hung over Jerusalem, where the three religions of Abraham had been able to coexist in relative harmony under Islamic rule for nearly five hundred years. This was the Muslims' first experience of the Christian West, as it pulled itself out of the dark age that had descended after the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, and fought its way back on to the international scene.¹

This view can be summed up concisely; Islam good, Christianity bad. This is not just something that we find in the media and among liberal scholarship, but this view has penetrated

1. Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, modern library ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2002), Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 2588.

our society to the point where former President Bill Clinton blamed the Crusades for the current bad relations between Islam and Christianity.

Indeed, in the first Crusade, when the Christian soldiers took Jerusalem, they first burned a synagogue with three hundred Jews in it, and proceeded to kill every woman and child who was Muslim on the Temple mound. The contemporaneous descriptions of the event describe soldiers walking on the Temple mound, a holy place to Christians, with blood running up to their knees. I can tell you that that story is still being told today in the Middle East and we are still paying for it.²

Islamic scholar and apologist John Esposito blames the Crusades for destroying the peaceful coexistence of Islam with its neighbors "Five centuries of peaceful coexistence elapsed before political events and an imperial-papal power play led to centuries-long series of so-called holy wars that pitted Christendom against Islam and left an enduring legacy of misunderstanding and distrust."³

This is a page taken from Islamic apologist and often regurgitated by self hating westerners or liberal Christians who are also eager to point the finger at the bogie man, better known as the Christian church. Once again; Islam good, Christianity bad.

Motivations

The motivations given from the traditional Muslim view of the Crusades are that they were motivated by aristocrats, thieves, robbers, and greedy monks. They allegedly consisted of men who had nothing to lose, using a religious pretext to grab the booty of foreign lands.

Robert Spencer, author of *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)*, summarizes the often held politically correct motivations for the Crusades:

The Crusaders marched across Europe to the Middle East. Once there, they pillaged and murdered Muslim and Jewish men, women and children indiscriminately, and forced the survivors to convert to Christianity. Awash in pools of blood, they established European proto-colonies in the Levant, inspiring and setting a

2. Robert Spencer, *The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World's most Intolerant Religion* (Washington, DC: Regnery Pub., 2006), Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 270.

3. John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998,58; quoted in Robert Spencer, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)* (Lanham, MD: National Book Network, 2005), Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 2096.

pattern for legions of later colonialists. They were the setting for the world's first mass killings, and are a blot on the history of the Catholic Church, Europe and Western civilization.⁴

Even conservative Christians often respond to the charges of the Crusades as a horrific era in the annals of mankind with an apology for the atrocities of the Church. But is this view of the Crusades accurate or fair? Let's examine a politically incorrect, yet accurate view.

Historical View

In sharp contrast to the preceding view, there is evidence that what most people believe about the Crusades is simply not true.

Background

Before we can truly understand the Crusades, we have to discuss something that is often missing from the discussion; the historical background.

Islam was started by the Prophet Muhammad around 622. Within a hundred years of Muhammad's death, most of Europe had fallen to the Muslim aggressors. Governments were given a choice; convert to Islam, pay a tribute or tax, or fight. Some willingly converted, others paid the tax, and yet others chose to fight. Those that chose to fight were defeated through violence at the hands of the Muslim army. The existing Byzantine Empire was Christian. It was the remnant of the Roman Empire. Muslims had conquered most of the existing Christian territories of Europe. The Byzantine Empire was helpless and unable to stop the spread of Islam. Eventually, in the 11th century, the Muslims took Jerusalem, Christianity's holiest city. Thomas Madden, Professor of History and Director of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Saint Louis University, wrote "They destroyed some churches, murdered clergy, and seized pilgrims."⁵

4. Spencer, *The Truth about Muhammad*, 2281. *Founder of the World's most Intolerant Religion*, Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 270.

5. Thomas F. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades*, updated ed. (Lanham, Md.: National Book Network, 2005), 5.

By 1095, Alexius I Comnenus requested the help of Pope Urban II in reclaiming the holy city of Jerusalem from the Muslims.⁶ The Pope then made an appeal to all Christians to join in the effort to retake what rightfully belonged to Christendom.

Motivations

Political

One of the main motivations for the Crusades was the Muslim aggression that consumed much of Europe. The Christian world watched as territory after territory fell to the Muslim conquerors. If something was not done, the entire known world would fall to Islam and all Christians would have to suffer possible annihilation. The Crusades was an effort to turn the tide of Muslim aggression. It was a long, delayed response to centuries of Muslim expansion.

Another often overlooked reason for the Crusades was as a response to increased Muslim persecution of Christians in the holy land. Robert Spencer writes:

In 1004, the sixth Fatimid caliph, Abu 'Ali al-Mansur al-Hakim (985-1021), turned violently against the faith of his Christian mother and uncles (two of whom were patriarchs), ordering the destruction of churches, the burning of crosses, and the seizure of church property...Over the next ten years, thirty thousand churches were destroyed, and untold numbers of Christians converted to Islam simply to save their lives. In 1009, al-Hakim gave his most spectacular anti-Christian order: he commanded that the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem be destroyed, along with several other churches."⁷

Personal

In contrast to the politically correct view, the Crusades came at a high personal cost to all who participated. Thanks to the works of scholars like Jonathan Riley-Smith, who analyzed large quantities of documents relating to those who actually participated in the crusades, we have a very different picture of the Crusaders than the popularized version. Riley-Smith reports, "Approximately 150,000 people across Europe responded to Urban II's summons by donning the cross of the pilgrim. The vast majority of these were poor, and many were women and elderly

6. Ibid., 7.

7. Spencer, *The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World's most Intolerant Religion*, 2133.

(or both). During the course of the First Crusade, approximately 40,000 men marched to the East...Only a small minority of that total were knights"⁸ However, it was the knights who brought with them their own personal armies. Madden writes, "What is clearest in the documentary record is that the vast majority of these knightly crusaders were not spare sons but instead the lords of their estates. It was not those with the least to lose who took up the cross, but rather those with the most."⁹ Many of these noblemen even sold estates and liquidated their assets to be able to afford the journey. As Robert Spencer puts it, "Crusaders sold their property to raise money for their long journey to the Holy Land, and did so knowing that they might not return."¹⁰ Furthermore, the Pope made it clear that any land captured belonged to the Byzantine emperor. This was not a land grab. Very few remained in the land after they fulfilled their vows: "The vast majority returned to Europe with neither riches nor land."¹¹

Jerusalem

When the crusaders arrived at Jerusalem, they were not a band of bloodthirsty war mongers. In fact Madden writes "On July 8, the Muslim defenders on the walls of Jerusalem watched with astonishment as the army of the Franks became a barefoot, unarmed pilgrimage. Singing prayers and bearing relics, most prominently the Holy Lance, the army of the First Crusade walked around the walls of Jerusalem, coming at last to the Mount of Olives. There, Peter the Hermit delivered a sermon."¹²

Madden records how the crusaders actually showed restraint when they entered Jerusalem:

8. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades*, 12.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 11.

11. Ibid., 12.

12. Ibid., 34.

By the standards of the time, adhered to by both Christians and Muslims, the crusaders would have been justified in putting the entire population of Jerusalem to the sword. Despite later highly exaggerated reports, however, that is not what happened. It is true that many of the inhabitants, both Muslim and Jews, were killed in the initial fray. Yet many were also allowed to purchase their freedom or were simply expelled from the city.¹³

Evaluation

I have presented two views of the Crusades. The first view is the politically correct view, while the second view represents an actual historical account. The first account is more fiction than fact. The second account represents the historical reality. When we look at the actual accounts of who the crusaders were, the negative stereotype is based on the popular belief that Christianity is evil. Whenever a villain is to be found, the Church often becomes the scapegoat. It is easy to blame the Church, while absolving everyone else.

The traditional view paints Islam as a peaceful religion, while completely ignoring how the Crusades came about in the first place. Jerusalem and much of Europe belonged to the Christian empire. These territories were taken by Muslims by force. Jerusalem was a sacred city to Christianity. It was the birthplace of Jesus, yet no one criticizes the Muslims who took this city by force, slaughtered many of the inhabitants, and subjugated them to humiliation. Yet an attempt to reclaim the city, as well as other territories is seen as European imperialism! Imperialism was clearly what the Muslims had in mind as it swept across Asia, Africa and Europe, yet the attempt to stop them is seen as evil!

The view presented by Madden and others, presents an overall more balanced view. Madden does not deny the atrocities of the Crusaders, yet he puts them into a time context as well as demonstrating that the view of peace loving Muslims living in Jerusalem at the time was simply a myth developed centuries later as a rallying call against Christianity by Muslims.

13. Ibid.

Even Karen Armstrong admits that the immediate cause of the Crusades was based on Muslim expansion¹⁴. She also admits that although the Crusades were "disgraceful", it was perceived as nothing more than a remote border incident to most Muslims. She writes, "It was only in the twentieth century, when the West had become more powerful and threatening, that Muslim historians would become preoccupied by the medieval Crusades."¹⁵

The common view of the crusaders as being a bunch of greedy barbarous mercenaries is simply untrue. The noblemen saw themselves as defenders of the Church and Truth. As Madden writes, "In short, most noblemen who joined the crusades did so from a simple and sincere love of God."¹⁶ This does not mean that they were all saints. They were warriors and could be savage, and at times there were. However, there was nothing about them that was as savage as the Muslims against whom they were fighting.

In the traditional view, we never hear about Muslim aggression. The Christians are always represented as the sole aggressors. However, even Karen Armstrong acknowledges that the Muslims did on occasion commit violent acts against Christians and other non-Muslims, however, this was only after the Crusades. In her view, these acts of violence were in response to the Crusaders who taught the civilized Muslims how to be barbarians. However, the facts say the exact opposite. We see that Muslims were committing acts of unnecessary violence since the beginning of their campaign for world domination. Serge Trifkovic, in his book *The Sword and the Prophet* writes:

Slaughters did occur in the initial wave of the conquest: during the Muslim invasion of Syria in 634, thousands of Christians were massacred; in Mesopotamia between 635 and 642, monasteries were ransacked and monks and villagers slain; in Egypt the towns of Behnesa, Fayum, Nikiu and Aboit were put to the sword. The inhabitants of Cilicia were taken into captivity. In Armenia, the entire population of Euchaita was wiped out. The Muslim invaders sacked and pillaged Cyprus and then established their rule

14. Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, 1560.

15. *Ibid.*, 1557.

16. Madden, *I2*.

by a "great massacre." In North Africa, Tripoli was pillaged in 643 by Amr, who forced the Jews and Christians to hand over their women and children as slaves to the Arab Army.¹⁷

In the words of Robert Spencer, "Muslim conquerors easily matched and exceeded the cruelty of the Crusaders in Jerusalem on many occasions."¹⁸

There were enough atrocities to go around. However there is a big difference between those done at the hands of Christians and those done at the hands of Muslims. None of the atrocities reflect the ultimate example of Christians, which is Christ. The Crusaders may have been Christian but there is a difference between Christians and Christianity. Christianity is based upon the teachings of Christ, however Christians often fall far short of this standard, but Christ is the standard nonetheless. Furthermore, the acts of violence such as the killing of Jews by Count Emicho of Leiningen, were never sanctioned by the Church. Moreover, the Pope in his appeal made it clear that the motivation should be to liberate Jerusalem, not act out of personal gain.

On the other hand, Muslims who committed atrocities were acting in complete harmony with Islam since Muhammad is their example and war was his legacy.

Authors Riddell and Cotterell sum it up nicely "the Crusades were a link in a chain of history. They represented the response of the Christian world to the earlier Islamic expansion and to the loss of the Byzantine territories in the Middle East and North Africa...If apologies are to be extended, it is important that this be done in a framework of mutual acknowledgement of error and excess, and share repentance"¹⁹

17. Serge Trifkovic, *The Sword of the Prophet: Islam: History, Theology, Impact on the World* (Boston, Mass.: Regina Orthodox Press, 2002), 95.

18. Robert Spencer, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)* (Lanham, MD: National Book Network, 2005), 2458.

19. Peter G. Riddell and Peter Cotterell, *Islam in Context: Past, Present, and Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 102.

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