HOW DOES JIHAD COMPARE WITH THE CRUSADES?

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I WOKE UP RECENTLY to a tweet in which a disgruntled individual accused me of criticizing Islam inconsistently. If Christians fought in the Crusades, does that not show that Christianity is violent? If it doesn’t, then how can I accuse Islam of being violent?

Of course, this individual did not have the advantage of reading the previous 16 chapters in this book before asking his question. By now it should be clear there is a great difference between jihad and the Crusades. Jihad was commanded by Muhammad and the Quran, both in principle and in reality, whereas Jesus commanded no such thing as the Crusades, neither in principle nor in reality. Therefore, jihad reflects the religion of Islam, whereas the Crusades do not reflect the Christian faith. There is a significant difference between the two.

HOLY WAR
As I mentioned at the end of the last chapter, Jesus’ teachings on peace and violence were so clear that no Christian force
entered into battle until after Christianity was assimilated into the Roman Empire in the fourth century. At that time, much that was culturally Roman coalesced with the Christian faith, and warfare began to gradually enter the Christian perspective.

By the turn of the fifth century, the question had become a serious one: Were Christians prohibited from all warfare, or might they engage in battle under certain circumstances? It was at this time that the Christian theologian Augustine began formulating a framework that would allow Christians to fight a just war. Providing stringent conditions, Augustine argued that fighting could fall within the will of God, but only as a necessary evil, an act that required penance. Many Christians adopted Augustine’s view, and for the next few centuries some fought under the banner of their faith with the understanding that they would have to repent as a result.

So it was approximately four centuries after Jesus that Christians formulated a theology of acceptable warfare, but it took another seven centuries before Christians developed a concept of holy war. Just after the First Crusade was launched, the contemporary historian Guibert of Nogent remarked in his work, On the First Crusade, “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.” No longer did warriors see themselves as committing sin when they fought; instead they saw their actions as meritorious, even salvific.

By contrast, Muhammad himself taught his warriors that fighting was salvific. According to Sahih al-Bukhari, “the first army amongst my followers who will invade Caesar’s city will be forgiven their sins” (Sahih al-Bukhari 4.56.2924). As I demonstrated in the answer to Question 4, Allah essentially made a bargain with Muslims. Death in battle would secure a mujahid’s station in heaven (9:111).

So it was not until Christians were a thousand years removed from Jesus that they developed a theology of holy war, whereas Muhammad and the Quran themselves taught Muslims that
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fighting could be salvific. Holy war is in the very foundations of the Islamic faith.

THE NATURE OF THE CRUSADES

Some records of the Crusades depict Christians committing abominable acts. An example is Count Emicho’s slaughter of Jews in the Rhineland. A rogue Christian leader, Count Emicho systematically slaughtered and plundered innocent Jews against the behest of multiple Christian bishops. He asserted that his zeal was on account of the Jews’ mistreatment of Jesus, ignoring the fact that Jesus himself was a Jew.

Also jarring is the description of what crusaders did to Muslims after scaling the outer fortifications of Jerusalem, as recounted here in a translation of the Gesta Francorum et aliorum Hierosolimitanorum collected in R. G. D. Laffan’s Select Documents of European History:

Our men followed and pursued them, killing and hacking, as far as the temple of Solomon, and there was such a slaughter that our men were up to their ankles in the enemy’s blood. . . . Entering the city, our pilgrims pursued and killed the Saracens [Muslims] up to the temple of Solomon. There the Saracens [Muslims] assembled and resisted fiercely all day, so that the whole temple flowed with their blood. At last the pagans were overcome and our men seized many men and women in the temple, killing them or keeping them alive as they saw fit. . . . Then the crusaders scattered throughout the city, seizing gold and silver, horses and mules, and houses full of all sorts of goods. Afterwards our men went rejoicing and weeping for joy to adore the sepulchre of our Savior Jesus and there discharged their debt to Him.

At the end of the fighting, the archbishop of Pisa and the count of St. Gilles wrote a letter to the Pope, an English translation of which has been produced by the University of Pennsylvania,
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boastfully describing their victory: “If you desire to know what was done with the enemy who were found there, know that in Solomon’s Porch and in his temple our men rode in the blood of the Saracens [Muslims] up to the knees of their horses.”

Please allow me to be clear: I denounce these atrocities unequivocally. I am utterly against the courses of action that the crusaders took, as they demonstrated a disregard for the value of human life, a demonization of Jews and Muslims, and no grounding whatsoever in the teachings of Jesus.

That said, the descriptions in these accounts are clearly exaggerations, as there were not enough people in the entire world to create a knee-deep lake of blood in Jerusalem. We should not view this florid language as a precise fact.

We should also be careful to be accurate about the historical context of the battle. John Esposito, professor of Islamic studies at Georgetown University, has denounced the First Crusade in his book, Islam: The Straight Path, using these terms: “Five centuries of peaceful coexistence elapsed before political events and an imperial-papal power play led to centuries-long series of so-called holy wars that pitted Christendom against Islam and left an enduring legacy of misunderstanding and distrust.” Professor Esposito’s sentiments may be admirable, but they’re based on fiction, a fiction that has taken hold of the popular understanding of the Crusades.

The reality is that Muhammad proclaimed war against Byzantine Christians, and his companions undertook the work of conquering Christian lands. Muslims had been subjugating Christian lands ever since the inception of Islam, just as the Quran commanded them. According to Crusade scholar Thomas Madden, in an article he wrote for the National Review shortly after September 11, 2001, “The crusades were in every way a defensive war. They were the West’s belated response to the Muslim conquest of fully two-thirds of the Christian world.”

This may bear repeating: Muslims had conquered two-thirds of the Christian world before the First Crusade. Islamic conquests
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were also often brutal. I shared one account of Muhammad’s companion ordering his soldiers to slaughter defenseless women and children in my answer to Question 4; here is another example from the Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu as Muslims were conquering the Bishop’s people:

[W]hen with great toil and exertion [the Muslims] had cast down the walls of the city, they forthwith made themselves masters of it, and put to the sword thousands of its inhabitants and soldiers, and they gained an enormous booty, and took the women and children captive and divided them amongst themselves, and they made that city a desolation.

This slaughter of men and enslavement of women and children follows Muhammad’s example in his treatment of the Qurayza Jews. Let us also not forget that Muslims often enlisted the captured boys in their slave armies, starting with the ghilman in the middle of the 800s and later the mamluks. This practice became so deeply rooted in Islamic custom that, according to Daniel Pipes, sixteen of the seventeen preeminent Muslim dynasties in history systematically used slave-warriors.

CONCLUSION

When we condemn the Crusades, we ought to do so in light of what they actually were, a defensive effort after much of the Christian world had been conquered by Muslims. Yet I do condemn the Crusades. The slaughter of Jews in the Rhineland and Muslims in Jerusalem was unconscionable, especially since crusaders had taken on the name of Christ. If their efforts had represented the state and not the church, and had they been much more humane, perhaps I would feel differently. But to take the symbol of the cross, on which Jesus died for his enemies, and to turn it into a symbol for killing one’s enemies in my mind deserves to be condemned.
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As a Christian, I am thankful it took a millennium for Christians to so distort Jesus’ teachings to support holy war. Had Christians engaged in such wars one hundred or two hundred years after Jesus’ death, perhaps the matter would be less clear-cut. As it is, there is little question. Jesus did not commission any concept of holy war, and it took Christians a thousand years to depart from the foundations of Christianity radically enough to engage in it.

By contrast, violent and offensive jihad is commanded in the Quran and we find corroborating traditions in the life of Muhammad. The foundations of Islam command Muslims to engage in holy war, offering them salvation if they die while fighting. It took Muslims 1,300 years to depart from the foundations of Islam so radically as to insist that Islam is a religion of peace.
What does Jesus have to do with jihad?

Find out in the book *Answering Jihad* by bestselling author Nabeel Qureshi.

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