

Discuss the factors that led to the Crusades and its consequences on Christendom. What are some important lessons that the church can learn from its involvement in wars and other acts of violence?

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1.0 Introduction

The crusading movement had involved every country in Europe, touching almost every area of life- the Church and religious thought, politics, the economy, and society- as well as generating its own literature. It had an enduring influence on the history of the western Islamic world and the Baltic region.¹ Without a doubt, the impact of the Crusades are still felt today, as civilizations now engage not merely based on geographical loci but on ideological and financial foundations. The religions have undergone slight changes, but the lessons learnt during the historic Crusades serve as important guideposts towards a more just and fair society, one not ruled by fear or favor, but with justice and mercy.

2.0 Discussion on the Causes of the Crusades

How did these events come to be? The crusades were set in motion by a variety of factors. One of the main reasons was to stem the rapid expansion of the Muslims in Asia. During the expansion of the Islamic Caliphate in the 7th century, Muslim influence spread from the Saudi peninsula to Palestine, and the Seljuk Turks would skirt the edges of Anatolia towards the 10th century.² As Islam spread through means of warfare,³ the ailing Eastern Roman Empire would struggle to defend key sites in the Holy Land against such a growing onslaught. After wresting it from the hands of the Persians in 629, the Eastern Orthodox Emperor Heraclius would lose Jerusalem again to the Arabs in less than a decade, and the city would remain in Muslim hands for four more decades before it came under Crusader hands for slightly less than a century (1099-1187 AD). The rise of Islam can be attributed to the development of a strong and simple code of practice that cemented Islam's hold in the once animistic Middle East, and channeled much of the energies of warring tribes into sorties towards territorial and theological dominance. The ambivalence of the existing Christians in the region- Monophysites in Syria- led also to quick takeovers.⁴ Such developments challenged the status of Christianity in Western Europe, and fostered a measure of "Islamophobia" which became one of the main reasons

¹ Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Oxford History of the Crusades* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). 1-15.

² Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades: The First Crusade*, (London: Penguin Books, 1951), 3-17.

³ Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, 15.

⁴ Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, 17.

troops mobilized dealt with a measure of brutality and caution towards these strange *Saracens*.

Secondly, the weakening of the Byzantine Empire can also be attributed as a contributing factor for the launching of the Crusades. After centuries of ostentatious displays of power and pomp, the once mighty Empire lost almost the whole of Asia Minor at the Battle of Manzikert. This showed to the Muslim world that the once 'mighty' Roman Empire was no longer a threat to their expansionist ideas. The King having been humiliated was set free, but vowed revenge. Into this comes a growing sense of desperation that confirmed fears in Europe that the Saracens were bold enough to attack Constantinople. This sense of alarm was real, in view of the rapidly shrinking borders of the Empire, and with the Muslims knocking even at the door of Spain.

As more lands fell into the hands of the Muslim invaders, the Byzantine Empire had to take immediate recourse about its 'untenable' condition. Eventually, the Eastern Orthodox Emperor, Alexius Comnenus I appealed to the Pope for mercenaries to help resist the advancing armies. The consideration of such an appeal showed the utter desperation of the Empire as the two churches had broken ties with other in the *East-West Schism* in 1054.⁵ The appeal became a soliciting of assistance to eradicate a common enemy. Although the Eastern Emperor had his fair share of problems, he was also on good terms with Pope Urban II, and therefore sent a delegation early in 1095 to report its predicament to the council of bishops and church leaders gathered in Clermont. The result was an incredible response which led to Pope Urban II giving an impassioned (and earth-shaking) plea to those who would willingly give themselves to "take the cross" and liberate Jerusalem from the "infidels." It changed the entire course of European and Arabian history.

Some scholars have also argued that Pope Urban II wanted to stop the infighting and pillaging of the knights within the Western Kingdom itself by channeling their energies

⁵ Catholic Encyclopedia, 506.

to fight and defend the places in the South.⁶ Appealing to the good consciences of the people, this move was meant to spur the Crusaders to defend the defenseless,⁷ but became disastrous, in that many of the knights would eventually be wholly responsible for the massacre and brutality meted out on innocent victims, including an outbreak of cannibalism at the Siege of Maarat. Using absolution of sins as an incentive to take up arms went well in a society steeped in religiosity and penitent living, and this gave the religious undergirding needed to spur the inexperienced Crusaders on through some of their most trying periods. Also, something needed to be done to stop the destruction meted by the armed bandits ravaging the European countryside.

3.0 Consequences on Christendom

Once the Crusades were set in motion, their effects were inexorable. One of the most notable consequences of the Crusades has come in the form of adverse Muslim reactions against the military action taken on their soil. Apart from the brutal massacres of innocent victims and other barbaric acts perpetrated by these barbarians, the Crusaders were known as dishonorable men.⁸ This was in comparison to Saladin, who treated both friend and foe with dignity and courtesy, and was deeply respected as a man of honor. Therefore the Muslims had a lesser view of the Christians and this has translated even to contemporary discourse, arising from a deep sense of enmity, distrust and bitterness among those mistreated by the Crusades. This is of course counter-productive to efforts at reaching out to the Arabic peoples, whether in friendship or the building of relationships. In no other way must such barbarous actions be atoned for than by the showing of genuine respect and honor to a proud race.

The Crusades also brought about great humiliation to the Christian leaders. During the Second Crusade, both Louis VII and Conrad III of France and Germany returned without a major success, after making preparations towards the expedition. Also, Richard the Lionheart, one of the most celebrated heroes of the Crusades, had to leave the Levant due

⁶ Catholic Encyclopedia, 504.

⁷ Riley-Smith, *The Oxford History of the Crusades*, 8.

⁸ Francesco Gabrieli, *Arab Historians of the Crusades* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 332-349.

to insufficient resources to hold Jerusalem. Not to mention the countless other leaders like Bohemund I who attacked Byzantine cities before he was rebuked for his insolence towards the Byzantine Emperor whom he had sworn allegiance to. Such behavior merely indicated the condition and motivations of the leaders of these Christian armies- and served further to confirm to the Muslims that Christians were (and still may be) uncouth, aggressive and untrustworthy brutes.

In spite of such ill-will, the Crusades brought culture, civilization and learning to a darkened Europe.⁹ The marked increase of trade and cultural exchanges among the Crusader nations with the Middle East brought about new tastes, new architecture and new language.¹⁰ The introduction of language, literature and science were some of the by products of such exchanges, not forgetting new understandings forged between both religions and greater tolerance among scholars on both sides of the divide.¹¹ Treece states that “[t]he crusades tended to break down the medieval assumption that there was only one code of religious belief, and so, in their own peculiar way, helped to prepare the European mind for what was later called the Reformation.”¹²

4.0 Important Lessons the Church can learn from its involvement in wars

Religion and politics, unless administered with the greatest of diplomacy and self-restraint, always form a potion for disaster. The potent mix of rhetorics of self-serving and egoistic popes and a populace unable to verify these true teachings eventually led to all such needless brutality, loss of life and ‘public-relations catastrophe’ (in modern terms) for the Christian faith. Because of the ultimate pervasiveness the Church had on medieval society, the dictates of its leaders became public policy with immediate effect, and the people could be incited to commit premeditated acts of violence which was even considered necessary and the best thing to do by their perpetrators. The Crusaders, through no help by demagogues such as Peter the Hermit had been cajoled to look upon a

⁹ Treece, *The Crusades*, 301.

¹⁰ Henry Treece, *The Crusades* (London: The Bodley Head, 1962), 283-319.

¹¹ Treece, *The Crusades*, 313.

¹² Treece, *The Crusades*, 314.

merciless and vengeful God that condoned unthinkable acts of barbarism and breach of trust. What really occurred was anarchy in true form. Basic rules of engagement, ethics or chivalry were all thrown out the window. What then is true religion?

With this in mind, we understand then the divisive nature of religions, and how it is so critically important for people of all faiths (including their own) to live together and co-exist in mutual respect and harmony. Acknowledging the need for furtherance of commerce and trade of supplies, the isolated Kingdom of Jerusalem had to rely on merchant caravans plying the Palestinian strip and through such enterprise, goods and knowledge could be exchanged for the betterment of both nations.¹³ With such openness, the Crusaders finally established a livable, but albeit 'uneasy truce' between the Muslim forces they had come to regard as neighbors. But the resurgence of a united and more cohesive enemy, and the bitter squabbling of Crusader leaders led to their eventual downfall.¹⁴ If the Christian forces had remained united as they were in victory as they were in overcoming defeat, the Christian Empire in the East would have at least lasted longer than it had, but the rivalries and power struggles effectively reduced their threat to the Muslims, and enabled them to sweep them to the sea.¹⁵

The importance of virtue and principles goes far beyond any strict adherence to religious practices or traditions. Criticism of the Crusader's crass treatment of the Muslims has been as old as the Crusades themselves.¹⁶ As mentioned above, Muslims could not reconcile the double-standards and hypocritical practices of a Crusading army totally oblivious and uneducated about the fundamentals of their own faith.¹⁷ But the Crusaders still saw it as a duty to guard the physical sites of the Bible, leading the Crusades down not only the path of intolerance and violence, but worst still, the total abuse of religious goodwill for the purposes of furthering material and political mileage upon the Muslims.

¹³ Anthony Bridge, *The Crusades* (London: Granada, 1980), 123-139. 191-194.

¹⁴ Bridge, *The Crusades*, 192.

¹⁵ Bridge, *The Crusades*, 193.

¹⁶ Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches toward the Muslims* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 97-98.

¹⁷ Kedar, *Crusade and Mission*, 98.

Such practices have come to define Muslim-Christian relations since the fateful September 11 attacks, fuelling greater hatred and intolerance on both sides.

In addition, the use of force has been an ethical 'no-no' in light of the Gospel's pacifist teachings. But Finucane explains that "[t]he question of Christian-Moslem interaction naturally includes the problem of the Christian attitude towards war. An examination of the course of the crusades has led some historians to suggest that Church doctrine was deliberately manipulated to suit specific ends: though committed to condemning bloodshed, the Church itself promoted it."¹⁸ In his speech at Clermont in November of 1095, some eyewitnesses recorded that the Pope had proclaimed the absolution of sins for those who would take on this 'holy order' to defend the Holy Land from "a race accursed by God..." that had desecrated the holiest sites in Christendom and went on to say to those gathered there, "On whom therefore is the labor of avenging these wrongs and of recovering this territory incumbent, if not upon you? You, upon whom above other nations God has conferred remarkable glory in arms, great courage, bodily activity, and strength to humble the hairy scalp of those who resist you."¹⁹ Such violence-filled words fuelled the hearts of people looking for a cause. The pilgrims were exhorted to "enter upon the road to the Holy Sepulchre; wrest that land from the wicked race, and subject it to yourselves" and the use of force would be the most reasonable way of going about it. Riley-Smith argues that although "crusades had technically to be defensive- Christians could not fight wars of conversion- but at grassroots' level people perceived Christianity to be a muscular religion, and missionary elements again and again pervaded crusading thought and propaganda."²⁰

One of the other lessons the Church can learn is to be peace-makers and not only 'peace-keepers'. Today, the United States has found itself in a quandary of its own making- a foot in Afghanistan and Iraq, leading to a mounting count of casualties and unending hatred towards Americans globally. The same mistakes are being made in that peaceful

¹⁸ Ronald C. Finucane, *Soldiers of the Faith: Crusaders and Moslems at War* (London: JM Dent & Sons Ltd, 1983), 210-213.

¹⁹ Dana C. Munro, "Urban and the Crusaders", *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, Vol 1:2, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1895), 5-8.

²⁰ Riley-Smith, *The Oxford History of the Crusades*, 7.

co-existence has been abandoned for self-interest. The original sentiment of bringing stability to the region seemed to be a right thing to do, especially on the heels of the September 11 attacks, which left many Westerners shocked and screaming for vengeance. However the fight to bring “democratic” freedoms to Iraq and Afghanistan have not yielded the results hoped for by military strategists. Instead, the factionalism, isolationist and extremist form of Islam has once again reared its head, although its unofficial figurehead is far from Saladinesque. But that does not mean that the highest honor and respect be withheld, regardless of race or creed.

5.0 Conclusion

The crusades have left a deep mark in our consciences to this day. Christians have never fully recovered and Muslims have never fully forgotten. As Riley-Smith states,

The triumphs of the Crusade were the triumphs of faith. But faith without wisdom is a dangerous thing...In the long sequence of interaction and fusion between Orient and Occident out of which our civilization has grown, the Crusades were a tragic and destructive episode...There was so much courage and so little honour, so much devotion and so little understanding. 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 a sin against the Holy Ghost.²¹

²¹ Riley-Smith, *The Oxford History of the Crusades*, 7.

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