

The Contexts of Religion and Violence

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Jerusalem in the Crusades

“Crescent and Cross,” *Kingdom of Heaven*, and the Fall of the City in 1099 and 1187

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Introduction

[1] The Crusades live on in the popular imagination as a movement of pious western knights seeking adventure, glory, and salvation. Forsaking home and country, they journeyed east, where they met, and defeated, the Infidel. At least that is how people tend to remember them. We have a vague recollection of Richard the Lionhearted and St. Louis (though we have trouble remembering which number he was), and maybe we remember Barbarossa, too. We know the Crusades took place in the Holy Land, and vaguely recall some related campaigns in Europe, but the only specific battle site that we can name with any certainty is Jerusalem. What we tend to forget, or overlook, is the toll in human lives on all sides of the Crusades, the episodes of violence that could at times be shocking, even to medieval sensibilities. And rarely do we ever ask ourselves the hard questions about the morality of it all, of the use of religion as a pretext for war and for violence against civilian populations.

[2] Such avoidance especially occurs in popular treatments of the Crusades, despite their promises to the audience of “new insights” and “more balanced” presentations. This tendency is evident in two major filmic depictions of the Crusades that premiered in 2005:

Ridley Scott's film, *Kingdom of Heaven*, which opened in May, and The History Channel's 4-hour series entitled "The Crusades: Crescent and the Cross", which aired in October and November. After a brief survey of the conquests of Jerusalem in 1099 and 1187, we shall look at how these two productions addressed the religious conflicts of the Crusades, as well as the violence surrounding both captures of Jerusalem. This exploration will lead us to some concluding thoughts – and questions to ponder – about the relationship between religion and violence, and how (or if) this relationship is to be approached, either in teaching or in informed conversation.

The Conquests of 1099 and 1187 in History

[3] The primary goal of the First Crusade was straightforward: to liberate the Eastern holy places, above all Jerusalem, from the Seljuk Turks (Peters: 27-32, 36-37).¹ To be sure, in calling for this first "pilgrimage" in November 1095, Pope Urban II had other purposes in mind, such as repairing relations with the Byzantine Empire and the Orthodox Church, bolstering papal authority (Mayer: 2-3), and putting a damper on the incessant, petty wars that European nobles had been waging amongst themselves of late (Peters: 31-34). Prospective Crusaders, too, had their own motives for going east, not the least of which was their insatiable desire for land, wealth, and glory. But the defense of the holy places was first and foremost in the mind of the pope and the cross-wearing pilgrims, and would remain so for at least the first hundred years of the Crusading movement.

[4] In his speech at the Council of Claremont, Urban II exhorted his listeners to "brandish your sword against Saracens" (Peters: 32) in battle – violence that, in a war situation, might readily be justified. However, it would be the less-readily-defensible violence against civilian populations that would stamp the First Crusade; this trend first surfaced before the armies of the First Crusade even mustered. Some German nobles, wondering why they were traveling so far to the Holy Land to defeat Muslims when they had "enemies of the Christian faith" (Peters: 110) in the Jews at home, initiated a wave of pogroms against Rhineland Jewish communities, most notably in Mainz, Cologne, and Worms (Asbridge: 84-88; for a collection of Jewish accounts of the pogroms, see Peters: 109-39). The leaders of these massacres never joined the Crusading armies that eventually headed eastward, but their deeds would echo in the treatment of civilian populations in the East. For example, at Barra and Maarat an-Numan, south of Antioch, Crusaders engaged in indiscriminate slaughter of the inhabitants after capturing the towns in November 1098; even those to whom the Frankish leader Bohemund had promised protection, including women and children, were either killed or sold into slavery (Peters: 84-85; for the accounts of Ibn al-Qalanisi and Ibn al-Althir, see 235-37).

[5] It is the conquest and consequent sack of Jerusalem, however, which has attracted the most attention over the centuries, and for good reason. Scholars are fortunate to have a wealth of primary sources from Christian and Muslim perspectives, from eyewitnesses and those who may have interviewed returning Crusaders in the next few years, as well as from later chroniclers who had access to personal letters and other materials now lost. Of course,

¹ The Egyptian Fatimids would retake the city from the Seljuks in August 1098.

with so many sources dealing with so passionate a topic as the capture of the Holy City, there are discrepancies. The basic chronology of events is relatively clear: the Crusaders arrived before the walls of Jerusalem on 7 June 1099; after a difficult siege of some six weeks, Godfrey, Duke of Lorraine, and his army succeeded in breaching the northeastern wall (which defended the Jewish Quarter) on 15 July. The gates of the city were opened, the remainder of the Crusader forces poured in, and the bloodbath began (Mayer: 55-56; Prawer: 22). The mosque of al-Aqsa was stormed, and all inside were massacred; those men and women who sought refuge on the roof were either killed the next day, or flung themselves from the roof to their deaths (Peters: 248-49, 256, 260; Kedar: 16-17). In the opinion of the chronicler Raymond d'Aguilers, this was "a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of the unbelievers, since it had suffered so long from their blasphemies" (Peters: 260).

[6] Here is where the sources begin to conflict. Some say that the slaughter of inhabitants, Muslim, Jewish, and even native Christian (for the Crusaders apparently could not tell, or take the time to discern, who was who) went on for two or three days, while other sources maintain that it ended the first day (Kedar: 24 and the Table 1, which offers a convenient categorical comparison between the various medieval sources). The number of dead is hard to establish, ranging from 10,000 to 65,000 in the Latin sources (Peters: 91; Kedar: 74) to 70,000 and even 100,000 Muslims alone in later Muslim accounts (Hillenbrand: 65-66; Kedar: 74 notes that one contemporary Muslim source put the number of Muslim dead at only 3000) – that in a city whose population in 1099 has been estimated at only 20,000 to 30,000 (Kedar: 74). Within a few days human corpses littered the streets, mosques, and synagogues of Jerusalem; depending on whom one wishes to trust, as the Crusaders walked through the city, the bodies and the blood reached either their ankles, shoe tops, calves, or knees, or else the knees or bridles of their horses (Peters: 91, 260; Kedar: 24). Realizing that the bodies would quickly decompose in the summer heat and likely spark a contagion, the conquerors impressed those Muslims and Jews who had managed to survive the massacre into removing the corpses to outside the city walls (Peters: 249; Prawer: 23). When he visited the Holy City the following December, the chronicler Fulcher of Chartres complained that the stench was still so bad that he had to cover his nose and mouth as he entered the city (Peters: 98).

[7] More problematic to the modern historian are the accounts of specific outrages. There are the stock atrocity stories of Crusaders dashing the heads of the young against the walls (which, as it has been pointed out, may have actually happened in imitation of Psalm 137:9) (Kedar: 72). Although the story does not appear in any eyewitness accounts, contemporary sources tell us that soldiers, having heard that Muslims had swallowed their money, disemboweled some bodies, and burnt others and searched through their ashes (Kedar: 20-21). Other sources told of piles of severed hands, arms, and heads, sometimes floating in rivers of blood.

[8] We cannot leave the story of 1099 without a brief look at Muslim accounts, which western scholars effectively neglected until the middle of the eighteenth century (Kedar: 43, 48). The first known Muslim report of the sack of Jerusalem simply stated that the Franks "returned to Jerusalem and conquered it from the hands of the Egyptians. Godfrey took it. They burned the Church of the Jews" (Hillenbrand: 64). Ibn al-Qalanisi (c. 1160) relates that

the Jews of the city gathered in the synagogue, which the Crusaders then burned over their heads (Peters: 275). As the years went by the list of outrages grew: from 1200 we begin to hear about 40 silver candelabra taken from the Dome of the Rock, imams and religious scholars killed in the mosques, the Qur'an burnt, and the old and the sick put to the sword (Hillenbrand: 65-66). It was, in fact, the Muslims who first expressed shock and outrage over the sack of Jerusalem, a sentiment that in western sources was only first shared by William of Tyre in his chronicle from the middle of the twelfth century. William suggested that the carnage was so great that even the Crusaders must have felt "disgust and horror" (Kedar: 26); however, later sources that clearly borrowed from William had a tendency to downplay his disgust over the slaughter (Kedar: 33, 35).

[9] In stark contrast to the events of 1099 is the story of the reconquest of Jerusalem by Saladin in 1187. Scholars still debate whether Saladin's ultimate goal was the recovery of Jerusalem, or the unification of Islam under the Abbasid caliphate (Gibb 1982: 99; Lyons and Jackson: 155-56; Dajani-Shakeel); whichever the final purpose, recovering Jerusalem for the faith would be regarded as the crowning achievement of his career. As early as 1178 he had voiced his desire to attack the Holy City the following year (Gibb 1969: 571), but determined that he first needed to bring the various Muslim rulers in the region under his command. To this end he played a shrewd, but sometimes baffling game, taking up arms against fellow Muslims while entering into a series of truces with the Crusader States (Lyons and Jackson: 239).² The Crusaders had a propensity to violate at least the spirit, if not the letter, of these truces, whereas they could always count on Saladin, famed for his piety and his integrity, to abide by their agreements. In March 1186, Mosul, the last Muslim holdout against Saladin, recognized his suzerainty, and he could now turn his attention toward preparations, military as well as diplomatic, to retake Jerusalem. Only the latest truce with the Franks, entered into the previous year, stood in his way.

[10] The Crusaders soon gave Saladin the pretext that he needed to break the truce: Reynald of Châtillon captured an Egyptian caravan and, despite the demands of both Saladin and fellow Crusaders, he refused to return his prisoners or the booty (Lyons and Jackson: 248; Gibb 1969: 585). Saladin summoned his armies and set out from Damascus in March 1187; on 4 July at Hattin, he all but annihilated the Crusader army, captured King Guy, ordered the execution of the Templars and the Hospitallers, and, both Latin and Muslim sources tell us, personally lopped off the head of Reynald (Gabrieli: 112, 123024, 134, 143; Edbury: 48, 161). The Crusader cities between Hattin and Jerusalem surrendered to Saladin in quick succession; by the night of 20 September, he stood before the walls of the Holy City (for a chronology of the events, see Ibn Shaddad: 77-78; Gabrieli: 140-46).

[11] With King Guy in captivity and most of the leaders of the Crusader forces dead, it fell upon Balian of Ibelin to defend the now underpopulated city. After the Muslims' initial assaults upon the city walls, Christian leaders appealed to Saladin for safe conduct in exchange for the surrender of the city; Saladin replied, "We shall deal with you . . . just as you dealt with the population of Jerusalem when you took it in 1099, with murder and

² Between 1174 and 1186, Saladin spent 13 months fighting the Franks, and 33 months fighting against other Muslims.

enslavement and savageries!” (Gabrieli: 141). Balian then obtained a meeting with Saladin, but this time he threatened violence of a different sort: he promised Saladin that before they would die at his hand,

by God we shall kill our children and our wives, burn our possessions, so as not to leave you with a dinar or a drachma or a single man or woman to enslave. When this is done, we shall pull down the Sanctuary of the Rock and the Masjid al-Aqsa and the other sacred places, slaughtering the Muslim prisoners we hold – 5,000 of them – and killing every horse and animal we possess (Gabrieli: 142).

[12] Upon consulting with his advisers, Saladin decided that it would be best to offer terms. He gave the Franks 40 days in which to ransom themselves and leave the city or be enslaved. Balian himself paid the ransom for some 18,000 of the city’s poor (Gabrieli: 143); despite the efforts of citizens and even some of Saladin’s associates to ransom as many as possible, Muslim sources report that over 15,000 Franks remained in the city after the November deadline (Gabrieli: 143, 162-63). Saladin delayed his entrance into Jerusalem until Friday, 2 October, so that it would coincide with the anniversary of Mohammed’s ascension (Ibn Shaddad: 77; Gabrieli: 160). The cross was removed from the Dome of the Rock, the mosques were purified, Friday prayers were celebrated, and “Islam was restored . . . in full freshness and beauty” (Gabrieli: 144-46).

[13] Muslim sources suggest that it was only after the surrender of the city that what violence against the remaining Franks took place (Baldwin: 617). Imad al-Din goes into particular detail about how the women were systematically humiliated: young girls married off, cloistered women forced into public, virgins “dishonored,” “great ladies sold at low prices . . . lofty ones abased, and savage ones captured, and those accustomed to thrones dragged down!” (Gabrieli: 163).

[14] As Benjamin Kedar points out in his brilliant essay on the Jerusalem massacre of 1099 in the western historiographical tradition, writers since the twelfth century have used the Crusades as a vehicle by which they have expressed their views not only about the Crusades themselves, but also about religion, society, and violence in their own time. Depending on the era, writers will either turn up or tone down the atrocities, or hold up the Crusades as triumphs of faith or examples of “the poison of fanaticism” (44) engendered by Catholicism, Christianity, or organized religion in general. In more recent years, treatments of the Crusades have varied from the immensely readable yet flawed (and very pro-Byzantine, anti-Frankish) three-volume history by Steven Runciman, to the downplaying of atrocities by Jean Richard, to the not-very-subtly-implied parallels between Crusaders and Nazis drawn by Friedrich Heer, to Hans Eberhard Mayer’s conclusion that the Crusades were, in essence, a 200-year fight “for what is after all an empty hole in a rock” (Kedar: 56-63; Mayer: 261, appearing only in the final chapter of the first edition).

The Crusades in Popular Imagination

[15] The continued interest with the Crusades is not limited to academic circles; the general public retains its fascination in the movement as well. Controversial and popular books like *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ* and *The Da Vinci Code* have

sparked interest in the Templars, which The History Channel has capitalized on with such DVD titles as “The Knights Templar” and “The Templar Code.” In 1995 the Arts & Entertainment network featured a series on the Crusades created by Monty Python alumnus Terry Jones, a production that took a Runciman-like harsh position against the Crusaders.

[16] In terms of the Crusades, religion, and violence, the two most recent popular depictions of the Crusades are among the most puzzling, and, hence, perhaps most indicative of our time: the film *Kingdom of Heaven* and the television series “The Crusades: Crescent and the Cross.” While the series offers a sounder and more balanced view of the Crusades than does the film (despite the screenwriter’s insistence that he based his screenplay upon primary sources; *The Epic: Production Notes*, 9), both are ambivalent when it comes to the clash of faiths and violence perpetrated in the name of religion.

[17] Even before it premiered in early May 2005, *Kingdom of Heaven* had generated controversy (and, the filmmakers likely hoped, buzz) simply by virtue of its existence: in the wake of 9/11 and President Bush’s reference to a “Crusade” against the terrorists, director Ridley Scott was depicting war between Christians and Muslims. When the film finally opened, it was lambasted as a snoozer and dubbed, in reference to Orlando Bloom’s starring in the role of Balian, “The Lord of the Rings: Legolas Defends Jerusalem” (Thomson). One of the leading scholars of the Crusades, Jonathan Riley-Smith, wrote that the film “will feed the preconceptions of Arab nationalists and Islamists . . . [T]he fanaticism of most of the Christians in the film and their hatred of Islam is what the Islamists want to believe. At a time of inter-faith tension, nonsense like this will only reinforce existing myths.”

[18] An early scene in the film depicts Christians, Muslims, and Jews coexisting peacefully together in Jerusalem. As Riley-Smith puts it, “the Holy Land is portrayed as a kind of early America, a New World welcoming enterprising immigrants from an impoverished and repressive Europe,” and a place where “a brotherhood of liberal-minded men” can try to “create an environment in which all religions will co-exist in harmony”; they are also “in touch with Saladin, who shares [their] aim of peace.” Their dream is soon shattered, however, by the doings of evil westerners among them, including the weak Guy, the treacherous Templars, and the alcoholic madman Reynald. These men drive Saladin to the point that he has no choice but to attack the Christians.

[19] What should have followed next was a David Lean-inspired set piece of the Battle of Hattin (to which, after nearly two hours, I had been looking forward to salvage this film), but Scott inexplicably omits this from the film: the troops on both sides line up, and then the scene jumps to a shot of carnage and swirling carrion birds.³ After the battle, and knowing that Saladin has indeed arrived outside the city walls, Balian delivers what should be the Crusades’ version of *Henry V*’s rousing Agincourt speech. But, instead of ideas that can stir men to risk their lives for a greater cause, Balian offers a vacillating, secularized, politically correct, and ultimately stupefying speech:

³ Ridley Scott weakly explains: “We don’t see that battle, because the climax of the film’s story occurs afterward, when Saladin brings his army to the walls of Jerusalem” (*The Epic: Production Notes*, 8).

It is fallen to us to defend Jerusalem, and we have made our preparations as well as they can be made. None of us took this city from Muslims! No Muslim of the great army now coming against us was born when this city was lost. We fight over an offence we did not give, against those who were not alive to be offended. What is Jerusalem? Your holy places lie over the Jewish temple that the Romans pulled down. The Muslim places of worship lie over yours. Which is more holy? The wall? The mosque? The Sepulchre? Who has claim? No-one has claim. All have claim! ["That is blasphemy!" hisses the Patriarch of Jerusalem.] We defend this city, not to protect these stones, but the people living within these walls.

[20] The final words of Balian's speech are not met with a crescendo of cheers, but a prolonged silence, which Scott must have thought would drive home the gravity of the moment. Unfortunately, the effect is thoroughly awkward, leading one to suspect that the people of Jerusalem, like the audience in the theatre, are collectively thinking, "What did he say? So what are we doing here?"

[21] In one of the film's final scenes, after the fall of Jerusalem, Saladin, played by Ghassim Massoud, walks through a room and does something totally out of historical character: he picks up a golden crucifix from the ground and, his eyes lingering upon it, gently places it upon a table. Saladin's gazing upon that cross, with what seems to be a mingling of regret and respect, may work in the why-can't-we-all-live-together minds of the filmmakers, but it is totally out of place in a depiction of a twelfth-century man. This, ultimately, is the problem with *Kingdom of Heaven* as a historical drama: rather than confronting the religious and political issues that drove men to "holy war," Scott attempts to update the controversies and the attitudes, thereby emptying the tale of any value that it might otherwise have in helping audiences to understand this critical moment in Muslim-Christian relations, much less to contemplate the subject of religion and violence.

[22] Less controversial, and in many ways more successful, is The History Channel's recent series on the Crusades. This production combines re-enactments and on-screen scholars, western and Middle Eastern, in an effort to present, once again, a "more balanced" view of the first three Crusades. The series' opening sequence, a montage of clanging swords, battering rams, rearing horses, and medieval "talking heads" over a *Carmina Burana*-styled soundtrack, promises excitement, with a little bit of historical interpretation thrown in. And, indeed, there are plenty of battle scenes, which are actually somehow more exciting, albeit infinitely cheaper and cheesier, than those in *Kingdom of Heaven*. The producers even seem to get respected Crusades scholar Jonathan Phillips to channel the persona of the "Crocodile Hunter" Steve Irwin, becoming *just a little too* excited as he talks about the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099:

You can look up at these walls, and imagine missiles, stones, arrows raining down upon you. [14 seconds of re-enacted battle scenes follow, including hacking, arrows, and the requisite image of a man covered in pitch and set on fire.] The fighting was barbaric and intense, and at one point, the Crusaders gave the phrase "live ammunition" its literal meaning. They

captured a Muslim, strapped him to a catapult, and fired him back over the walls.

[23] After so much mayhem depicted in the taking of the city, the filmmakers betray their own uncertainty about how to treat the sack itself. In the end we get a lone, exhausted Crusader who, in a pastiche of the various chroniclers' accounts of the massacre, may well be experiencing William of Tyre's "disgust and horror":

Replaced the Saracens, and killing them all the way out to Solomon's Temple. Before long, its walls were streaming with blood. We killed both men and women, cutting off their heads with our drawn swords. The surviving Saracens dragged the dead bodies out in front of the city gates, and piled them up in mounds as high as houses. No-one has ever seen, or heard, such slaughter of pagans. For they burnt them on pyres as high as pyramids. No-one knew how many there were – except God. Jerusalem is ours.

[24] What follows for the remainder of this episode, and the beginning of the next, is Muslim reaction to the sack of Jerusalem, then and now. Re-enactors paraphrase sources such as Imad ad-Din, while a modern author, Tariq Ali, explains how the memory of the First Crusade made twenty-first-century Muslims particularly alarmed at President Bush's promise of a "crusade" against terrorists in the days after 9/11. When a western scholar, Thomas Asbridge, appears on screen, he does not address the slaughter, but merely speaks of how Europeans interpreted the fall of Jerusalem as God's will. Latin Christianity's response, or lack thereof, is never addressed or explained in this series, leaving the attentive viewer wondering what medieval Christianity thought about the relationship between religion and violence. And so, with all its attentiveness to detail, all its efforts to balance Christian with Muslim points-of-view, sources, and scholars, the "Crescent and Cross" series ultimately fails to address the Big Question that, whether we want to acknowledge it or not, looms over any treatment of the Crusades, academic or popular, written or filmed: how do people convince themselves that faith condones such violence?

[25] The failure of the *Kingdom of Heaven* and the "Crescent and Cross" to adequately address the issues of religion and violence in the Crusades raises a number of broad, yet significant questions:

Why are we as a society (however defined) so uncomfortable addressing the issue of religion and violence? Is this due to the secularization of modern society, the vestiges of political correctness, or a post-9/11 mentality?

When we talk about the Crusades, or any period of religious wars, how much attention should we pay to the violence itself? This is not to suggest that we need to dwell upon every gory detail of a massacre, but is it enough to say, "Well, a lot of people died badly," and move on to the next subject?

Are we right to brand all those who take part in religious wars, or even individual acts of religious violence, as "fanatics"? This is an easy label to apply, but the label also enables us to dismiss, rather than try to understand the motivations and mindset of, the perpetrators.

What do we gain from exploring the topic of religion and violence? Once we have studied it, can we do anything to prevent it? Or is religious violence a “fact of life” with which we must all live?

The articles in this volume not only address the fact of religion and violence over time, but also efforts to confront the confluence of religion and violence and diminish it. Unfortunately, the Crusades offer no lessons on resolving this issue. But, in hindsight, they should at least compel us to reflect upon the problem and its resolution.

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