



APOCALYPTIC WAR OF TWO FAITHS

An Epic History Channel Presentation

Pundits and politicians have looked to the medieval era's two-hundred-year holy wars in the Middle East, the Crusades, as a way to understand current geopolitical events. They have pointed out parallels between then and now: Christians were at war with Muslims. There was the advocacy of sacred violence, and political connivance was inextricably linked to all discussion.

Historian and author Jonathan Phillips, a commentator

on the History Channel documentary debuting November 6th at 9 P.M. ET/PT, "The Crusades: Crescent & The Cross," notes that the word crusade is for the most part used in the secular sense today. "If you were to open up any newspaper, you would probably find 'crusade' in it. For example, there might be something about a 'crusade' to stop waiting lists in hospitals—Tony Blair came out with that the other day. But Blair didn't mean a holy war. He meant a good cause."



But in the East, the Crusades are still spoken of, with the kind of seemingly intimate knowledge that could cause one to assume they had occurred only days before. Café and street-side storytellers lionize the victories of Saladin, the man who re-took Jerusalem and who withstood the challenge led by the celebrated English King, Richard the Lionheart.

Author and professor of Islamic history Taef Kamal el-Azhari, a commentator in “The Crusades: Crescent & The Cross,” notes that politicians and dictators have even used the images from the Crusades to their own ends. Indeed, Saddam Hussein once issued a postage stamp with his picture alongside that of Saladin, with whom he shared the same birthplace, Tikrit, as Hussein liked to compare himself with the warrior who successfully challenged the West. “I grew up in Egypt in the sixties and seventies, where he was portrayed as a saint,” el-Azhari says.

Present-day residents of these fought-over territories spend their days on former battle sites. “Although much of it was destroyed by an earthquake in 1302, many of the citadels and the fortifications are there, to remind you of that era,” says el-Azhari. Phillips notes, “If you were to go to the site for the battle of Hattin—where Saladin defeats the crusaders—and if you have a good range of contemporary descriptions, you can piece it together.” The contended holy places—the pretext for the wars—are also still extant: the Al Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock, and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Phillips notes that the Old City of Jerusalem has physically changed very little.

And these sacred sites still hold great power. El-Azhari notes, “The Al Aqsa Mosque is the first place the Muslims prayed in the direction of. In Saudi Arabia, the mosque is on the fifty riyal, the currency we use every day.”

A PLACE IN HEAVEN

The war cycle was set in motion in early 1095 when Pope Urban II got a request from Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenus to help him defend his Eastern Christian empire, based in Constantinople, from the invading Muslim warriors. In November, Urban took the opportunity of the Council of Clermont to speak of the atrocities taken in the name of Islam against Christian pilgrims. Among other things, Urban claimed that the pilgrims to the church of the Holy Sepulcher were raped, forced to convert, or disemboweled.

Modern-day historians conclude that the pope was either exaggerating or had been misled by the Byzantines. At the end of his speech, legend has it, the crowd roared its approval: “Deus vult!” (God wills it!)

What happened next is open to speculation, as no one knows





whether Urban foresaw how popular the Crusade would become. Because this war was divinely sanctioned, he granted indulgences. Those who had slaughtered other Europeans in the unending battles were, at best, headed for Purgatory. But most were doomed to Hell. Any soldier, however, who took up the sword to fight the infidel, could be guaranteed a place in heaven.

Knights, soldiers, and pilgrims by the thousands took the vow. They swore to march to the Holy Land—some with their wives, and others with entourages—through the European continent, over mountains, and across barren deserts to reclaim Jerusalem. Certain of their places in the afterlife, the Crusaders launched what might today be called “shock and awe” attacks throughout the enemy territory. They slaughtered Muslims, but also Jews, heretics, and fellow Christians.

Alexius hoped for a small group of mercenaries; what he got was a force of more than sixty thousand soldiers with the goal of wresting control of Jerusalem from the Muslims, who had ruled it for more than four hundred years. In the medieval cosmology, Jerusalem was at the center of the earth, and for Christians, there was no more sacred a site than the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Erected in 330, this church is built on the reputed location of Christ’s crucifixion; it is also where Jesus was entombed.

In 1099, the Crusaders took Jerusalem. They established four main states: the counties of Edessa and Tripoli; the principality of Antioch; and the kingdom of Jerusalem. The Second Crusade was launched in 1147 to retake the city of Edessa, which had been lost in battle (by convention the major Crusades in the Holy Land are numbered, for a total of either seven or eight, depending on how one sets the parameters). The Third Crusade was prompted by the loss of Jerusalem to Saladin, the man who revived the jihad—the struggle to defend one’s faith.

As the years wore on, Western enthusiasm for battle persisted and they staged ever-greater campaigns to try to achieve victory. European kings pledged their fortunes as the Crusaders sought

to regain Jerusalem. “They tried to reclaim Christ’s land for Christianity—that’s why they kept on going,” Phillips says. “And, for Muslims, Jerusalem was an important city. Once they had it, they had to keep it.”

SACRED VS. SECULAR?

But “it wasn’t always about war,” says el-Azhar. “The East influenced the West. Marriage took place all of the time.” A chaotic balance took place. “There’s a wonderful quote from a Spanish traveler who was performing a pilgrimage to Mecca. He noticed three trading caravans passing chained, captive crusaders as they headed to Damascus.” According to el-Azhar, the traveler said, “People of commerce are taking care of their daily lives. People of war are taking care of their daily lives. Life goes on.” Phillips explains, “both sides were like two heavyweight boxers who keep hitting at each other, unable to knock the other one out.”

What drove both sides—the sacred or the secular? Phillips argues that it was both, because for the most part there was so little money to be made from these far-flung ventures. But for el-Azhar, “religion was for the poor and the illiterate. The soldiers were either professionals or mercenaries. For commerce especially, the wars were convenient, because the Near East and the Middle East controlled the commercial artery from the Far East to Europe.”

Perhaps, however, the question is simply too facile to ask. Just as with today, the area is of both strategic and mercantile importance. Answering why there is bloodshed today, doesn’t come easily, either. Suffice to say, each fighter had his motives.

The Crusades in the Middle East ended in 1291 with the fall of Acre, the last Christian settlement. But they continued elsewhere, such as Cyprus and Asia Minor, for generations. The idea of the Crusade and jihad was firmly established, leaving us with a dark legacy: the word “crusade” for the East holds the same power as does “jihad” for the West. ■

