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**The Truth About the Crusades  
By eNews of** [**K-House**](http://www.khouse.org/)

Many people, including President Obama, has tried to make a “moral equivalence” argument that Christianity has been just as violent as Islam and he has to go back one thousand years to do it, back to the Crusades.

Carole Hillenbrand’s book [The Crusades: Islamic Perspective - Amazon](https://www.amazon.com/The-Crusades-Islamic-Perspectives-Surveys/dp/0748606300) (Edinburgh University Press, 1999) sets out to sensitize Western readers to Muslim views about the Crusades, in the belief that this will lead to greater understanding between the West and Islam.

In the late 1990s a “Reconciliation Walk” was organized by a group of Christian organizations and individuals. It consisted of thousands of Christians who marched along the route of the First Crusade all the way to Jerusalem, apologizing as they went for the actions of those early Crusaders over nine hundred years earlier.

The reconciliation walkers reported that “in towns and villages, people spilled out of their houses and applauded the team as they passed.” One walker reported the response from people in Beirut:

*If you did this in London or Sydney, you would expect a cynical response. The response from the people on the streets [of Beirut], particularly the Muslims, has been warm. The first word I have heard is “good.” If there were such a word as “uncynical” that [would] be the way to describe it.*

Michael Karam, a Lebanese writer, painted this incident in a different hue in The Times article, “Let’s forget the Crusades”:

*The Reconciliation Walkers are terribly sincere and terribly out of their depth. Their words tell us more about where they are from than where they are going… We Lebanese see them as dabblers concerned with something that has been overtaken by many other, worse horrors during the past millennium. Yet in the best Lebanese tradition, they will be received with honour, listened to, offered coffee and sent on their way.*

In order to take an unvarnished look at the Crusades, one needs to look at several factors that precipitated these military campaigns by Christians.

**What were the Christian crusades?**

First of all, the crusades should not be referred to as the “Christian crusades.” Most of the people involved in the crusades were not truly Christians, even though they claimed to be. The name of Christ was abused, misused, and blasphemed by the actions of many of the Crusaders.

Second, the crusades took place from approximately A.D. 1095 to 1230 in response to specific actions taken by Muslims against Christian lands. The actions taken by many of the Crusaders were not Christian in any way and the Bible does not teach as a general principal that one needs to hate or kill non-believers.

Third, the crusades were responses to Muslim invasions on what was once land occupied primarily by Christians. From approximately A.D. 200 to 900, the lands of Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Turkey were inhabited primarily by Christians. Once Islam became powerful, Muslims invaded these lands and brutally oppressed, enslaved, deported, and even murdered the Christians living there. In response, the Roman Catholic Church and “Christian” kings/emperors from Europe ordered the crusades to reclaim the land the Muslims had taken.

**Motives for the Crusades**

The Saljuq Turkish victory over the Byzantines at Manzikert in 1071, with subsequent territorial gains in Asia Minor, caused widespread consternation throughout the Christian world. The Byzantines, who had long followed a defensive strategy in their conflicts with their Muslim adversaries, looked for help from their fellow Christians. An urgent appeal for help was sent by the Byzantine Emperor to the Pope in Rome. It should be noted that relations between the Eastern and Western Christian empires had long been strained, so such an appeal points to the sense of panic felt within Christian ranks.

But there were other factors that contributed to the emergence of the Crusades. The loss of the holy sites in Jerusalem centuries earlier had been a bitter pill for Christian authorities to swallow, and they had never given up hope of recapturing the city where Jesus was crucified. Indeed, despite the loss of Jerusalem to Muslims, Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land had developed.

However, in the middle of the eleventh century, Muslim harassment of, and attacks upon, Christian pilgrims had increased in frequency. Lambert, a chronicler of the German pilgrimage of seven thousand people in 1064–65, recorded the following account:

*When the pilgrims were just a short distance from Rama … they were attacked by marauding Arabs… Many of the Christians, thinking they might rely on their religion for assistance and salvation, had trusted in God’s protection rather than in weapons. They were, as a result of the first attack, brought down by many wounds and robbed.… The other Christians did their best by throwing stones … not so much to drive away danger as a desperate measure to escape imminent death.*

So piety was a motivating force for such pilgrimages, as well as for certain participants in the ensuing Crusades. A belief in eternal reward justified a concept of holy war, and this proved to be a powerful attraction for many who joined the Crusades. The twelfth-century writer Guibert of Nogent clearly believed the crusading motive was primarily a quest for eternal salvation:

*“What has driven our knights thither is not ambition for fame, for money, for extending the boundaries of their lands … God has instituted in our time holy wars, so that the order of knights and the crowd running in their wake … might find a new way of gaining salvation.”*

Some other motives had less of a spiritual dimension. Military campaigns always brought with them promises of wealth and plunder. Motives of personal ambition also came into play, as did hopes for trading opportunities. Once again, Hallam expresses both the complexity and diversity of motives according to different groups who participated in the campaigns:

*Complex though their motives were, it is easier to understand why knights joined the First Crusade than to explain the participation of hordes of peasant … The theme of Jerusalem was all-important to them. They undertook the expedition not as a military campaign but as a pilgrimage, an important feature of 11th century life.*

**The First Crusade (1096–99)**

The **First Crusade** was precipitated by a statement by Pope Urban II in September 1096:

*Anyone who sets out on that journey, not out of lust for worldly advantage but only for the salvation of his soul and for the liberation of the Church, is remitted in entirety all penance for his sins, if he has made a true and perfect act of confession.*

Ironically, this promise of eternal reward for participating in holy war is strongly reminiscent of a similar call in the Qur’an at Sura 3:158:

*And if ye die, or are slain, Lo! It is unto Allah that ye are brought together.*

There are two significant differences though. First, the Christian call for holy war was made by a human pope and as such was subject to challenge by later theologians. The Muslim call to jihad, however, is cemented within the Qur’an for all time. Second, the doctrine of holy war has now largely fallen into disuse in Christian circles, whereas jihad as a military concept is still widely practiced by some Muslim groups.

**Subsequent Crusades**

Many crusading campaigns followed on from the first. These crusades have many aspects in common.

The **Second Crusade** lasted from 1147 to 1149 and was launched in response to the loss in 1146 of the Crusader principality of Edessa to Muslim attackers. Pope Eugene III called for a new crusade to recover the lost territory:

*We enjoin you in the name of the Lord and for the remission of your sins … that the faithful of God, and above all the most powerful and the nobles act vigorously to oppose the multitude of the infidel … and strive to liberate from their hands the many thousands of our brethren who are captives.… We accord them that same remission of sins that our predecessor Pope Urban instituted.*

Again there is a promise of forgiveness of sins associated with the campaign. This crusade ended in a failed attempt to capture Damascus.

The **Third Crusade** lasted from 1189 to 1192 and was launched after the fall of Jerusalem to the Muslim warrior Salah al-Din (Saladin) on October 2, 1187. Saladin’s armies had also captured Acre, Beirut, Sidon, and other prominent Christian strongholds.

Pope Gregory VIII called for a crusade on October 29, 1187, in similar terms to the calls of his predecessors. Some land was recaptured, including Acre in July 1191 after a two-year siege, but not Jerusalem. It was to remain under Muslim control for over seven hundred years.

The loss of Jerusalem and the tentative hold the Crusaders had on the recaptured land led to an increase in the frequency of subsequent Crusades.

In 1198 Pope Innocent III issued a call for a crusade to consolidate Christian territory in the Holy Land and offered an indulgence:

*All those who take the Cross and remain for one year in the service of God in the army shall obtain remission of any sins they have committed, provided they have confessed them.*

The resulting **Fourth Crusade** lasted from 1202 to 1204. From a Christian perspective this was one of the most disastrous. Events took an unexpected turn due to political intrigue and power struggles. The crusading knights eventually directed their campaign not against Muslim adversaries but against the Byzantine Empire itself, because of Western suspicion at seeming Byzantine willingness to compromise with Muslims. Constantinople was attacked and captured by Crusader forces, and a Western ruler was put on the Byzantine throne.

Pope Innocent III was furious at the conquest of Constantinople. He bitterly rebuked the papal legate who accompanied the Crusaders:

*It was your duty to attend to the business of your legation and to give careful thought not to the capture of the Empire of Constantinople, but rather to the defense of what is left of the Holy Land and, if the Lord so wills, the restoration of what has been lost.…*

*How can we call upon the other Western peoples for aid to the Holy Land … when the crusaders having given up the proposed pilgrimage, return absolved to their homes; when those who plundered the aforesaid empire turn back and return with their spoils, free of guilt?*

After such a development, subsequent crusading campaigns were tainted. Further Crusades took place, but they were unsuccessful. Little by little the various Crusader strongholds fell to Muslim armies, often with great brutality. A chronicler described a Muslim raid on Sidon (Saida) in 1253:

*When [the Saracens] heard the report (a true one) that the king had sent no more than a very small contingent of good men to fortify the city of Saida, they marched in that direction.… The Saracens poured into Saida and met with no resistance, for the town was not completely surrounded by walls. They killed more than two thousand [sic] of our people, and then went off to Damascus with the booty they had gained in the town.*

The year 1291 witnessed the end of the crusading venture with the fall of Acre, followed by the loss of the last remaining coastal towns.

**An Assessment**

The Crusades were characterized by savagery and intolerance. But it was mutual mistreatment, following on from centuries of bloody conflict, massacre, and Muslim imperial expansion. The victims of this recurring cycle of conflict were Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Likewise, the perpetrators were both Muslims and Christians.

**Ancient Criticisms**

Criticism of the Crusades among Christians is not a recent phenomenon. Indeed, there was a vigorous debate during the time of the Crusades, as recorded by Humbert of Romans, who wrote a response to critics of crusading in the late thirteenth century:

*“There are some … who say that it is not in accordance with the Christian religion to shed blood in this way, even that of wicked infidels. For Christ did not act thus.… [But Christianity] must be defended when necessary from its enemies by the sword.”*

It should be remembered that the Crusades were a link in the chain of history. They represented the response of the Christian world to the earlier Islamic expansion and to the loss of the Byzantine territories in the Middle East and North Africa. They do, of course, raise substantial moral issues, but consideration of these should not be divorced from the historical context.

For Christians, there is much to apologize for in the Crusades, but they in no way can be used to justify the brutality and carnage that is taking place in the world today in the name of Islam.

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