
Inventing the Crusades

Thomas F. Madden

The Crusades, Christianity, and Islam
by Jonathan Riley-Smith
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Within a month of the attacks of September 11, 2001, former president Bill Clinton gave a speech to the students of Georgetown University. As the world tried to make sense of the senseless, Clinton offered his own explanation: "Those of us who come from various European lineages are not blameless," he declared. "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 Mount. The contemporaneous descriptions of the event describe soldiers walking on the Temple Mount, 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," he concluded, and there is good reason to believe he was right. Osama bin Laden and other Islamists regularly refer to Americans as "Crusaders." Indeed, bin Laden directed his *fatwa* authorizing the September 11 attacks against the "Crusaders and Jews." He later preached that "for the first time the Crusaders have managed to achieve their historic ambitions and dreams against our Islamic *umma*, gaining control over Islamic holy places and Holy Sanctuaries. . . . Their defeat in Iraq will mean defeat in all their wars and a beginning of the receding of their Zionist-Crusader tide against us."

Most people in the West do not believe that they have been prosecuting a continuous Crusade against

Islam since the Middle Ages. But most do believe that the Crusades started the problems that plague and endanger us today. Westerners in general (and Catholics in particular) find the Crusades a deeply embarrassing episode in their history. As the Ridley Scott movie *Kingdom of Heaven* graphically proclaimed, the Crusades were unprovoked campaigns of intolerance preached by deranged churchmen and fought by religious zealots against a sophisticated and peaceful Muslim world. According to the Hollywood version, the blind violence of the Crusades gave birth to jihad, as the Muslims fought to defend themselves and their world. And for what? The city of Jerusalem, which was both "nothing and everything," a place filled with religion that "drives men mad."

On September 11, 2001, there were only a few professional historians of the Crusades in America. I was the one who was not retired. As a result, my phone began ringing and didn't stop for years. In the hundreds of interviews I have given since that terrible day, the most common question has been, "How did the Crusades lead to the terrorist attacks against the West today?" I always answered: "They did not. The Crusades were a medieval phenomenon with no connection to modern Islamist terrorism."

That answer has never gone over well. It seems counterintuitive. If the West sent Crusaders to attack Muslims throughout the Middle Ages, haven't they a right to be upset? If the Crusades spawned anti-Western jihads, isn't it reasonable to see them as the root cause of the current jihads? The answer is no, but to understand it requires more than the scant minutes journalists are usually willing to spare. It requires a grasp not only of the Crusades but of the ways those wars have been exploited and distorted for modern agendas.

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That answer is now contained in a book, *The Crusades, Christianity, and Islam*, written by the most distinguished historian of the Crusades, the Cambridge University scholar Jonathan Riley-Smith. A transcription of the Bampton Lectures he delivered in October 2007 at Columbia University, it is a thin book, brimming with insights, approachable by anyone interested in the subject.

It is generally thought that Christians attacked Muslims without provocation to seize their lands and forcibly convert them. The Crusaders were Europe's lacklands and ne'er-do-wells, who marched against the infidels out of blind zealotry and a desire for booty and land. As such, the Crusades betrayed Christianity itself. They transformed "turn the other cheek" into "kill them all; God will know his own."

Every word of this is wrong. Historians of the Crusades have long known that it is wrong, but they find it extraordinarily difficult to be heard across a chasm of entrenched preconceptions. For on the other side is, as Riley-Smith puts it "nearly everyone else, from leading churchmen and scholars in other fields to the general public." There is the great Sir Steven Runciman, whose three-volume *History of the Crusades* is still a brisk seller for Cambridge University Press a half century after its release. It was Runciman who called the Crusades "a long act of intolerance in the name of God, which is a sin against the Holy Ghost." The pity of it is that Runciman and the other popular writers simply write better stories than the professional historians.

So we continue to write our scholarly books and articles, learning more and more about the Crusades but scarcely able to be heard. And when we are heard, we are dismissed as daft. I once asked Riley-Smith if he believed popular perceptions of the Crusades would ever be changed by modern scholarship. "I've just about given up hope," he answered. In his new book he notes that in the last thirty years historians have begun to reject "the long-held belief that it [the Crusade movement] was defined solely by its theaters of operation in the Levant and its hostility toward Islam—with the consequence that in their eyes the Muslims move slightly off center stage—and many of them have begun to face up to the ideas and motivation of the Crusaders. The more they do so the more they find themselves *contra mundum* or, at least, *contra mundum Christianum*."

One of the most profound misconceptions about the Crusades is that they represented a perversion of a religion whose founder preached meekness, love of enemies, and nonresistance. Riley-Smith reminds his reader that on the matter of violence Christ was not as

clear as pacifists like to think. He praised the faith of the Roman centurion but did not condemn his profession. At the Last Supper he told his disciples, "Let him who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me, *And he was reckoned with transgressors.*"

St. Paul said of secular authorities, "He does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer." Several centuries later, St. Augustine articulated a Christian approach to just war, one in which legitimate authorities could use violence to halt or avert a greater evil. It must be a defensive war, in reaction to an act of aggression. For Christians, therefore, violence was ethically neutral, since it could be employed either for evil or against it. As Riley-Smith notes, the concept that violence is intrinsically evil belongs solely to the modern world. It is not Christian.

All the Crusades met the criteria of just wars. They came about in reaction attacks against Christians or their Church. The First Crusade was called in 1095 in response to the recent Turkish conquest of Christian Asia Minor, as well as the much earlier Arab conquest of the Christian-held Holy Land. The second was called in response to the Muslim conquest of Edessa in 1144. The third was called in response to the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem and most other Christian lands in the Levant in 1187.

In each case, the faithful went to war to defend Christians, to punish the attackers, and to right terrible wrongs. As Riley-Smith has written elsewhere, crusading was seen as an act of love—specifically the love of God and the love of neighbor. By pushing back Muslim aggression and restoring Eastern Christianity, the Crusaders were—at great peril to themselves—imitating the Good Samaritan. Or, as Innocent II told the Knights Templar, "You carry out in deeds the words of the gospel, 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'"

But the Crusades were not just wars. They were holy wars, and that is what made them different from what came before. They were made holy not by their target but by the Crusaders' sacrifice. The Crusade was a pilgrimage and thereby an act of penance. When Urban II called the First Crusade in 1095, he created a model that would be followed for centuries. Crusaders who undertook that burden with right intention and after confessing their sins would receive a plenary indulgence. The indulgence was a recognition that they undertook these sacrifices for Christ, who was crucified again in the tribulations of his people.

And the sacrifices were extraordinary. As Riley-Smith writes in this book and his earlier *The First*

Crusaders, the cost of crusading was staggering. Without financial assistance, only the wealthy could afford to embark on a Crusade. Many noble families impoverished themselves by crusading.

Historians have long known that the image of the Crusader as an adventurer seeking his fortune is exactly backward. The vast majority of Crusaders returned home as soon as they had fulfilled their vow. What little booty they could acquire was more than spent on the journey itself. One is hard pressed to name a single returning Crusader who broke even, let alone made a profit on the journey. And those who returned were the lucky ones. As Riley-Smith explains, recent studies show that around one-third of knights and nobility died on crusade. The death rates for lower classes were even higher.

One can never understand the Crusades without understanding their penitential character. It was the indulgence that led thousands of men to take on a burden that would certainly cost them dearly. The secular nobility of medieval Europe was a warrior aristocracy. They made their living by the sword. We know from their wills and charters that they were deeply aware of their own sinfulness and anxious over the state of their souls. A Crusade provided a way for them to serve God and to do penance for their sins. It allowed them to use their weapons as a means of their salvation rather than of their damnation.

Of course it was difficult, but that is what penance is supposed to be. As Urban and later Crusade preachers reminded them, Christ Himself had said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." As one Crusade preacher wrote, "Those who take the cross deny, that is to say renounce, themselves by exposing themselves to mortal danger, leaving behind their loved ones, using up their goods, carrying their cross, so that afterward they may be carried to heaven by the cross." The Crusader sewed a cloth cross to his garment to signify his penitential burden and his hope.

Take away penitence and the Crusades cannot be explained. Yet in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Protestants and then Enlightenment thinkers rejected the idea of temporal penalties due to sin—along with indulgences, purgatory, and the papacy. How then did they explain the Crusades? Why else would thousands of men march thousands of miles deep into enemy territory, if not for something precious? The first explanation was that they were fooled by the Antichrist: The Catholic Church had convinced the simple that their salvation lay in fighting its battles. Later, with the advent of liberalism, critics assumed that the Crusaders must have had economic motives. They

were seeking wealth and simply used religion as a cover for their worldly desires.

In the nineteenth century, the memory of the Crusades became hopelessly entangled with contemporary European imperialism. Riley-Smith tells the fascinating story of Archbishop Charles-Martial Allemand-Lavigerie of Algiers, the founder of the missionary orders of the White Fathers and White Sisters, who worked diligently to establish a new military order resembling the Knights Templar, Teutonic Knights, and the Knights Hospitaller of the Middle Ages. His new order was to be sent to Africa, where it would protect missionaries, fight against the slave trade, and support the progress of French civilization in the continent.

Drawing on money from antislavery societies, Lavigerie purchased lands on the edge of the Saharan Desert to use as a mother house for a new order, *L'Institut Religieux et Militaire des Frères Armés du Sahara*. The order attracted hundreds of men from all social classes, and in 1891 the first brothers received their white habits emblazoned with red crosses. The dust cover of Riley-Smith's book is itself a wonderful picture of these brothers at their African home. With palm trees behind them, they look proudly into the camera, each wearing a cross and some holding rifles.

The *Institut des Frères Armés* lasted scarcely more than a year before it was scrapped and its founder died, but other attempts to found a military order were made in the nineteenth century, even in Protestant England. All wove together the contrasting threads of Romanticism, imperialism, and the medieval Crusades.

President Clinton is not alone in thinking that the Muslim world is still brooding over the crimes of the Crusaders. It is commonly thought—even by Muslims—that the effects and memory of that trauma have been with the Islamic world since it was first inflicted in the eleventh century. As Riley-Smith explains, however, the Muslim memory of the Crusades is of very recent vintage. Carole Hillenbrand first uncovered this fact in her groundbreaking book *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*. The truth is that medieval Muslims came to realize that the Crusades were religious but had little interest in them. When, in 1291, Muslim armies removed the last vestiges of the Crusader Kingdom from Palestine, the Crusades largely dropped out of Muslim memory.

In Europe, however, the Crusades were a well-remembered formative episode. Europeans, who had bound the Crusades to imperialism, brought the story to the Middle East during the nineteenth century and reintroduced it to the Muslims. Stripping the Crusades of their original purpose, they portrayed the Crusades as Europe's first colonial venture—the first

attempt of the West to bring civilization to the backward Muslim East.

Riley-Smith describes the profound effect that Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Talisman* had on European and therefore Middle Eastern opinion of the Crusades. Crusaders such as Richard the Lionhearted were portrayed as boorish, brutal, and childish, while Muslims, particularly Saladin, were tolerant and enlightened gentlemen of the nineteenth century. With the collapse of Ottoman power and the rise of Arab nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century, Muslims bound together these two strands of Crusade narrative and created a new memory in which the Crusades were only the first part of Europe's assault on Islam—an assault that continued through the modern imperialism of European powers. Europeans reintroduced Saladin, who had been nearly forgotten in the Middle East, and Arab nationalists then cleansed him of his Kurdish ethnicity to create a new anti-Western hero. We saw the result during the run-up to the Iraq War, when Saddam Hussein portrayed himself as a new Saladin who would expel the new Crusaders.

Arab nationalists made good use of the new story of the Crusades during their struggles for independence. Their enemies, the Islamists, then took over the same tool. Osama bin Laden is only the most recent

Islamist to adopt this useful myth to characterize the actions of the West as a continual Crusade against Islam.

That is the Crusades' only connection with modern Islamist terrorism. And yet, so ingrained is this notion that the Crusades began the modern European assault on Islam that many moderate Muslims still believe it. Riley-Smith recounts: "I recently refused to take part in a television series, produced by an intelligent and well-educated Egyptian woman, for whom a continuing Western crusade was an article of faith. Having less to do with historical reality than with reactions to imperialism, the nationalist and Islamist interpretations of crusade history help many people, moderates as well as extremists, to place the exploitation they believe they have suffered in a historical context and to satisfy their feelings of both superiority and humiliation."

In the Middle East, as in the West, we are left with the gaping chasm between myth and reality. Crusade historians sometimes try to yell across it but usually just talk to each other, while the leading churchmen, the scholars in other fields, and the general public hold to a caricature of the Crusades created by a pox of modern ideologies. If that chasm is ever to be bridged, it will be with well-written and powerful books such as this. FT

Wine Cellar

I have two barrels of wine
stocked in my private store.
One's earthy, one divine;
I thirst for neither the more.

Nights when I think what sins
hold me in others' debt,
a rouge goblet begins
to let my mind forget.

But when dawn lights the halls
and draws my sight outside,
a clearer glass recalls
the heaven I was denied.

—Daniel Haar

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