Christopher Tyerman – God’s War. A New History of the Crusades

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The return of what some might consider as Western – in particular Anglo-American – ‘imperialism’ to the Middle East has renewed interest on other supposed ‘clashes of civilisations’ of the past and has thus helped to stimulate myriads of hurried ‘histories’ of varying quality. The result (as mirrored in some of the more serious works) is a stunning reinterpretation of the Crusades, revealed as both bloody political acts and a manifestation of a growing Christian communal identity.

At least in our daily parlance, the ‘crusaders’ still appear to be present, although the actual historical events from which their names are derived – the Crusades, aiming at the reconquest of the Holy Land from the Muslims – date back far into the High Middle Ages. Whether in the language of Bin Ladin et al. who deign to refer to a so-called ‘Zionist and Crusader alliance’ on the one hand or United Nations-sponsored ‘crusades to eradicate poverty and disease’ on the other, ‘crusaders’ and ‘crusades’ are still a part of our own times. In 2002, then US President George W. Bush described his anti-terrorism campaign as a ‘crusade’ but was compelled to repudiate the term when it was pointed out that the word was regarded as highly offensive by Muslims and Jews – because of the historical events to which it referred.

The actual historical Crusades, however, had far-reaching political, economic, and social impacts, some of which have lasted into contemporary times. Western sources speak of heroism, faith, and honour (emphasised in chivalric romance), but also of acts of brutality. Orthodox Christian, Jewish, and Muslim chroniclers tell stories of barbarian savagery, although it was not until 1899 that the first Muslim history of the Crusades was written. Prior to the growth of Arab nationalism in the twentieth century, the Crusades were virtually unknown in the Islamic world.

Significantly, the crusades were never referred to as such by their participants. The original Crusaders were known by various terms, including fideles Sancti Petri (the faithful of St Peter) or milites Christi (knights of Christ). They saw themselves as undertaking an iter, a journey, or a peregrinatio, a pilgrimage, though pilgrims were usually forbidden from carrying arms.

Oxford scholar Christopher Tyerman’s study – 1,040 pages in the Penguin paperback edition – has been lauded as “the definitive study of the crusades needed for a long time now”. This is certainly quite a momentous statement if we bear in mind that since the 1950s it had been Sir Steven Runciman’s (1903–2000) work which was considered the last word on the eleventh- to thirteenth-century ‘clash’ between Christendom and the world of Islam of the Holy Land. Runciman’s epic
three volume *A History of the Crusades* (1951–54) was the authoritative source for those seeking to understand that tumultuous period of history.

In countries which were, at the time of the Crusades, Roman Catholic, and in countries which were later largely settled by Western Europeans, including the United States, the crusades were remembered favourably for centuries. Nonetheless, what is often forgotten – especially among Muslims and Jews – is that there have been also many vocal critics in Western Europe since the Renaissance. As a matter of fact, in the course of the twentieth century, critical views of the crusades have come to dominate most assessments, with the above-mentioned work of Runciman – an exact contemporary and close friend of George Orwell – featuring most prominently among them. ‘Defenders’ of the Crusades, on the other hand, now present their viewpoint as that of an embattled minority as against a standard view in which the Crusades are regarded as bloody and unjustified acts of aggression.

More comprehensive treatments – among them the book by Tyerman here under review – seek to take account of both the brutality of the Crusades and the sincere religious motivation behind them, of what could be summed up as ‘religious devotion’ and ‘godly savagery’. A crucial recent development in this regard is the recognition, variously interpreted, of the parallel between crusades and the Islamic concept of *jihād*. Secular critics of the crusades see both *jihād* and crusade as providing a religious justification for war and intolerance. Supporters present the crusades as defensive responses to Islamic *jihād* and, in some cases, advocate a renewal of the crusades – a view that may be linked, by both critics and supporters, to current US policy in the Middle East. Unlike the crusade, the *jihād* was enjoined on the entire faith community (all able-bodied Muslims), and it was fundamental to faith, an actual ‘sixth pillar’ of Islam. The crusade and *jihād* were both driven by militant zeal, but other commonalities are superficial.

The crusading phenomenon was not born overnight. It evolved, and this book has the length and patience to illustrate how. As a matter of fact, the early Christians had rejected the notion of war – even for the sake of self defence. Tyerman traces the subsequent changing attitudes from reluctance, to accommodation. The Crusades were far more than a series of battles; they mark a turning point in medieval European society and had an impact on far more than just military development. *God’s War* also provides an illuminating insight into the social, economic, religious and political changes that were happening at the same time. Tyerman is a masterful researcher and has referenced a phenomenal number of primary and secondary sources – Christian, as well as Muslim.

Tyerman offers a ‘fresh’ insight into this historical and multifaceted encounter between East and West. In his introduction he states that “[a] familiar but baneful response to history is to configure the past as comfortably different from the present day. Previous societies are caricatured as less sophisticated, more primitive, cruder,
alien. Such attitudes reveal nothing so much as a collective desire to reassure the modern observer by demeaning the experience of the past.” In other words, Tyerman argues that we often tend to ‘project’ our own cultural as well as religious or ethical values back into the past, thus judging historical events and circumstances by the standards of the present, often through the lenses of what some today are criticising as ‘cultural relativism’.

Tyerman, who relied on Oriental as well as Western (i.e. Muslim as well as Christian) sources, draws on corrective scholarship, demolishing myths about crusading motives. His bulky but well-written book features eight chapters. Chapter 1 gives a detailed account of the First Crusade, which led to the reconquest of Jerusalem by the Christians in 1099. This part contains also a detailed and fascinating study of the changes that took place within Christian thought – from the quasi pacifism of the early periods to the idea that the Holy Land should be retaken from the Muslims by force. Chapter 2 offers a fascinating overview on the socio-political conditions prevailing in ‘Frankish Outremer’, i.e. the Christian crusader states of Jerusalem, Antiochia, Tripoli and Edessa. Chapter 3 deals with the Second Crusade which was launched after the fall of Edessa in 1145. Chapter 4 provides an account of the Third Crusade of Richard Lionheart and Saladin fame. Chapters 1 to 4 can be considered the core of the book, whereas the remaining chapters deal with subsequent developments.

From the Western perspective, the crusades confirmed a communal identity comprising aggression, paranoia, nostalgia, wishful thinking and invented history. Understood by participants at once as a statement of Christian charity, religious devotion and godly savagery, the ‘wars of the cross’ helped fashion for adherents a shared sense of belonging to a Christian society, and contributed to setting its human and geographic frontiers. In these ways, the crusades helped define the nature of Europe. It is refreshing to read a dense, intellectual and accurate piece of work which describes the Crusades as they most probably were (although Tyerman’s excursions into so-called ‘crusades’ in Europe and on the Spanish and Baltic frontiers are less assured and less thoroughly grounded in the sources than his chapters on the Holy Land). The Crusades were viewed in Western Europe as bellum justum – a just war of defence – a concept to which Tyerman has dedicated a considerable part of his introductory part and which is still part of the official doctrine of the Catholic Church. Most crusaders expected to return home, and they knew they would take heavy financial losses. Nor was the papacy driven by economic interests. Thus, it would certainly be inadequate to explain the complexity and astonishing prowess of the First Crusade in terms of a ‘proto-colonial’ venture, as, in the words of Tyerman, “[t]he political, material, and military pillars of victory fail adequately to describe the structure of the First Crusade or alone explain its success. Although it is misleading to assume that all recruits and followers shared a similar intensity
of religious motivation and zeal, without the element of ideology and spiritual exhilaration, there would have been no march to Jerusalem, let alone a successful conquest.” The more we learn about (un)holy wars, the more difficult it becomes to judge them.

Islam, as Tyerman says, “was only marginally inconvenienced” by the Crusades. The big conflict of the era was not between crusaders and Muslims but between Sunnites and Shi’ites. Nevertheless, the age of the Crusades is said to have shaped for centuries the relations between Christians and Muslims. From the perspective of our own times, the Crusades have made a lasting impact on the Islamic world, especially in their perception of the West and of Christians. In fact, today many Muslims still consider the Crusades to be a symbol of Western hostility toward Islam. As Tyerman himself states, “the personal decision to follow the cross, to inflict harm on others at great personal risk, at the cost of enormous privations, at the service of a consuming cause, cannot be explained, excused, or dismissed either as virtue or sin. Rather its very contradictions spelt its humanity.”

Therefore, and in the light of the current issues between the Islamic World and the West, the appearance of Tyerman’s ‘New History’ is of particular value and significance to Muslim as well as Christian readers – whether those from academia or the educated public. Above all, however, God’s War is a brilliant piece of historical scholarship and a hugely rewarding reading experience.

**Hajee Sullaiman Shah Mahomed – Tales from Five Continents: The 19th Century Travel Diaries of Hajee Sullaiman Shah Mahomed, 1880–1895**


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The author, Hajee Sullaiman Shah Mahomed, was born in Kathiyawar, India, in 1859, and eventually settled in Cape Town where he died in 1929. Shah Mahomed left a legacy of reconstructed shrines and mosques, and a trust that would mature after a hundred years to establish a Centre of Oriental Studies at the University of Cape Town. His early life was one of poverty and hard struggle. As a consequence, he left India in search of better fortune. He became a successful businessman and a philanthropist. He travelled extensively, and published his diary in *Tales from Five Continents*.

Apart from his childhood inclination to travel, he must have taken the Qur’anic command to ‘travel through the land’ seriously; not only to note the social life of various races, but also to “feast my soul upon the manifold beauties of nature, with