

At the same time that our mission station was being bombed by the National Islamic Front government in Sudan, fellow missionaries were organising “Reconciliation Walks” to the Middle East to apologise for “The Crusades”. As our church services and schools were under aerial and artillery bombardment by Jihadists, this seemed rather bizarre.

Some claim that the Crusaders were “*The starting point of hostility between Islam and the West.*” disrupting “*five centuries of peaceful coexistence*”.

### **What Preceded the Crusades?**

However the Crusades only started after five centuries of Islamic Jihad had conquered and annihilated, or forcibly converted, over two thirds of what had formerly been the Christian world. Shortly after the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem, in 638, Christian pilgrims were harassed, massacred, and crucified.

Muslim governors extorted ransom money from Pilgrims, and ransacked churches. In the 8th Century the Muslim rulers banned all displays of the Cross in Jerusalem. They also increased the penalty tax (*Jizya*) on Christians and forbade Christians to engage in any religious instruction, even of their own children! In 772, the Caliph al Mansur ordered the hands of all Christians and Jews in Jerusalem to be branded.

In 923, a new wave of destruction of churches was launched by the Muslim rulers. In 937, Muslims went on a rampage in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday plundering the Church of Calvary and the Church of the Resurrection.

In 1004 the Caliph Al-Hakim unleashed a violent wave of church burning and destruction, confiscation of Christian property, and ferocious slaughter of both Christians and Jews. Over the next ten years, 30,000 churches were destroyed and vast numbers of believers were forcibly converted or killed.

In 1009, Al-Hakim ordered that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem be destroyed.

When the Seljuk Turks swept into Jerusalem in 1077 they murdered over three thousand people, including many Christians. It was at this point that the Christian Emperor of Byzantium, Alexius I, appealed for help to the Western churches.

Pope Urban II challenged the knights of Europe at the Council of Clermont in 1095: *“The Turks and Arabs have attacked our brethren in the East. They have killed and captured many and have destroyed the churches. On this account I...persuade all people of whatever rank, foot soldiers and knights, poor and rich, to carry aid promptly to those Christians...”*

Nowhere in the call for the launch of the Crusades was there talk about either conquest or conversion. They were merely to remove the Islamic invaders from the lands that had previously been Christian, to restore religious freedom to the Holy Lands.

### **Myths and Misconceptions**

The myth that the Crusades were unprovoked, imperialist actions against the peaceful, indigenous Muslim population is simply not accurate.

Similarly, the characterization of the Crusaders as greedy for loot, only out for personal gain, is simply out of touch with reality. Those who participated in the Crusades saw it as an act of sacrifice rather than of profit. The Crusades were in fact prohibitively expensive. Many Crusaders had to sell their property to raise money for the long journey to the Holy Land and knew that their chances of returning alive were slight. Most who did manage to survive and return came back with nothing material to show for their efforts.

Similarly the modern myth that the Crusaders attempted to forcibly convert Muslims to Christianity is a politically motivated fantasy. Search as one might through the writings and records of the Crusaders, one will not find any mention of Crusaders seeking to convert the Saracens or the Turks. The Crusaders saw themselves as Pilgrims seeking to recapture and

liberate Christian lands from vicious invaders.

### The Myth of Saladin

The depiction of Saladin as merciful and magnanimous is a myth. When Saladin captured the crusaders at Hattin on 4 July 1187, he ordered the mass execution of all the Christians: *“They should be beheaded in accordance with Quran 47:4 ‘When you meet the unbelievers on the battlefield, strike their necks’”*

Saladin’s secretary Imad reported,

*“With him were a whole band of scholars and Sufis and a certain number of devout men and aesthetes; each begged to be allowed to kill one of them and drew their swords and rolled back their sleeves. Saladin, his face joyful, was sitting on his dais; the unbelievers showed black despair.”*

In 1148, the Muslim Commander Nur ed–Din ordered the slaughter of every Christian in Aleppo.

In 1268, when Mamluk Sultan Baybars seized Antioch, he ensured that all the men were slaughtered, the women sold into slavery, the crosses in every church smashed, the Bibles torn and burned, the graves of Christians desecrated. Every monk, priest and deacon was dragged to the altar and had their throats slit. The Church of Saint Paul and the Cathedral of Saint Peter were destroyed.

On 29 May 1453, the greatest city in the world of that time, Constantinople, was conquered by the Jihadists. The Muslims *“slew everyone that they met in the streets, men, women and children without discrimination. The blood ran in rivers down the steep streets from the heights of Petra toward the golden horn”* . The Muslim soldiers even entered the Hagia Sophia, and slaughtered thousands of Christians worshipping in what was then the largest church in the world at that time.

### A Clear and Present Danger

From the first century of Islam Muslim armies were invading Europe. Spain suffered under

Islamic occupation for 8 centuries. In the 14th Century, Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Macedonia, Albania and Croatia fell to Muslim invasions.

In 1426 the Egyptian Mamluks conquered Cyprus. In 1395 the Muslims conquered Nicopolis on the Danube River. In 1444 the Muslim armies seized Varna in Hungary. In 1456 the Turks besieged Belgrade, and even tried to conquer Rome, but were thrown back. The Muslims first attempted to seize Vienna in 1529. As late as 11 September 1683 Muslim armies besieged Vienna, but were routed by 30,000 Polish cavalrymen led by Poland's King Jan Sobieski III.

### **Were the Crusades a Failure?**

The constant depiction of the Crusades as a failure is not justified by the historical record. The Crusades bought Europe time. The Crusades succeeded in seizing the initiative, throwing the Muslim invaders onto the defensive, for the first time after five centuries of attack. The Crusaders bought Europe time – centuries in fact.

At a critical time, the Crusades united a divided Europe, and threw the Muslim invaders back, bringing a peace and security to Europe that had not been known for centuries. As a result of the tremendous sacrifices of the Crusaders, Christian Europe experienced Spiritual Revival and Biblical Reformation which inspired a great resurgence of learning, scientific experimentation, technological advancement, and movements that led to greater prosperity and freedoms than had ever been known in all of history.

For a picture of what Europe might be like today had Islam succeeded in conquering it, one can look at the previously Christian civilisations of Egypt and what is today called Turkey. The Copts in Egypt now make up just 10% of the total Egyptian population, and are severely oppressed. What is today called Turkey was once the vibrant Christian Byzantine Empire, the economic and military superpower of its day. Today the Christian civilization which had flourished there for a thousand years has all but been extinguished. The population of the last Christian city in Asia, Smyrna, was massacred by the Turkish Army in 1922.

### **A Reaction to Jihad**

The crusaders were reacting to five centuries of relentless Islamic Jihad. The Middle East was the birthplace of the Christian Church. It was the Christians who had been conquered and oppressed by the Seljuk Turks. Many of the towns in the Middle East welcomed the crusaders as liberators.

Far from the crusaders being the aggressors, it was the Muslim armies which had spread Islam from Saudi Arabia across the whole of Christian North Africa into Spain and even France. Muslim armies sacked and slaughtered their way across some of the greatest Christian cities in the world, including Alexandria, Carthage, Antioch and Constantinople. These Muslim invaders destroyed over 3,200 Christian churches just in the first 100 years of Islam.

### **Against All Odds**

When we think about the Middle Ages, we inevitably view Europe in the light of what it became rather than what it was. The fact is that the superpower of the Medieval world was Islam, not Christendom. The crusades were a battle against all odds with impossibly long lines of supply and crippling inadequate logistics. It was a David against Goliath enterprise from the beginning. The chances of success for the first crusade were highly improbable. They had no leader, no chain of command, no supply lines and no detailed strategy. The first crusade consisted simply of thousands of dedicated warriors marching deep into enemy territory, thousands of kilometres from home. Many of them died of starvation, disease and wounds. It was a rough campaign that always was on the brink of disaster. Yet by 1098, the Crusaders had liberated Nicea and Antioch, and in July 1099 they re-conquered Jerusalem.

Professor Madden, the author of *A Concise History of the Crusades*, has observed: "From the safe distance of many centuries, it is easy enough to scowl in disgust at the crusades. Religion, after all, is nothing to fight wars over. But we should be mindful that our Medieval ancestors would have been equally disgusted by our infinitely more destructive wars fought in the names of political ideologies...Whether we admire the Crusaders or not, it is a fact that the world we know today would not exist without their efforts. The ancient faith of Christianity, with its respect for women and antipathy toward slavery, not only survived but flourished. Without the crusades, it might have followed Zoroastrianism, another of Islam's rivals, into extinction." But for the crusades Europe would have probably fallen to Islam and the USA and South Africa would never have come into existence.

### **Logistics and Economics**

As the Christian History Institute has pointed out, the characterising of crusaders as only in it for the plunder and the loot betrays an ignorance of both geography and history. The vast majority of the crusaders were impoverished and financially ruined by the crusades. Crusaders, through great sacrifice and personal expense, left their homes and families to travel 3000km across treacherous and inhospitable terrain – and the shortest crusade lasted 4 years. Considering that only 10% of the crusaders had horses, and 90% were foot soldiers, the sheer fact of logistics is that the crusaders could not possibly have carried back enough loot to have made up for the loss of earnings and high expenses involved with these long crusades. Many crusaders lost their homes and farms to finance their involvement in the crusades.

### **There's More to Life than Money**

Perhaps self-seeking materialistic agnostics in the 21st Century cannot understand that some people could be motivated by something other than personal financial enrichment, but the fact is that many people make sacrifices for their religious convictions, and in order to help others. In the case of the crusaders, the historical record makes clear that amongst the motivations that led tens of thousands of volunteers to reclaim the Holy Land was a sense of Christian duty to help their fellow Christians in the East whose lands had been invaded and churches desecrated by Muslim armies, and a desire to secure access to the Holy Lands for pilgrims.

There was also a desire to fight for the honour of their Lord Jesus Christ, Whose churches had been destroyed and Whose Deity had been denied by the Mohammadan aggressors. In other words, to the crusaders this was a defensive war to reclaim Christian lands from Muslim invaders.

We may not share their convictions, or agree with their methods, but we ought to evaluate them in the light of the realities of the 11th and 12th centuries, and not anachronistically project our standards and politics back upon them.

### **Jihad vs The Gospel**

The word “crusade” does not appear in the Bible, nor is it commanded in Christianity. However,

Jihad is the sixth pillar of Islam and the second greatest command of Muhammad. It is not only commended, but commanded in the Quran.

The crusades ended many centuries ago, however Islamic Jihad is carried out to this day. Millions of Christians have been slaughtered throughout the centuries by Islamic militants – such as the 1.5 million Armenians murdered in Turkey in 1915. Christians have continued to be slaughtered by Islamic militants in Indonesia, the Philippines, Sudan and Nigeria to the present day.

Therefore, before Christians fall over themselves to apologise for the crusades, which ended over 700 years ago, it would be wise to first learn from reliable sources what the crusades were all about, and study the Islamic teachings and track record of Jihad over the last 14 centuries. Those who do not know their past have no future.

Dr. Peter Hammond

Frontline Fellowship  
P.O. Box 74 Newlands 7725  
Cape Town South Africa  
Tel: 021-689-4480  
Email: [mission@frontline.org.za](mailto:mission@frontline.org.za)  
Website: [www.frontline.org.za](http://www.frontline.org.za)