



Religion in history: conflict, conversion and co-existence

The crusades

John Wolffe

The launching of the first crusade in 1095 marked an important new departure in religious history. More than six centuries have passed since the end of the Roman Empire in the west.

I am standing in the round church of the Holy Sepulchre in Cambridge, built in 1130 and modelled on the original church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. It is a vivid visual reminder of the way in which the Christian holy places captured the religious imagination of people in the 11th and 12th Centuries. I have come to Cambridge to interview Professor Jonathan Riley-Smith, a leading authority on the crusades.

Well can I begin with that stock simple but difficult historian question, why? In 1095 the second bridge is the first crusade, but the Muslims had been in control of Jerusalem for four and a half centuries, why does it happen at that point?

Jonathan Riley-Smith

There have been all sorts of theories written about why the crusades happened, and I have to be perfectly honest I think that it is a question which is, it is not that it is impossible to answer, it is that actually, in the late 11th Century, Western Europe took a step that no one could possibly have expected. It was preceded by one course of events and one development, which came together. The course of events was a growing obsession with the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem expressing itself in pilgrimages which from the 1020s onwards were almost constant and at certain times there were great waves of pilgrims travelling to the east, in the 1030s for instance and not only pilgrims going, but returning with relics, building churches actually based on the dimensions of the Holy Sepulchre, so throughout the 11th Century there is a kind of rising obsession with Jerusalem with the Holy Sepulchre expressed in pilgrimage, and secondly in the early 1080s, that is a decade and half before the preaching of the first crusade, when Central Europe was in fact torn by a civil war, one forgets just how intense and violent the investiture controversy became.

The papacy granted to the armies of a very remarkable woman called Matilda of Tuscany who was a fanatical supporter of papal reform and whose armies were marching up and down central Italy, granted to them remission of sins in exchange for fighting. Now this was a step unprecedented in Christian history in which the Pope and his agents were saying that you could do penance for your sins, that is pay back to God for your sins, through the exercise of arms. Actually, in this, equating fighting with prayer, works of mercy, fasting, but as I sometimes say to my students the difference between the age of faith and ours is not that these people were better than us, in many ways they were a great deal worse. The difference was they worried about it, and they really worried.

They were locked into a world from which any responsible man, as Lord lets say, as head of a family whatever, in a world racked by blood feuds, vendettas, by violence and all the rest of it, I mean leaving aside that you were sleeping with your wife, they were locked into a world from which they could not escape without escaping their responsibilities. It is very easy to say go off to a monastery, withdraw to a monastery, withdraw from the world, not so easy to fulfil if you are head of a family. They were locked into that world and absolutely obsessed with sin and its consequences, and they are presented quite suddenly with a way of at least temporarily wiping the slate clean, performing actions with which they were thoroughly familiar, going on pilgrimage and fighting.

John Wolffe

So we have the general spiritual climate, which you describe for us in the 11th Century. How important do you think Urban the II's Sermon at Claremont was as the trigger that sets things going?

Jonathan Riley-Smith

I don't think actually there was one trigger. Urban spent a year travelling through France and French speaking territory. I reckon he travelled about 2,000 miles in that time, he was already in his sixties. He preached all the time, there were private meetings as well with great lords, I have actually mapped those first crusaders I know and an awful lot of them come within two or three days march of Urban's itinerary. You are dealing with the late 11th and 12th Centuries, they were a very theatrical and melodramatic age in which everything is expressed in theatrical terms and it is the same with Urban.

Now just imagine, Urban is accompanied everywhere by a flock of archbishops and bishops, few cardinals, each of these will have a train, a riding household, the Pope's entourage would stretch over miles of countryside, miles of countryside. They time their arrival, I just don't know how they did this in 1095 to 6, they timed their arrival in towns to coincide with great feasts. So for instance they are at Saint Gilles for the feast of St Gilles, St Gilles' body is still at the Abbey of Saint Guile. They are at Le Puis which is the greatest Marian Shrine of the age for the feast of the assumption, they are at Poitiers for the feast of the St Hilary – how they did this I simply do not know.

But anyway this huge train stretches through the countryside, it comes into a town these small towns would never have seen anyone of any importance in living memory, never see the King, The Pope then puts his tiara on, now at that time it is not a tiara as we know it, the sort of bulbous thing, it is a kind of Frisian cap with a single band of gold with jewels in it and around, he puts this on, he rides through the town, he consecrates basilicas and cathedrals with masses of people there and then he preaches across everywhere he goes and so one has to ask oneself – wow, how does the news spread and I think it spreads through kindred. I think there is a way in which the news of the Pope's preaching spreads out from his itinerary through family networks.

Now I will tell you an amazing thing, if you look at first crusaders and if you look at them by family, by kindred, you find they are concentrated in certain families and that actually is very helpful because while it is quite impossible to get into the mind of anyone in the late 11th or 12th Centuries, we do not even know what they look like. It is possible to say something about collective ideas, so if you have got a family and then you look and see are there traditions of attachment to certain saints, is there a tradition of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, is there a tradition of association with certain reform, monastic houses and so on, you can actually in some cases at any rate, see that a particular kindred has the sort of traditions that would make it susceptible and it would make it responsive to the Pope's appeals.

But when you turn to isolated a crusader that is people who take the cross in a family in which there is no other member of the family taking the cross, as often as not, or not, their mother or their wife comes from one of the families with collective group crusaders. Preaching is amazing what happens, I mean the crusade preachers by the late 12th and 13th Centuries, would arrive at a location where they have decided to preach – everything is done to heighten a sense of drama, some of them had a great canvas screen with Muslim desecrating the holy Sepulchre and they would preach against a background of this. The proceedings would start with mass being said in the presence of as many senior ecclesiastics that they could get together from the locality.

Then the papal general letter summoning crusade would be read and translated – and these letters are extremely emotional, extremely emotional. So they would be read and translated out and we know that the preachers carried copies of these letters in their saddlebags and then the preacher would launch into his homily which would be quite short, but would end with what was called an invocatio which is a very emotional appeal to join the crusade. Now at that point in Humbert of Remonse, treatise of crusades preaching in Britain in the 1260s, we put in the margin next to invocatio – 'cantus' – at this moment a choir strikes up – it is like a Billy

Graham assembly and people then leap to their feet you see and come forward to take the cross and there is a great pile of already made up crosses, and sometimes pins so they could pin these cloth crosses onto their chests and the whole purpose of this melodrama, of this theatre, of the language that is used, is I have to stress to make people make spontaneous decisions in a society in which spontaneity is frowned on.

John Wolffe

I find this fascinating, I mean we have to be wary of anachronism of course, but perhaps closer analogies than I thought with, indeed, what is happening in the 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries, with the conversionist preaching of evangelical missionaries.

Jonathan Riley-Smith

Absolutely – one of the great fallacies of reform historians and they are reformation historians and they are now changing their tune on it, is you know the belief that preaching was something that only came with Protestantism, whereas actually the early Protestant preachers were building on a long tradition of populist preaching, not only with regard to crusades but of course the one I know about, the theme I know about is in crusades which stretches right back into the 11th Century.

John Wolffe

Was it ever in a simple sense a sort of war with Islam?

Jonathan Riley-Smith

What is the defining thing is not the Muslim, but the Holy Sepulchre. The Muslims happened to be in charge of the Holy Sepulchre and the Muslims happened to recover the Holy Sepulchre under Saladin in 1187, but what was important was this relic that was what was important not whoever, only secondarily was it the Muslim who was important!

John Wolffe

Yes I have also seen it, it is an incredible building isn't it and I find it fascinating that Saladin left it there after he recaptured Jerusalem in 1187.

Jonathan Riley-Smith

The history of religious sites is quite an interesting one, I mean that was not of course for Muslims the kind of site, I think they recognised that the Christian population of Palestine, and the Christian pilgrims, needed that site so they did not convert it into a mosque which they did with quite a lot of the churches. But even in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, there are church mosques. In Acre there was a, must have been Shiite, because it was supposedly an oratory to Ali, which was in the town with an eastern apse. So Christians and Muslims were actually worshipping in the same building. The cathedral of the Holy Cross in Acre which had been an mosque, they retained the Mihrab and Muslims could go in and pray.

So it was quite common for there to be on both sides actually, certain toleration even kind of syncretic attachment to certain shrines, there is a lot of to-ing and fro-ing. While people retained their religious attachments, nevertheless, that region was one where there was such a mixture, and anyway possibly still in the 12th Century a Christian majority amongst the indigenous in Palestine that has recently been suggested that Islamisation in Palestine between the 7th and 11th Centuries had not proceeded as quickly as we used to suppose and that large parts of Palestine were still Christian.

John Wolffe

So despite the headlines obviously of conflict between Christianity and Islam, one can in reality speak of a significant coexistence perhaps particularly in more peaceful periods in the 11th and 12th Centuries.

Jonathan Riley-Smith

Yes it is extremely interesting to me that the character of crusaders change when they get to the east. Before I get on to the issue of Muslims lets take Jews – now you have these pogroms against Jews in the Rhineland and elsewhere preceding almost every crusade to the east. Disproved of by the church, the church tries to stop it, but taking place. But when they

get to the east after an initial period which is anyway now up for being argued about, because the idea that they massacred Jews in Jerusalem has been disproved by the great Jewish historian Goitein, when they get to the east they appear to have tried to experiment with Wimmer that is the Muslim regulations for children of the book - retaining Wimmer on Jews lifting it off Christians and imposing it on Muslims, but in fact the situation of Jews in the Kingdom of Jerusalem was fairly favourable.

There is, as Joshua Prava wrote in the history of the Jews pointed out massive migration into Palestine under the crusaders by Jews. The great Maimonides was teaching in Acre, the Jewish tribunals in Acre and Tyre – their prescripts are still surviving. So it is as if these people's personality change, I mean in the west they bashed these people, in the east while you can't say they were tolerant, I mean Jews, Muslims, non- Catholic Christians live under legal disabilities, there certainly is much more like the kind of protected religions who had found an Islamic state.

But it still raises the question why they are so different in the west, and my theory for what it is worth is this, that every holy war whether Christian or Muslim or even if you take radical Buddhism because there is this rather war like form of Buddhism not just the pacifist kind – it turns on itself, turns back on the society which generated it, and it becomes clear that you can only be successful if you are fighting out of a purified uniform society and I think myself that like all forms of holy war, very rapidly crusading turned inwards and saw the Jews as an alien body which would have to be eliminated if Christianity was to be successful extra-liminally, I mean outside its borders and it is fascinating to me that when crusading starts going really badly from the late 12th Century onwards, so crusades against Heretics, crusades against Catholic Popes - the papacy. and so on increase.

I mean the less successful it is on the frontiers, the more concentration there is inside and this is precisely the same with modern Islamism. The great figure, the ancient ideologue of modern Islamism is a man called Iban Tamir, and Iban Tamir was actually writing around 1300 and he maintained that for the Jihad to be successful it had first to turn inwards and it had to destroy Shiism which was heresy, and it had to purify Islamic society and only when Islamic society was uniform and purified would the world be conquered and Usama Bin Laden quotes Iban Tamir constantly. Constantly.

John Wolffe

To recap a bit, what do you think kept it going so long for two centuries even if we just take it from the first crusade to the fall of Acre, much longer than that if we think of the longer run impulse of crusading?

Jonathan Riley-Smith

The crusades lasted a very long time indeed. Now crusading if you define a crusade carefully you could say that the crusades proper fulfilling the various conditions for crusade went on to the end of the 16th Century, the last crusade proper is probably the Armada of 1588. Even if one is simply talking in terms of popularity, the most popular centuries for crusades are the 13th and 14th, between 1200 and 1500 there is barely a year when there is not a crusade going on somewhere. It begins to decline in the 15th Century, and of course the reformation takes a big chunk of Europe away from the crusading movement, although Luther was in fact preaching something not unlike a crusade and there was even a French Calvinist in the 1570s who tried to produce his own Calvinist version of crusading minus Pope, minus indulgence and so on.

John Wolffe

It is a very important context for understanding what is happening in the reformation period?

Jonathan Riley-Smith

Oh yes, but the fact is now this movement, however you look at it, is long lasting it also is in space terms since Finland is created out of crusades, Swedish crusades, right through the 14th Century. So from the north to Africa to Goa in India in the 16th Century, was in the hands of the Portuguese military orders, they were running Goa. So wherever you look you are dealing with an immense movement. What kept it going? It struck a cord and that cord was a

continuous one, it remained penitential even to the end it is penitential, but I think if it had retained the radical nature of the early crusades in penance terms, it might not have lasted.

What happened was that chivalry diluted the penitential and made it more acceptable, so that whereas for a first crusader the crusade is primarily not about service to God or service to the church, or service to Christendom but is primarily about self-sanctification. By Humbert of Remonse, the great writer of preaching treaties in the 1260s, the crusade is about service to Christ, that is a kind of chivalric view, but that service can only be effective if it is penitential, so can you see how the penitential element has been diluted and made in a sense more acceptable because that radical – you can easily see how the early one could not have kept its intensity – so chivalry dilutes it, keeps it going and then what further keeps it going, lets face it, is the Turks spilling into Europe and starting to conquer the Balkans and somehow Europe has got to be defended against the Turks.

What really brought the crusades to an end, well there are two things I suppose, one was the fact that Turkish menace evaporated and the other was the enlightenment and the scorn the enlightenment thinkers has for as Deodoro said, say '*çest guerre horrible*' – 'these horrible wars'.

John Wolffe

Do you think the word 'crusade' is sometimes in danger of being misused?

Jonathan Riley-Smith

I think one has to be careful here. I think modern terminology is sometimes a lot less simple and a lot more complex than one imagines. I can give you an example of this – Usama Bin Laden is not the only Islamist, not the only nationalist as well, to use the term 'crusades' and 'crusaders' and constantly. And his use of this term has an extremely interesting background. In the 19th Century it was very common for romantic imperialists in France and Britain, in Germany and elsewhere, to associate imperialism with crusading. There was a theme right through the 19th Century which equated modern imperialists as it were with crusading and in a sense saw really very anachronistically this was extremely anachronistic but saw the crusaders, as it were, returning with imperialism.

Now in the 1890s the Abdul Mohammed II, the Ottoman Sultan, who lets face it was under terrible pressure losing large parts of the Turkish empire to the west and to sort of independent movements in the Balkans, actually appealed to Islamism and in the course of this said the west is fighting a crusade against us, the west has renewed the crusade. This idea proposed by him was taken up by Arab nationalists, particularly once the French and British had mandates in Syria and Palestine and the French and British popular press were banging on about the crusades anyway. It reached a peak, the nationalists – a kind of theme that the west having lost the first round in the crusades had returned, as it were, and were now using different and more sophisticated techniques, but were actually focusing, targeting on it, so this reached a peak, in Egypt in the 1950s, Naza himself was patronizing, the production of a great many volumes in which not only was there constant talk of the crusades now being re-run, but the establishment of the state of Israel was an act of vengeance.

It was on the very ground occupied by the Kingdom of Jerusalem and here the Israelis were surrogates for a western crusading movement which was in fact imperialism. Now what happened was that Islamists becoming very much sort of stronger and more powerful in the Muslim world from the 1970s onwards, while they rejected utterly every other aspect of nationalist thought, because nationalists tend to be secular, they tended to be divisive whereas Islamists think in the pan-Islamic terms of the unity of the whole of Islam, took up this idea and in particular they have great ideologue, a man called Seid Kutub produced what he termed 'crusaderism', that behind imperialism lies crusaderism and crusaderism is the old enemy, Christianity, out to destroy believers. And Seid Kutub has had a huge influence on the whole Islamist movement and in particular Jihad Islamism and so what they have done is they have restored ideology whereas nationalists tend to think when they thought about crusades that crusades were simply masks for western avarice and proto-colonialism and that that was as bad. The Jihad's have restored ideology because behind all that there lies this Christian enemy still out to destroy Islam and they have globalised crusading, whereas nationalists,

Arab nationalists simply thought in terms of Palestine, Syria and North Africa, now Osama and some others say well the Soviets in Afghanistan were crusaders, the Jews in Israel are crusaders and this is actually a very interesting concept. And I have to say that I blame myself partly, I and other crusade historians for years we knew this sort of thing was being written and we dismissed it as rubbish.

Now most modern crusade historians are what is called pluralist and pluralism proposes that true crusades in every sense of the word were not only fought in those theatres of war where the enemy was Islam, Palestine, Syria, the East, Mediterranean, North Africa and Spain, but also in the Baltic, in the interior of Western Europe and the enemies of crusaders are not only Muslims but Pagan Balts, Shamanist Mongols, Cathar, Heretics, even Catholic political opponents of the papacy. Now once pluralism begins to spread and it started to spread really from the late 1970s onwards throughout the crusading sort of historiography and is now the predominant position, the Muslims lose their position as the prime opponent – you can no longer think of the crusades just as a war with Islam.

John Wolffe

Jonathan Riley-Smith's remarks about some recent Muslim understandings of the concept of crusade take us back to the issue about the different perspectives from which religious history is viewed. In particular he provides a partial answer to the question I posed of what a Muslim historical view point might look like. Of course, not all Muslims would subscribe to the ideas Riley-Smith outlines, any more than all Christians identify with a positive and heroic reading of the crusades.

Such views, though, need to be taken seriously by historians, not because they are accurate accounts of the past, but because they have been very influential in forming beliefs and attitudes in later periods. But it is not helpful simply to dismiss small Partisan views of religious history as rubbish. They are themselves part of the history we are studying and have a legacy that has a potent influence on world views in our own day.