

THE CRUSADES, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM

(THE OCTOBER 2007 BAMPTON LECTURES IN AMERICA
AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY)

by Jonathan Riley-Smith

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Riley-Smith's four lectures on the historical record of what the Crusades actually were do a great job, in just 80 pages, of unveiling the true nature of the Crusades. He shows how vastly different those holy wars were from what uninformed Westerners and Islamists alike usually perceive them to have been. Riley-Smith argues persuasively that the perception most contemporary Muslims have of the Crusades dates only from the *end* of the nineteenth century. In his lectures (which became this book) he sought to help people see the enormous gulf that has opened between the *historical actuality of the Crusades as understood by historical specialists* and the common *modern convictions about the nature and meaning of the Crusades* (pp. 5-6). Riley-Smith's explicitly states what he intends to be the main, and urgent, message of the book:

It is that we cannot hope to comprehend—and thereby confront—those who hate us so much unless we understand how they are thinking; and this involves opening our eyes to the actuality—not the imagined reality—of our own past (p. 6).

In this review I am going to give an overview of Riley-Smith's argument and then suggest a few implications that this understanding of the role of the Crusades in history could have for our understanding of Islamists and the ongoing permanent state of hostility that Muslim Arabs have toward the state of Israel and more generally, against the West and particularly against the United States.

There are so many assumption-destroying 'revelations' in this book that it is hard to decide which ones to mention, and which ones to leave for you to discover when you read the book yourself. For example, Riley-Smith suggests that Christian leaders, both Catholic and Protestant, are in a state of denial about the Crusades when they suggest that the Crusades really had very little to do with the true teachings of the church. He quotes an Oxford church history professor who suggested that the Crusades were 'a bizarre centuries-long episode in which western Christianity wilfully ignored its Master's principles of love and forgiveness' (p. 4). Riley-Smith suggests that such perspectives are totally unfounded historically, and that:

Augustine believed that temporal rulers, even pagan ones, could rightly wage war, but he also believed that God could personally order war, and if he did so, it would be

as recently as the seventeenth century, and perhaps more recently still, *most Christians*—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—*had in general no problem with the idea of holy war*. From the twelfth century to the seventeenth the consensus of the teaching of the Catholic bishops was that qualified men had *a moral obligation to take the cross*. This was reinforced by the support of a succession of men and women generally recognized as saints: Bernard of Clairvaux, Dominic, Louis of France, Thomas Aquinas, Bridget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, John of Capistrano, even probably Francis of Assisi (pp. 4-5, emphasis added).

Riley-Smith calls the Crusades penitential war pilgrimages. ‘To crusade meant to engage in a war that was both holy, because it was believed to be waged on God’s behalf, and penitential, because those taking part considered themselves to be performing an act of penance’ (p. 9). Before Christians gained political power, the Roman doctrine of just wars warranted the exercise of state force only when three conditions were properly met: (1) the motives must be good and for a just, or legally valid, reason, (2) it must be formally declared by an authority recognized as having the power to declare war, and (3) it must be waged justly (pp.12-13). Augustine adapted this and added some Christian nuances by arguing that a just cause for war was ‘an intolerable injury, usually taking the form of aggression or oppression’ (p. 12). Augustine believed that temporal rulers, even pagan ones, could rightly wage war, but he also believed that God could personally order war, and if he did so, it would be ‘without doubt just’ (p. 12). Augustine helpfully insisted that the *right intention* had to be present; those undertaking war had to be motivated by love and should use only as much force as necessary, so as to mitigate the suffering of the innocent as much as possible.

Unfortunately, Augustine also advocated two other principles that were not so great: (1) that it was God who authorized wars when his ministers declared war, and that (2) such authorized violence was morally neutral because it was undertaken in obedience to God. Thus, following Augustine’s lead, holy war came to be understood as authorized directly, or indirectly, by God, and being fought to further God’s intentions. The moral force of the violence was all in the intention of the perpetrators. Killing was not bad, since men will die anyway, but the suffering is bad. If they were rightly motivated, then the violence committed was morally neutral (pp. 12-13). Further, the Crusades, like all holy wars, could only be reactive, and never wars of aggression or oppression (p. 15). Moreover, since Crusades were fought by volunteers, a convincing case had to be made for every war. A powerful theme in persuading people of the need for the Crusades was that an endangered Christ was personally calling on men to hurry to his aid.

But one central aspect of the Crusades which made them exceptions to normal ‘holy’ wars was that these wars were undertaken, by the participants, as

wars of penance. All crusaders were expected to behave as thought they were penitents on a pilgrimage. When not in armour crusaders were supposed to dress simply as pilgrims. It is said that after the liberation of Jerusalem in 1099 the survivors of the first crusade threw away most of their weapons and armour and returned home carrying only the palm fronds that showed they had completed their pilgrimage (p. 30). This was a revolutionary re-conceiving of holy war.

It was a belief that the Crusades were collective acts of penance, repayments through self-punishment of the debts owed to God for sin, which distinguished them from other holy wars.... It is no exaggeration to say that a crusade was for an individual only secondarily about service in arms to God or the benefiting of the church or Christianity; it was primarily about benefiting himself, since he was engaged in an act of self-sanctification.... The penitential nature of crusading helps to explain why, after the often revolting violence, the most characteristic feature of any expedition was how liturgical it was. The first crusaders began each new stage of the march barefoot and they fasted before every major engagement (pp. 33, 34).

Over time the cross began to be strongly associated with the Crusades. In the devotional life of the Middle Ages, the cross gave meaning to everything, and the Crucifixion was the centre of piety and imagery of that devotion. Cross-centred language grew around 1200 and was pervasive in the 13th century (p. 41). One 'James of Vitry' in seeking to inspire volunteers for a crusade made this appeal:

What greater almsgiving can there be than offering oneself and one's belongings to God and risking one's life for Christ, leaving behind one's wife, children, relations and birthplace for the service of Christ, exposing oneself to dangers on land, dangers at sea, dangers from thieves, dangers from plunderers, the danger of battle for the love of the Crucified (p. 40)?

Those undertaking a crusade had NO thought of material gain from the pilgrimage. Crusades were dangerous (with a death rate exceeding 40% for some), inconvenient, always very expensive with few rewards and very costly. They were a severe drain on family resources throughout their history. Yet, in spite of these hardships, most devout Christians believed, for centuries, that war against perceived enemies of Christendom and the church had both necessary and beneficial qualities, not the least of which was that those taking part in the crusade pilgrimage could repay the debt their sinfulness had incurred (p. 43-44).

In the second half of his book, Riley-Smith shows that Crusading was not an early kind of European imperialism. He then goes on to show how late nineteenth century European imperialists drew on the distorted romantic images of Crusading, such as those portrayed in Walter Scott's novels, and sought to appropriate these images for their own imperialistic ends. By the end of the

nineteenth century, however, most Muslims had entirely forgotten about the Crusades, which they viewed as having been decisively won by their own side.

But then, as Riley-Smith shows in his fourth chapter, the emerging Arab nationalists in the early twentieth century took the nineteenth century imperialist crusade rhetoric literally, and came to believe that the West was embarking on yet another crusade because they had lost the first round of Crusades. This nineteenth century romanticised reinterpretation of the Crusades, manufactured by European imperialist, is now taken as fact throughout the Muslim world; this perception is a central part of the motivation that drives Islamists today—the need to fight against the crusade that Westerners are perpetrating against Islam in its heartland. Many Muslims see the European installation of the Jewish state of Israel as one of the primary instruments of crusading efforts in the twentieth century. The Islamists' commitment to destroy the state of Israel and push the Jews into the Mediterranean sea is understood to be a necessary act of holy war against the crusading West that has installed a vassal state in the Muslim heartland, The West must be defeated again, just as, after the initial successes of the Crusaders in the eleventh century, they were eventually soundly defeated.

Riley-Smith comments that in our Western efforts to counter *jihadism*, little effort has been made to counter this seriously distorted Muslim reading of Crusade history. We tend to see Crusading in much the same way that Muslims see it, and are often ashamed of it. Recent attempts to apologize to Muslims for the Crusades are pointless, for 'an apology for past events would have been futile as far as the Muslims are concerned, since crusading is for them still a reality, conducted in more sophisticated and effective ways than ever before' (p. 77).

Reading this short presentation of the penitentiary nature of the Crusades—and of how the Crusades were re-interpreted and appropriated by nineteenth century imperialists, and then used by first Arab nationalist, and more recently by jihadists—has been very illuminating. I now better understand the nature of the Crusades, why they were defended and justified by the vast majority of Christians for 6-700 years, and how it is that present day Muslims have come to believe a distortion of this ignoble history and use it as fuel for their jihadist zeal against the 'crusading West'. One's reading of history certainly impacts one's deeds in the present, and both sides of the continuing clash between Islam and the Western powers are not being helped by this serious misreading of crusader history.

Reviewed by Don Little