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Rereading the Crusades: An Introduction

THE VERY WORD 'crusade' stirs controversy. A colleague told me recently that a university in Pennsylvania had decided that their crusader mascot no longer represented the image they desired to project for their school. Yet a popular television programme wears the same badge proudly. There is nothing new about these differences. They are a product of the 'parochialism in time', as Bertrand Russell calls it, that has haunted our modern age,¹ and their origin is to be found in popular views that have found refuge even in the works of respected historians.² Many of those who have given thought to the matter have regarded the crusades as the product of religious fanaticism; others have viewed them as forerunners of European imperialism, the first hesitant steps towards European colonialism. But neither of these views is as influential among contemporary historians as the idea that the crusades sprang from an authentic religious concern for the liberation of the holy places, the establishment of Christian unity, and the protection of Christian minorities in Muslim lands.³ There is no line that would enable scholars to rule certain factors entirely in or out of this picture. Evidence of religious fanaticism among both Christians and Muslims can be found, but was it ever sufficient to be a primary cause, to shape the continuing commitment of the West to the crusades, or to play a similar part in Islamic attitudes towards the West?⁴

¹ Bertrand Russell, quoted by Christopher Dawson, *The Making of Europe* (New York, 1952), 16.

² Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades* (Cambridge, 1954), iii. 480, reminds us of these problems in a dramatic passage which closes his monumental work: 'High ideals were besmirched by cruelty and greed, enterprise and endurance by a blind and narrow self-righteousness; and the Holy War itself was nothing more than a long act of intolerance in the name of God, which is the sin against the Holy Ghost.'

³ Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A Short History* (London, 1987), xxviii-xxix, provides a good definition of the crusade and a discussion of the state of the question. Cf. also his *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading* (Philadelphia, 1986) and Hans Eberhard Mayer, *The Crusades*, 2nd ed. (London, 1988).

⁴ Recently the popular writer Karen Armstrong has turned to the crusade in *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World* (New York, 1991). Although she stresses that her own background and interests are in the field of religion, most of the book is devoted to journalistic comparisons of the situation of the modern Near and Middle East and that at the time of the crusades. Like many such works, she argues for a type of historical continuity that bears little

Likewise, despite numerous examples of European lordships in the East, Western settlements in the Levant remained small.¹ Those directly related to the crusades never lost their military character: commercial developments were either independent of or subsidiary to the crusades, though they certainly benefited from them.² Issues such as these, whatever their relative importance to the picture of the crusade movement, do serve to illustrate the important role of the crusades in transforming not only western European society, but also the Mediterranean world.³ Often their impact had both positive and negative effects, but, more important, it affected the manner in which ideas, practices, and institutions developed in ways that we need to understand better in order to untangle the complex strands that form the everyday fabric of our own society.

The essays that follow illustrate some of the ways in which the crusades affected the Latin West and, to some extent, the Byzantine Empire. In so doing, they also address issues that animate popular debates that are largely grounded in efforts to infuse moral judgements into history and in intense feelings about the causes of injustice in the contemporary world.⁴ It is well to remind ourselves that Christopher Dawson continues Russell's lament with the stricture that 'this way of writing history is unhistorical, since it involves the subordination of

resemblance to the actual state of affairs in those regions. What is of particular interest for this essay, however, is the degree to which she retains the view that religious fanaticism underlay the crusades. Her view is merely the late-twentieth-century version, post-modern and a bit Gnostic, of many earlier critiques of the Westerners as fanatics and the Muslims as tolerant. The following comment is revealing: 'It is often true that the people who are not involved in a holy war tend to be more creative than their territorially-minded brethren. We have seen that this is true in Judaism and in 1146 it was also true in Christianity. Indeed Bernard's [St Bernard of Clairvaux, who preached the second crusade] crusading religion itself seems barren. Not only was his Crusade a disaster but he thwarted creativity at home. As a Cistercian he disapproved of beautiful architecture and would have had no time for Chartres Cathedral; he destroyed Abelard's intellectual movement, and even his mysticism was elitist and exclusive and only for Cistercians. Francis of Assisi would later bring spirituality to the people, and the friars would replace the Cistercians as the leaders of Europe in the thirteenth century.' In a further statement that illustrates her way of 'using' history, Armstrong writes: 'Eleanor of Aquitaine, who had always opposed Bernard's Holy War, spread the cult of courtly love throughout northern and southern France after she settled in her native Poitiers in 1170.' All of this is interwoven with her reading of some of the best recent literature on the topic that hardly supports her views.

¹ Benjamin Z. Kedar, 'The Subjected Muslims of the Frankish Levant', in *Muslims under Latin Rule*, ed. James M. Powell (Princeton, 1990), 135-74.

² Hilmar C. Krueger, 'Economic Aspects of Expanding Europe', in *Twelfth-Century Europe and the Foundations of Modern Society*, ed. Marshall Claggett, Gaines Post, and Robert Reynolds (Madison, 1966), 59-76.

³ This point is well illustrated in the fine study by Michael A. Köhler, *Allianzen und Verträge zwischen fränkischen und islamischen Herrschern im Vorderen Orient* (Berlin, 1991).

⁴ The recent and generally worthwhile study by Amin Maalouf, *The Crusade through Arab Eyes* (New York, 1985), provides various examples.

the past to the present.¹ Laudable though the motives of the participants in contemporary discussions may be, they may well produce the platitudes of the future rather than the incisive new meanings they seek, unless they engage the difficult and controversial decisions made in the past in all their complexity and, at the same time, strive to escape the dominant presentism of our age. The essays respond to some of the important issues expressed in these discussions. Here I propose some perspectives that may prove helpful to the non-specialist.

James A. Brundage details the confrontation between morality and violence in the writings of canonists and theologians, to show how deep were the conflicts over issues fundamental to the crusades.² We must keep in mind that his sources do not provide a coherent and unified view of just war or holy war. As he makes clear, it is possible to speak of a consensus on these topics only if we ignore the reservations and disagreements of some writers. The tension between acceptance and rejection of war as a means of settling disputes, present in much Christian writing of the period, must be taken seriously. As Brundage tells us, it is not merely a product of rationalization.³

The tension differentiates Christianity from both Old Testament views of war and the attitudes that developed in Islam. One might suggest, however, that holy war is more a Christian phenomenon, because sanctification of the cause was necessary to remove the obstacles that Christian thought had raised to the use of war under the aegis of religion.⁴ Putting the matter another way, the idea of just war set requirements that were difficult to meet or judge in the real world. Holy war lowered the barriers. While the roots of holy war certainly stretch back to the Old Testament, and the roots of the jihad likewise – though we should not rule out the force of the bedouin experience – the society that produced the concept of holy war did so from its experience of wrestling with its own devils.⁵ Holy war was not a

¹ Dawson, *Making of Europe*, 16.

² See, also, James A. Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law and the Crusader* (Madison, 1969) and his essay 'Holy War and the Medieval Lawyers', in *The Holy War*, ed. Thomas P. Murphy (Columbus, 1976), 99–140.

³ This is not the only such tension. For a discussion of the conflict between the idea of pilgrimage and war, see the recent dissertation by Christopher Libertini, 'Decision at Damiatta: The Transformation of the Crusades, 1095–1221' (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston College, 1995).

⁴ The term 'Holy War' seldom occurs in medieval writing about warfare and serves chiefly among more modern authors to denote the degree of religious motivation behind particular wars. There is an extended discussion in Frederick Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1975), 2, 38.

⁵ Brundage, 'Holy War', 103. But cf. W. Montgomery Watt, 'Islamic Conceptions of the Holy War', in *Holy War*, 141–56, esp. 151–2. Watt stresses the importance of the *razzia* in the

perverse violation of the Christian commitment to peace, but a direct result of it. To be consistent ideologically, warfare had to proceed from a sacred cause. This was the guarantee of its justice.

Another way of looking at holy war is as an act of love.¹ This view, taken from St Augustine, proceeds from the notion that war is a corrective. We might use the analogy of parent and child, in which the parent applies discipline out of love for the child. It is difficult, however, to apply this principle to those not of the Christian faith. Christian heretics, for example, would at least be aware of the doctrines of the church and, in theory, subject to correction. But how would that apply to those who were neither aware of nor subject to those teachings? Only, it seems, if we see the sacralization of war as a means of transforming society can we reconcile it to the crusade against the Muslims.² Pope Urban II certainly was aware of the potential for the crusade to change the Christian society of the West. According to Fulcher of Chartres, the pope referred specifically to this purpose in the sermon at Clermont in 1095 during which he proclaimed the First Crusade: he spoke with deep concern of the harmful impact of the changes that were taking place in the West, such as the increase in population and its link to internal conflict. He also enunciated a vision of a new Christian society in the East.

By the middle of the twelfth century, the papacy was able to produce an historical interpretation of the crusade that integrated its military aspects with the papal programme of reform, thus linking it closely with the idea of societal renewal. Essentially, the crusade was the instrument for the restoration of Christian unity between East and West and for the reconstruction of the church in lands that had been under Muslim rule; a programme tuned to the echoes of a Constantinian golden age. To what degree did they echo also in the secular dreams of the Emperors since the time of Conrad III? Is it possible to understand a Frederick Barbarossa without envisaging him as a central figure in a renewed society? And what of other secular rulers? Did they also share in this vision? Notions such as imperialism and colonialism, drawn from the experience of later ages, are inadequate to describe the conceptual framework that was gradually developing in

formation of the idea of jihad.

¹ Jonathan Riley-Smith, 'Crusading as an Act of Love', *History*, lxxv (1980), 177-92.

² For a discussion of missionary efforts, see Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches to the Muslims* (Princeton, 1984). I suggest that the zeal to transform society exhibited in the missionary effort was compatible with the fundamental goals of the crusade enunciated from the time of Pope Urban II. See also the discussion of the relationship between the crusade and the concept of wars of liberation in Jonathan Riley-Smith, *Crusades*, 4-7.

the evolving crusade movement. Beyond doubt, the notion of holy war helps us to deepen our understanding of the Mediterranean world.

Against this background we should set the essay by Bernard Hamilton, which directs us towards the place of institution building, in this case monastic institutions, in the process of transformation.¹ The development of various forms of lay spirituality that accompanied the reform movement of the eleventh century found expression in the crusade movement, beginning with the sermons preached by Urban II in 1095. This spirituality had its roots in monasticism. Conversely, the crusades further helped to shape lay spirituality along monastic lines, and to provide, in the hospitaller and military orders founded in the twelfth century, models for new monastic forms. The crusades witnessed the transport of religious houses and forms of religious life that were developing in the West not only to the Holy Land but also to Cyprus, Rhodes, Lebanon, Asia Minor, and, for a time in the thirteenth century, to the Latin Empire of Constantinople. Among those new orders directly influenced by the crusades, the Carmelites stand out as one with roots in the Holy Land itself. But the relationship of the Franciscans to the crusades was even closer. The deep sense of mission derived by St Francis of Assisi from the crusades – at Damietta in 1219, he preached to both the crusaders and the Sultan – was instilled in his followers.²

From the beginning, the crusades had forced Westerners to look beyond their frontiers. The course of the thirteenth century would amply demonstrate, in such activities as the missions to China and to the Mongols, the manner in which the crusades helped to transform Europe's place in the world. The religious orders, particularly the Franciscans and the Dominicans, took the lead, but, as Hamilton shows, the way was paved by habits of support built in the West for the new foundations in the East in the course of the twelfth century. Can we go so far as to say that the example of the hospitallers and the military orders helped to reshape the role of religious orders in the church?

What emerges very clearly is that the new forms of knightly piety so prominent in the thirteenth century, and that underlie the concept of chivalry, are themselves deeply indebted to the positive role assigned

¹ Bernard Hamilton, *The Latin Church in the Crusader States: The Secular Church* (Aldershot, 1980), provides the reader with detailed evidence of this work as well.

² Kedar, *Crusade and Mission*, 119. Regarding the Order of Merced, Trinitarians, and the ransoming of captives, cf. James Brodman, *Ransoming Captives in Crusader Spain: The Order of Merced on the Christian-Islamic Frontier* (Philadelphia, 1986) and Giulio Cipollone, OSST, *Cristianità-Islam: Cattività e liberazione in nome di Dio: Il tempo di Innocenzo III dopo 'il 1187'* (Rome, 1992).

to the military class in the crusades; a role reinforced by the formation of the military orders and which came to have a special meaning for the foundation of orders of chivalry in the later Middle Ages.¹ Clearly, the development of this positive martial spirit was also valuable for the emerging states of the West, though it possessed obvious drawbacks as well. The quasi-religious aspect of secular attitudes towards war has lasted into the twentieth century, often in the garb of nationalism; clothing the monastic ideal behind chivalry in totally new and potentially awful identities in the modern world. But this linkage is a far cry from the arguments for continuity often heard today.

Penny J. Cole points directly to some of the ways in which the crusades influenced the development of theological ideas such as purgatory, penance, and prayers for the dead.² We have only to note the prayer that was recited by the priest during the memorial masses for departed souls to capture something of the spirit of the crusade's spiritual meaning. Certainly, her work suggests that the crusade formed an integral element in the lay spirituality of the West and thus provides specific evidence of other transformations similar to the transformation of the orders of chivalry.

Finally, the importance of the debate over the diversion of the Fourth Crusade, in which the work of Donald E. Queller and Thomas F. Madden has played a leading role, hardly needs explanation.³ The expansion of Islam had punctuated Late Antiquity throughout the Mediterranean world. The crusades were, of course, the beginning of Western expansion. Rather than dwell on that point, however, we need to examine how the focus of the Latins once more on the Mediterranean altered the picture that had emerged in Late Antiquity. The crusades injected a new dynamic into that world, one that went beyond conquest. What was begun would ultimately open the way for

¹ Heribert Müller, *Kreuzzugspläne und Kreuzzugspolitik des Herzogs Philip des Guten von Burgund* (Göttingen, 1993), shows the connections between the foundation of the Order of the Golden Fleece and the crusades. His work demonstrates the importance of studying the orders of chivalry in the context of earlier military orders. For further work and up-to-date bibliography, see *The Military Orders: Fighting for the Faith and Caring for the Sick*, ed. Malcolm Barber (Aldershot, 1994).

² Penny J. Cole, *The Preaching of the Crusades* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991) is an extended discussion of numerous important relationships between the crusade and medieval spirituality. Cf. also, James M. Powell, *Anatomy of a Crusade, 1213-1221* (Philadelphia, 1986), 51-65 for a discussion of the impact of crusade on the concept of vocation.

³ Donald Queller, *The Fourth Crusade* (Philadelphia, 1978). A second edition, revised by Queller and Madden, is currently in press. See also Thomas F. Madden, 'Vows and Contracts in the Fourth Crusade: The Treaty of Zara and the Attack on Constantinople in 1204', *International History Review*, xv (1993), 441-68; 'Venice and Constantinople in 1171 and 1172: Enrico Dandolo's Attitude towards Byzantium', *Mediterranean Historical Review*, viii (1993), 166-85; and 'The Fires of the Fourth Crusade in Constantinople, 1203-4: A Damage Assessment', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, lxxxix-lxxxv (1992), 72-93.

the fundamental transformation of all Mediterranean societies. If the diversion of the Fourth Crusade was a tragedy for Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire, it may also have administered a shock that helped to preserve the empire for another two hundred and fifty years. The value of Queller's and Madden's arguments may lie in changing the dimensions of the discussion about the nature of the later Byzantine Empire, recognizing the positive aspects of the post-1204 experience and de-emphasizing the anti-Venetian tone in scholarship.

The essays do not attempt to paint over the negative aspects of the crusades. Rather, they provide insights into the way in which they were perceived by contemporaries. They point towards a fuller understanding of the reason why many could support such military endeavours. Although there were certainly religious fanatics in the West – and this was true within the Islamic world as well – the continued broad-based support for the crusades depended far more on the self-image of a society that commanded the loyalties of people than on fanatical zeal. The crusades were, as we sometimes recognize ourselves, a creative force that, for better or worse, held up a vision of a new and better world, but one that was not without flaw.

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