

The Crusades

Comparing Christianity at its Worst to Islam

"It is by persuasion, and not by force and compulsion that the Kingdom comes to men, and what protects the church in the last analysis is never the power of the State but only the Holy Spirit as He accompanies the pure preaching of the Word and regenerates the hearts of men."

Dr. H.J. Stob's *The Liberty of Man*

How well do we know the differences between Christianity and Islam, the world's fastest growing religion? In the aftermath of infamous terrorists attacks against New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Muslims placed ads in newspapers, wrote letters to editors, and opened Mosques to the public. They all fervently claimed that the horrendous crimes committed by Arab Muslim terrorists don't represent the true nature of Islam. They ask, "How can these terrorists be true Muslims since Islam orders peace and a true Muslim can only be a symbol of peace and human rights?" American and Canadian Muslims may well be among the first to condemn terrorist attacks and to speak of terrorism as anti-Islamic. But at the same time some major Muslim organizations don't protest the campaign to drive the Israelis into the sea, or the persecution of Christians in Muslim dominated countries. The relationship between Christians and Muslims in Islam-dominated countries continues to be of virtual persecution of Christians. "Never in living memory has the situation for Christian minorities in the Islamic world been so precarious," warns Patrick Sookhded, the director of the Wilshire, England-based Barnabas Fund.

Comments made by an influential leader thought to be in the Islamic mainstream were not reassuring either. Said Sheik Muhammad Gemeaha, leader of Manhattan's Cultural Center, "The Jews were behind these ugly acts (of Sept. 11), while we, the Arabs were innocent." He also claimed that Jewish doctors were poisoning Muslim children in American hospitals and that Zionists, working in the nation's traffic control towers aided the suicide hijackings.

Political leaders have accepted the Muslims' arguments at face value. When war against Muslim terrorists was declared, the public was told over and over again that it was not a war against Islam as a religion. For example, after the September 11 attacks, the White House used the word Crusade to describe its war against Muslim terrorists. But soon afterwards it was code named "Infinite Justice." The title and the word Crusade were deemed offensive to Muslims, so they were changed and apologized for. Even evangelical Christians apologize for the word Crusade. Some say there are Muslims who may never come to Jesus Christ simply because of the self-righteous vigor that fuelled the violence and murder during the Crusades. Others claim that the memories of the Crusades continue to live on in the Muslim mind. In their view, the association between Christianity and naked power, sometimes cruelly used, has been to the lasting detriment of the Christian cause. One writer even declared that the Crusades have done more damage to Christianity in the twentieth century than they did in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

On July 15, 1999, the nine-hundredth anniversary of the fall of Jerusalem to the Crusaders, a party of Christians paraded round the city walls. Their intent was to publicize a personal apology for the Crusades to Muslims. They wanted to make a conciliatory gesture, on the one hand, and on the other hand express contrition for wars which they believed were departures from the Spirit of Christ and His gospel. Although well intended, I believe their apology was pointless.

Muhammad and Jesus

Why the Crusades? I am convinced that their roots are in Islam itself. In Islam there is no separation between the church and political power. In his *The Life of the Prophet Muhammad*, 'Abd Al-Raj,am'Azzam, the first Secretary-General of the Arab League (1945-1952), notes that Islam, unlike any other great religion, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity, subscribes to a political and social order that is to be carefully established and observed in the here and now as a road to the afterworld. "The Kingdom of God in heaven," he states, "is achieved through piety and through a system of social and political order, namely, a Kingdom of God on earth." In an Islamic dominated state, therefore, the political head is the religious head, the representative of Allah.

The place of Muhammad (c.570-632), the founder of Islam, is entirely different from that of Jesus in Christianity. Muhammad is no ideal figure. He did not claim to be sinless. On the contrary, he confessed that he was one. "So know (O Muhammad) that there is no God save Allah, and ask forgiveness for thy sin" (Surah 47:19). He preached violence. He was a skillful diplomat, statesman and general. Through jihad, or holy war, his followers were called on to fight on behalf of Islam. His aim was to build an Islamic society, either through peaceful means or through war. Most of the Arabs were not convinced professors of Islam. No, they accepted it because if they didn't Muhammad would make war on them and conquer them and capture their goods. "The wandering Arabs say: We believe. Say (unto them, O Muhammad): Ye believe not, but rather say 'we submit, for the faith hath not yet entered into your hearts'(Surah 49:14). Before his death Muhammad succeeded in uniting a large number of the Arabs of his immediate region under the crescent of Islam. Though sometimes spoken of as a mediator, Muhammad is neither God nor Savior. He was a mortal man like others. From its very outset, Islam was a military faith, propagated by warlike Arab armies.

Muhammad robbed in the name of Allah. He occupied lands in the name of Islam. During his lifetime, Muslims became a political as well as a religious community, with the Prophet as sovereign-dispensing justice, commanding armies, collecting taxes, and waging war. Yet in the eyes of the true Muslims, Muhammad is more than a man. They revere him as the final Messenger of God and the "Seal of the Prophets." He is the object of faith and of obedience. Muslims believe that the greatest example of such life of obedience and surrender is to be seen in the life of Muhammad. It is on his life that they seek to model their own, just as a Christians try to model their life on the example of Jesus Christ. But Muhammad is dead and buried. His bones are still in the grave in

Medina. According to Islam, he waits for the great Day of Judgment. Muhammad is dead. Jesus is alive. Christians serve the risen Savior!

G.R. Cragg, an Anglican expert on Islam, suggests that the key difference between Muhammad and Jesus is highlighted by asking the question: "How should the prophet succeed when the people refuse to hear him?" By the means of the sword and subjection or by the cross and the resurrection?

In the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, God made Himself known. In the person of Jesus Christ I see the very nature of God. How different from Muhammad! Jesus never confessed sins. He never asked for forgiveness. He showed no awareness of moral failure. He believed Himself to be sinless. Jesus died for our sin, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, thereby becoming our intercessor. For three centuries Christianity spread by preaching the Gospel, showing kindness and love, living exemplary lives, and giving encouragement and hope to the poor. It grew as the religion of the oppressed. War was seen as a contradiction to the Gospel. And throughout the centuries Christians have always been more or less aware of this. In the time of emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180) the anti-Christian pamphleteer Celsus was the first known person to realize that although the Christian community was non-political, quietist, and pacifist, it had it in its power to transform the social and political order of the Roman empire.

Holy War

The enormous importance of war in the spread of Islam is denied today in intellectual circles that admire Islam and claim it is a peaceful and democratic religion. But history tells a different story. War is inherent in Islam. War meant to convert infidels is considered a sacred duty. A war of this kind is a jihad, a holy war. The French scholar Jacques Ellul observes:

"Let us make no mistake, the word jihad has two complementary senses. It may denote a spiritual war that is moral and inward. Muslims have to wage this war within themselves in the fight against demons and evil forces, in the effort to achieve better obedience to God's will, in the struggle for perfect submission. But at the same time and in a wholly consistent way the jihad is also the war against external demons. To spread the faith, it is necessary to destroy false religions. This war, then, is always a religious war, a holy war."

In other words, the idea of a holy war is not of Christian origin. Muhammad freely used the sword. His military expeditions against Meccan caravans, the elimination of the Jews in Medina, and the willingness to use force to convert Arab tribes are matters of historic record. And hardly had the Islamic faith taken hold in Arabia when an immediate military conquest began. From 632 to 651, in twenty years after the death of the prophet, there were lightning wars of conquests. In 634 Muslim armies captured Damascus, then all of Syria and Palestine. Egypt was invaded in 642. Seventy years

afterwards it began to invade Spain. By 700 the whole of once Christian North Africa was in Muslim hands. There Christianity completely disappeared.

As I have shown, war is not a foreign concept in Islam. The idea of a holy war is a direct product of the Muslim jihad. It is inscribed in its teaching. It is coherent with Muhammad's conviction that the world is destined to become Muslim by Arab conquests. And if the latter is a holy war, then obviously the fight against Muslims to defend or save Christianity has also to be a holy war. The Crusades, then, are an imitation of Islam's jihad. Between 1096 and 1291 -over nearly two hundred years - armies from Europe were determined to re-conquer the former Christian territories which had been lost to Islam. But one of the leading causes of the Crusades was the destruction of the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem and also the Holy Sepulchre on the orders of Caliph al Hakim of Egypt (996-1021), known as "the mad Caliph." It was especially the desire to recover the "holy places" for pilgrimages to the Holy Land that gave impetus to the Crusades. And those who joined the Crusades were guaranteed salvation. They did not have to undergo the penance of heavy temporal punishment, which the Roman Catholic Church laid on penitent sinners. As in Islam the one who dies in a jihad goes straight to Paradise, the same belief was applied to the one who takes part in a Crusade.

Conclusion

I didn't write this article to make excuses for the perversion of Christian conduct during the Crusades. I am not trying to shift the blame on the Muslims or whitewash a dark period in the history of the Church. And I can't think of any contemporary Christian scholar who would defend what the Crusaders did. The great fault of the Crusaders was that in their fervent desire to recover Christian lands conquered by Muslim invaders, they imitated Islam. The tragedy was that the Church had forgotten the Gospel of free grace. They trusted indulgences, work-righteousness and papal dispensations rather than trusting in Christ alone. They were convinced that they could enter paradise by fighting "a holy war" against unbelievers, the conquerors of the Holy Land, the destroyers of Christendom's holy places. The Crusades were wrong. But the September 11th terrorist attack is a stark reminder that Muslim extremists, fighting their jihad, still believe that terrorizing Western civilization, persecuting Christians and other "infidels," and dying for their cause means instant paradise.

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