

The Crusades & Religious Toleration in Medieval Christianity

by Albert Hernández
Iliff School of Theology

“There must be war! God wills it! This is the rallying-cry of the crusader forces that control Jerusalem during the late-1100s in Ridley Scott’s acclaimed 2005 film *Kingdom of Heaven*, one of the few Hollywood portrayals of the Crusades ever praised by Muslim and Arab-American groups. Ironically the Bible, Qur’an and Torah texts of those who fought in the Crusades proclaimed the Word of a God in whose image and likeness the first human, Adam, was created.

Indeed as descendants of both Adam and the Children of Abraham all Jews, Christians, and Muslims had much more in common than most of the instigators and soldiers were willing to admit. Even amidst the violence and turbulence of the Crusades, some remarkable examples of toleration and mutual edification have come down to us through the centuries. Some medieval Jewish, Muslim, and Christian thinkers asked a timeless theological question: What did God intend by the multiplicity of faiths?

On a different note, I have never forgotten the descriptions of the Crusades in my old high school and undergraduate world history textbooks as having “beneficial effects” because “Europe was exposed to the scientific advancements of the Arabs” which stimulated the economy and a revival of learning. However, the historical realities and unfortunate legacies of the various conflicts, known as the Crusades, are not as simple as the sentiments expressed by providential slogans about the Will of God, nor as such outdated educational materials would have us believe.

The truth is that on the receiving end of these chivalric campaigns, thousands of non-combatants died, towns were burned and communities shattered forever. Long before the Crusades, the Arabs and the kingdoms of the Latin West had economic and cultural ties that helped decrease the isolation and impoverishment known to Western Europeans as the “Dark Ages.” The impact of the Crusades upon the development of medieval Europe and the legacy of these military expeditions for the future of Arab and Islamic civilization is one of the most misunderstood and neglected aspects of today’s public and theological discourse.

What Were the Crusades?

Medievalists are divided as to what the defining periods and characteristics of the Crusades really were. Some regard the Crusades to the Holy Land, which lasted from 1095 to 1291 as the classic definition and example of this conflict. Another faction has argued that “crusading” was an integral part of European history from the 700’s through the 1600’s and was motivated much more by cultural assumptions about territorial, political, economic, and military issues than by mere stereotypes about religious wars or by theological differences between Muslims and Christians.

Even in the case of the Albigensian Crusade, conducted by Christians against the Cathar heretics

of Languedoc over a thirty-five year span and culminating in the infamous massacre at Montsegur on March 16, 1244, we find protracted disputes over economic, political, and territorial issues motivating leaders and participants on each side. This was a fight for control of southern France, in which both the Papacy and northern French nobility seemed as intent on centralizing power as on rooting out heresy.

Thus, the medieval idea of “crusade” was not just aimed at Arabs or Muslims in the Holy Land but extended to heretics and pagans, renegade nobles and kings, and enemies of the Pope across Europe. In contrast, with the much more well-known Crusades to the Holy Land, which spanned only two centuries, Spain and Portugal waged a lengthy “Reconquest” for the future of Christendom, a cosmic battle that lasted from the Moorish invasion of Iberia in 711 to the fall of the Caliphate of Granada in 1492.

From these varied perspectives, the following article offers an overview of the Crusades to the Holy Land followed by a summary and analysis of the largely forgotten yet still smoldering historical legacy of the Spanish Reconquest. The need for a lasting peace with justice amidst the current global crisis necessitates that we revisit the lessons of the Crusades and the medieval legacy of religious toleration among Abraham’s Children.

The Crusades to the Holy Land

The term “crusade” derives from the red crosses which crusader knights and soldiers inscribed on their white tunics. To Arab and Muslim chroniclers, the Crusades were known as “the Cross Wars” (*al-hurub al-salibiyya*). Cultural ignorance was rampant on both sides as the Europeans referred to all Arabs and Muslims as “Saracens” while most Arab chroniclers misrepresented the invaders as “Franks,” after the Germanic tribe that settled the region of France. Considering how much of the Hebrew tradition and of Jesus’ life is contained in the Qur’an, ignorance of each other’s religious beliefs appears far deeper on the part of the European and Christian forces as their chroniclers often referred to mosques as “mahommedaries” and criticized Muslims for worshipping the Prophet Muhammad as a “god” while mistranslating his name with Latinized equivalents for “dog” and “devil.”

In the post-9/11 era, almost all areas of medieval historical studies are booming but none more so than Crusade studies. On the surface this may seem odd to the general public but important reconsiderations of the political and theological ideas that led to the formation of European Christian ideologies of peace and holy war are being conducted.

Among these is Tomaž Mastnak’s *Crusading Peace: Christendom, The Muslim World, and Western Political Order* (University of California Press, 2002), which examines the rise of the Crusading spirit in 1095 from the roots the church’s attempt to curtail warfare and blood feuds among the nobility by enacting and enforcing sanctions like the Peace of God and the Truce of God. Converting and civilizing these Germanic warrior-princes became a top priority for the medieval Church. Whereas Christ and the Apostles, and the early Church Fathers up through St. Augustine had clearly favored a pacifist tradition, as a result of becoming embedded in such political and military conflicts medieval Popes and Bishops gained great authority in promoting

secular law and order.

This “new order” as directed by the Church set limitations upon feudal lords with respect to whom they were allowed to attack, the times of the liturgical calendar when they were allowed to take arms against one another, and the types of property and/or possessions they were forbidden to take. Mastnak’s main thesis rests on the impact this restructuring of power and prohibition of war had upon the Church’s political prominence in the Latin West: “The circumscription of violence opened the way for the Church not only to assert its control over the use of arms but also to direct violent action” (10). The stage was then set for crusading against Christendom’s foreign enemies.

It was on the last day of the Council of Claremont, November 27, 1095, that Pope Urban II preached the sermon that inspired the First Crusade as a sort of “armed pilgrimage” to free Jerusalem from the infidels. Four years later the expedition succeeded in establishing the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, which existed until 1291. As much as we would like to have the text of that sermon, there is no surviving copy, nor do we even possess reliable accounts of what he told his audience on that fateful day. What little we do know about Pope Urban’s rhetoric of war comes from a few clergy and nobles present but who wrote their accounts many years later. Most scholars agree that he discussed the need to re-take Jerusalem from the Muslims who denied the divinity of Christ, and that he probably promised God’s salvation for those who took up the sword in the service of Christ and the Church. Hence the phrases “soldiers for Christ” and “Christian soldiers” (*milites Christi*).

By the mid-1100s, the Church had established religious orders of warrior-monks like the Templar Knights and the Order of Knights Hospitallers. As Abbot Odo of Cluny wrote: “Truly, no one ought to be worried because a just man sometimes makes use of fighting, which seems incompatible with religion” (as quoted in Mastnak, 17). Terms such as “peace war” and the “holy manner of warfare” are common among the French and Latin sources of this period. From our vantage point, we must ask whether focusing such aggression against a foreign foe, who just a few years earlier had been eagerly sought after as a trading partner with rich textiles and technological ingenuity, was motivated by a desire to decrease feudal violence in Europe while focusing Europe’s feudal kingdoms against the Arabs and Islam to promote deeper socio-political unity back home.

While Arab and Muslim chroniclers interpreted the Crusades as ploys for colonization, the invaders employed divide and conquer tactics among rival local factions to weaken the Arab kingdoms of the Middle East. The Second Crusade began in 1145 after King Louis VII of France and Pope Eugenius III agreed that the crusader kingdom of Jerusalem needed their help once more. This time, St. Bernard of Clairvaux preached the sermon that unleashed the campaign and promised the participants absolution for their sins and the Lord’s promise of salvation for their deeds of courage and sacrifice.

In 1187, the great Muslim leader Saladin recaptured Jerusalem and Philip Augustus of France together with Richard the Lion Heart responded with the campaign known as the Third Crusade that failed to re-take the Holy City.

The Fourth Crusade is regarded as one of the great military disasters of the Middle Ages when in 1204 the crusaders attacked Constantinople instead of the Turks and seriously weakened the Byzantine Empire. There was even an ill fated and dubious “Children’s Crusade” followed by a “Shepherd’s Crusade” to free the King of France who had been captured while crusading in the East.

By the time the French-Angevine King, St. Louis IX, led the Seventh and Eighth Crusades, the last remaining vestiges of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem were soon to be expelled from the Middle East with the fall of Acre in 1291. Although European kings and Popes later dreamed of regaining control over Jerusalem, none were ever capable again of raising the financial and military resources to challenge the Islamic kingdoms of the Middle East. Also, feudal wars between England and France preoccupied the Latin West until the 1500’s.

The Spanish Reconquest

About a month after the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda’s leaders began making cryptic statements about medieval history that “the tragedy of al-Andalus will not be repeated in Palestine.” Although President Bush later expressed regret through a spokesperson for his own description of the “war on terror” as a “crusade” to rid the world of evil, the two sets of comments seemed related to each other.

“Al-Andalus,” was the Arabic term for Medieval Spain, a land where the Children of Abraham lived together in relative peace and economic cooperation for almost eight centuries of Islamic civilization on European soil. In the autumn of 2001, however, millions of otherwise well-educated men and women across the Western world had no idea what Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants were talking about. 911 days later when terrorists bombed the trains in Madrid on March 11, 2004 (aka: 3/11), a letter claiming responsibility for the murderous attacks stated, “This was part of settling old accounts with Spain, the Crusader....”

Once again, the use and abuse of historical memory in the twisted rhetoric of the attackers was lost upon many in the public because, in the numerous humanities courses and social studies textbooks included among our high school and university curricula, the Western nations have paid very little attention to the story and legacy of that Hispano-Muslim civilization of the Middle Ages.

The Spaniards never ignored this story but re-wrote the master narrative of this encounter among Abraham’s Children with the aroma of an ardent nationalism and religious zeal as “*La Reconquista*,” (The Reconquest) of their homeland from the invading Moors. One example of such national myths is the numerous depictions of St. Santiago Matamoros, (literally: “St. James, The Killer of Moors”) on horseback slicing his way through the ranks of Arab and Muslim troops.

Despite Biblical and Quranic precepts promoting peace and dialogue, medieval civilization was a violent society in which warfare was a viable means of settling disputes and extending the

range of one's political and economic influence, and in which successful campaigns of Holy War or jihad signified God's blessings upon the victors. Of such Divine favor, all of Abraham's Children who tasted victory seemed certain at one time or another.

Berber and Arab invaders from Morocco overthrew the Visigothic kingdoms of the medieval Iberian Peninsula in 711. It was an unusual invasion since due to Visigothic feudal excesses and cruelty some Spanish Christians and Jews welcomed the Islamic "invaders" as liberators preaching a message about the one, true God of Abraham along with ideas about justice and education for all. Then around 756, a surviving prince of the massacred Umayyad dynasty of Arabia, Abd al-Rahman I, crossed from North Africa into Spain and after a brief conflict declared himself Caliph (i.e. "Successor to the Prophet"). This began a "Golden Age" of Islamic civilization on European soil as the new Cordovan state fostered economic prosperity, established law and order, promoted literacy, and extended full rights of citizenship to tax-paying Christians and Jews across the Caliphate, who as the Abrahamic "People of the Book" were seen as theological kin. This was the land the Arabs called "al-Andalus."

The Spaniards and Portuguese retreated to the northernmost corners of the peninsula and from there launched the long series of intermittent "crusade" wars known as "The Reconquest." The knights, mercenaries, and crusaders who fought in this conflict were known as the "Conquistadors." It is hard to follow the ebb and flow of these conflicts spanning almost eight centuries. Suffice it to say that by the year 1000 there were clearly distinct Islamic and Christian territories across Iberia with embattled frontier regions changing hands frequently. A rich blending of Islamic, Christian, and Jewish cultural influences occurred in the art, music and poetry, architecture and literature of Medieval Spain which can still be seen and heard everywhere in Spain today.

The first turning point in The Reconquest came in 1085 when the Christian forces of King Alfonso VI of Leon-Castile retook Toledo from its Arab and Muslim rulers and hastened the demise of Cordova. A few more Muslim kingdoms and states would rise and fall in the ensuing centuries along with considerable feudal infighting among the Spanish kingdoms themselves. Then in 1212, the major turning point occurred when the Christian army of Alfonso VIII of Castile joined forces with the kingdoms of Navarre, Aragon, and Portugal and overwhelmed a sizable Muslim army at the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa. His son, Ferdinand III, then re-united Leon and Castile and by 1236 concentrated his military efforts on three of the remaining major Islamic centers of power: Cordova, Valencia, and Seville. Over the next eight years, all three cities fell to the crusading Spanish-Christian armies.

As in the Crusades to the Holy Land, divide and conquer tactics played a decisive role in weakening resistance among the Hispano-Muslim cities and kingdoms. For their loyalty and military support, Muslim emirs and commanders who fought for the Spanish kings were rewarded by being granted the right to retain and govern the southernmost Islamic region of Iberia, known as the Caliphate of Granada.

Christians, Jews, and Muslims living in those times prayed that the violent and turbulent Reconquest of Iberia had reached its conclusion. But it was not long before the House of Aragon

superseded the supremacy of the other Spanish kingdoms by embarking on a very aggressive expansionist agenda, both at home and abroad. This revived “The Reconquest” as a struggle for national unity as well as for the expulsion of the Jews and Muslims from European soil. In their view, Aragon was carrying out the “Will of God.” In the view of some clergy, Spain was to be the agent of a great transformation across Christendom.

These ideologies of power and exclusion culminated in the unification of Spain under the banner of the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabel of Castile in 1474 and in the conquest of Granada on January 2, 1492. The conclusion of this cosmic battle the same year that Christopher Columbus sailed off into the Atlantic in the name of these same Spanish Monarchs was proof enough for Spain and her leaders that this was “God’s Will” for their new nation.

Given the well-known record of Spanish imperialism and exploitation in the “New World,” readers of this article should note that the “explorers” who followed Columbus to the Americas were known as “Conquistadors.” One might even argue that after 1492 the idea of “Crusade” took on new meanings as a new generation of “crusaders” dreamt of conquering lands across the Atlantic filled with gold and jewels, which some of them called “the New Jerusalem” and which was populated by native tribes that some among the crusader-colonists compared to “noble-savages” in the “Garden of Eden.” Thus failure to learn the hard lessons of multiculturalism and religious diversity during eight-centuries of conflict and coexistence among Christians, Muslims, and Jews living in medieval Spain culminated in yet another unfortunate legacy of violence and conquest for the indigenous and colonial peoples of what would become Latin America.

Religious Toleration During the Crusades

While modern-day radicals and terrorists have distorted and misused the past, we who live in the present have forgotten or ignored that the history of the Crusades to the Holy Land and the Reconquest of Iberia is also a story of broken kinship and failed coexistence among the Abrahamic family. Perhaps one of the most useful lessons from the many centuries medieval Christendom invested in these various Crusades may be gleaned from the scattered insights of medieval authors who wrote about religious toleration. Here is but a small sample from body of work they left us.

The Spanish Muslim theologian, Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), whose *Meccan Revelations* is probably the world’s longest religious poem, offered a paraphrase and reflection of Sura 31:27 from the Qur’an. In summary, he stated that if all of the trees on Earth were pens and the seven seas ink. And, together began writing the names by which God had been known to His children across time and place, one could not possibly exhaust the list of these Divine names. This for Ibn Arabi was proof enough of God’s mandate for religious toleration among human societies. If such imagination was possible at the height of the Crusades, then what are we modern men and women capable of envisioning during the present global crisis?

A former knight turned ardent missionary, St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) traveled through Spain, Morocco, Palestine, and Egypt seeking Muslims for conversion. Arriving in Egypt in 1219 at the time of the Fifth Crusade during a lull in the Battle of Damietta, Francis crossed over

into the Sultan of Egypt's camp with the intent of converting Malik al-Kamil and his people to the Gospel. One of the medieval chroniclers of Francis' life noted that he was appalled at the brutality and lack of discipline among the Crusader forces and believed that the Saracens would defeat them. The Sultan was impressed with Francis' piety and courage, and renunciation of worldly riches but refused to convert. Instead the two men began a series of conversations about faith and salvation while their meeting passed into legend as a symbol of peace through a dialogue of mutual edification for both Christians and Muslims.

Around the year 1200, the German poet-knight Wolfram von Eschenbach composed an epic poem, *Parzival*, about one foolish knight's quest for a mysterious Grail-stone which he slowly learns cannot be won by the sword, nor by chivalric deeds, but only by faithful recognition that human nature is made whole in relation to God's saving grace. The saga also features the Muslim knight, Fierefiz described as the chivalric champion from the Middle East. Neither Parzival nor Fierefiz ever knew his real father but both know that their fathers were killed while crusading.

Events somehow lead the two young knights into a joust to the death on the afternoon of the evening before Pentecost. As their combat begins, Parzival's sword miraculously breaks and the two young knights discover that they are brothers born of the same father through different mothers: Parzival born of a French Christian queen and Fierefiz born of an Arab Muslim queen. The Will of God intervenes to spare each of them from the sin of killing his kinsman. Parzival then attains the Grail on Pentecost Sunday and rides to the Grail-Castle with his brother to claim their destiny. This climactic conclusion recalls all sorts of Biblical images about the Children of Abraham and reconciliation among enemies in times of war.

Conclusion

In closing, we must reiterate the question already posed above: If such imaginative constructions were possible for Muslims, Jews, and Christians at the height of the Crusades, then what possibilities for peace with justice might the imaginations of today's Christian men and women yield amidst our current global crisis?

Notes