

What about those Crusades?!

May 11, 2005

Has this ever happened to you? You'll be talking with someone about how the Church or Christianity or the message of Jesus or Jesus Himself has made all of our lives better. Perhaps you point out that the faith has built a solid foundation of respect for the sanctity of all human life, the importance of equal justice under the law, and the value of open and honest transactions based on respect and mutual gain. Just as you think you may be making some sense your interlocutor blurts out, "Yeah, but what about the Crusades?!"

Don't you just hate that question? What's most troubling is that it deserves an answer. What about the Crusades? Why did all of those Christians, encouraged by the Church, march all the way to Jerusalem and slaughter all of those Muslims, many of them innocent women and children, to keep Christianity's most sacred land "holy"? The Crusades are a period of history that most Christians would rather not talk about.

Lately, however, it has been a topic hard to avoid. Radical Islamists often refer to their jihad against Jews and "Crusaders". President Bush even had to apologize for using the word "crusade" in describing the war on terror. Now Ridley Scott, director of *Alien, Gladiator* and *Blackhawk Down*, has just released *Kingdom of Heaven*, a 120 million dollar epic bloodbath with thought provoking dialogue designed to get all of us talking about the Crusades.

Does *Kingdom of Heaven* help us come to terms with the historical truth that those who call themselves Christian can be just as hate filled and bloodthirsty as anyone else? *Kingdom of Heaven* opens in late 12th century France to gravediggers burying a beautiful young woman who killed herself to end her grief over the death of her child. Before she is placed in the ground one priest steals the silver crucifix off of her neck while another shouts to the gravedigger, "She was a suicide. Cut off her head."

Obviously Scott is not going to let the church off easy in this film. In truth, Balian's wife and children were very much alive. But that doesn't lend itself to priest bashing. Later that night Balian (Orlando Bloom) sees the stolen crucifix on the priest's neck. It turns out the buried woman was his wife. Enraged, he kills the priest. He then avoids justice by leaving with his father for Palestine to "erase my sins and those of my wife as well."

Robert Spencer of jihadwatch.com claims this is the first major flaw in the film, that Christian doctrine has never encouraged jihad: the killing of infidels to assure you a place in heaven. This may be comforting to believe but it is, unfortunately, wrong. Pope Urban II promised at the council of Clermont in 1095 that those who abandoned war against other Christians and instead fought the infidels who occupied Jerusalem would have their sins forgiven.

All who die by the way, whether by land or by sea, or in battle against the pagans, shall have immediate remission of sins. This I grant them through the power of God with which I am invested.

Let's not be too hard on Urban. Remember that the Muslims had conquered nearly half of Christendom with their sights set on Europe. Urban believed Christ would save humanity through His Church. If Christ's Church was gone, humanity would be lost.

So how do millions of people with conflicting world views live together peacefully? Scott and writer Monahan have chosen the period between the 2nd and 3rd Crusade to stage their morality play because they see it as a time of relative tolerance. Balian arrives in Jerusalem to find modest peace and pluralism.

Sure the Templar Knights, under the control of Guy de Lusignan, are still trying to get Baldwin, the Christian leper King of Jerusalem, into war with Saladin and his 200,000 warriors amassing around the city. Yes, Saladin has killed tens of thousands to unify the Muslim world against the Crusaders. And yes, the Crusaders have killed tens of thousands in their attempt to push the Muslims out of Palestine and to protect pilgrims to Jerusalem. But for these few months the bloodshed has abated.

It is at this very point that Scott and Monahan transform Balian from a medieval knight into a modern political theorist and tactician. Not only does he seek his own forgiveness, but now he sees, "a better world than man has ever seen. A kingdom of conscience. A Kingdom of Heaven." To represent this period of pluralism Scott/Monahan introduce a fictional Brotherhood of Muslims, Jews, and Christians who counsel with the leper King on how to maintain the fragile peace.

Yet both the movie and history take an unfortunate turn away from this acceptable truce. Baldwin succumbs to his leprosy. Guy de Lusignan is crowned King of Jerusalem and immediately heads into the desert to conquer Saladin. Saladin slaughters the new King's army and then sets his sights on conquering Jerusalem.

From this point on the film becomes as confused about the Crusades as we are. Balian fails to transform his tribal warriors into enlightened agents seeking a kingdom of conscience. They don't, after all, want to get their heads cut off. Balian himself is so busy slashing and killing his way around Jerusalem that he has little time for further social contract sermonizing. War, in fact, becomes all that is important to him. Why are all of these pacifists killing each other?

It is as difficult for Scott to remove this bloodthirsty aspect of his characters' humanity as it was for the Medievals invading Jerusalem nearly a millennium ago to remove it from theirs. Today, *Braveheart* and *Gladiator* and *Troy* and *Alexander* and *Lord of the Rings I, II, and III*, are successful films partially because some savagery remains within us.

If nothing else, history continues to teach us that humanity is "red in tooth and claw." As members of that humanity we are capable of terrible acts of cruelty. We see this in the news everyday. If we were honest with ourselves we would admit that under the worst circumstances, none of us would be totally immune from the unthinkable. Are we hopelessly flawed? If left to our own devices are we still capable, after all that we have learned, of unspeakable violence? Could it be that we are, by necessity, in need of being saved from ourselves?

And what about that daunting question, "What about the Crusades?" The problem of man's inhumanity to man is so pervasive that all of us are vulnerable. Therefore, the institutions of both state and church should do all they can to minimize it.

The institutions of state should resort to violence only to protect innocent human life. The institutions of church should never militarize. If a state militarizes through its police or it's

military and involves its citizens in the process then the church has an obligation to speak to the legitimacy of that action and to be of spiritual support to those involved.

The mission of the Church is never defined by conquest of land or money or people. Its mission is to encourage the free submission of souls to the will of God that recognizes the dignity of all human beings as children of God.

Urban II was right to discourage Christians from killing each other. He was wrong to encourage them to kill infidels. Scott's support of pluralism, regardless of how fictionalized (Professor Jonathan Riley-Smith said the movie is "not historically accurate at all") and lopsided (all members of the Church are dimwits and wicked; nearly all extremists are Christian) should be encouraged. Political pluralism is, after all, the solution to this menacing problem of divergent cultures getting along.

Political pluralism does not necessarily mean religious pluralism. People of faith (including those of atheism and secularism) think that what they believe is true and what others believe is false. Honestly, don't you believe that what you believe is true? Political pluralism encourages us to accept this, that beliefs are cherished by those who hold them. It allows for the expression of these beliefs. But just as importantly, political pluralism insists that we live peacefully with each other while respecting each other's dignity.

The Christian faith has encouraged this solution, regardless of its mistakes in the past. In fact, the Christian faith is the leading proponent of this solution.

Pope Urban II's stirring speech at the Council of Clermont launched the first and only Crusade to meet its military objective

In 1094 or 1095, Alexios I Komnenos, the Byzantine emperor, sent to the pope, Urban II, and asked for aid from the west against the Seljuq Turks, who had taken nearly all of Asia Minor from him. At the council of Clermont Urban addressed a great crowd and urged all to go to the aid of the Greeks and to recover Palestine from the rule of the Muslims. The acts of the council have not been preserved, but we have five accounts of the speech of Urban which were written by men who were present and heard him. Versions by:

1. [Fulcher of Chartres](#): **Gesta Francorum Jerusalem Expugnantium**
2. [Robert the Monk](#): **Historia Hierosolymitana**
3. [Gesta Francorum](#) [**The Deeds of the Franks**]
4. [Balderic of Dol](#)
5. [Guibert de Nogent](#): **Historia quae dicitur Gesta Dei per Francos**
6. [Urban II](#): **Letter of Instruction, December 1095**

All the king's horses and all the king's men

The year was 1095 CE, William the Conqueror had united England under one crown 30 years earlier. The French had been dividing properties amongst their sons for generations, causing bloodshed between brothers over small pieces of real estate. In reaction, Pope Urban II expanded "The Truce of God", which outlawed fighting from Sunday to Wednesday, and

banned fighting involving priests, monks, women, laborers and merchants on any day of the week. Italy was a collection of city-states, constantly being overrun by invading hordes, the latest of which were the Normans, who had just started to become "civilized".

There was also the Byzantine empire, ruling from Constantinople, whose emperor at this time was Alexius Comnenus. To his East, the Turks were rapidly encroaching on his empire, and had begun attacking pilgrims on their way to - and in - Jerusalem, causing him great distress. He wrote to his friend Robert, the Count of Flanders, in 1093, telling him about supposed atrocities committed by the Turks on the Christian pilgrims, and Robert passed this letter on to Pope Urban II. Urban, an opportunist, saw this as a perfect way to solve some of his local problems. He personally promoted a Holy Crusade to reclaim the Holy Lands from the barbarian Turks. Thus, the First Crusade was launched in 1096 CE.

Shedding light on a dark chapter

Indeed, Asbridge makes clear that the venture succeeded against all odds. Facing a formidable enemy, a dangerous journey, uncertain aid from erstwhile allies, a novel command structure, and a thin supply of trained troops, the First Crusade was the military equivalent of the Hail Mary pass in football. Reading about the horrible trials these devoted men (and women) faced on the road to Jerusalem, I couldn't help but cheer for them, in spite of my moral horror for what they did. The detailed descriptions of intrigue in palace and cloister, military strategy, and the clash of arms make this an innately interesting journey for readers. It reads kind of like *The Lord of the Rings*—but without the Lord.

Asbridge says that, contrary to the conclusions of earlier histories, the First Crusaders were motivated not primarily by avarice (the expedition was too dangerous and expensive). Urban II, the instigator, was seeking to establish the primacy of the papacy after years of humiliation from secular authorities. Urban sought to rally Christendom under his banner and, bringing together various theological and sociological strands, lit a powder keg at the Council of Clermont in November 1095.

May 10, 1310: In Paris, 54 Knights Templar are burned alive. The Catholic Church created the Templars to protect Holy Land pilgrims from bandits, but the knights' quick rise in power and wealth made them unpopular. Philip the Fair of France against them trumped up charges of blasphemy and homosexuality to convince Pope Clement to disband the order and persecute its members (see issue 40: The Crusades)

Ridley Scott's latest epic "Kingdom of Heaven," from 20th Century Fox opened at No. 1 with an estimated \$20 million in tickets sold during its debut weekend at the North American box office. The 130 million dollar "Kingdom of Heaven" starring Orlando Bloom opened in 100 markets worldwide and took in \$56 million internationally.

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