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## The Church and the Crusades

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Few events that happened in medieval Europe are even today spoken about as often as the crusades. Recent happenings in India<sup>1</sup> and the world at large<sup>2</sup> have brought to the forefront ideas and feelings connected with the words *jihad* and *crusade*. Ideas and feelings connected with religious traditions, especially if they are popular ones, evoke strong reactions from the people.

### Crusades

The crusades dominated the mind of medieval Europe. Despite their overpowering influence no one term was consistently used to describe the crusades or the crusaders. Besides various vernacular words that appeared in the thirteenth century, like *croiserie* in French, the 'crusade' could be called a pilgrimage (*iter* or *peregrinatio*), a holy war (*bellum sacrum* or *guerre sainte*), a passage or general passage (*passagium generale*), an expedition of the Cross (*expeditio crucis*) or the business of Jesus Christ (*negotium Jesu Christi*). It is only in the late twelfth century that the technical word *cruce signati*, 'signed with the cross', was used for those who took part in these adventures, and from this derives the word 'crusaders' (Riley-

Smith 1977: 12). As a mark of a public commitment to participate in a crusade, they wore a red cloth cross sewn to their dress.

Not only were different terms used, but crusades referred actually to more than one activity. As against the popular use of the word, 'crusade' was not restricted to the military expeditions of Christians to the Holy Land. It was used also to describe the military expeditions against Muslims in the East and for the fight against the Muslims in Spain. The same word was also used when the Christians used military force against the heretics, schismatics and dissenters within the Christian community, whom the popes adjudged enemies of the faith. Despite this varied usage of the word, in this essay we shall focus only on the crusades that were launched to recover to the Holy Land from the Muslims and see how the Christian community of those days justified the use of force to achieve its aim.

### Pilgrimages

Going on pilgrimage played a major role in initiating the crusade movement. In the earliest days of Christianity pilgrimages were probably rare. Bib-

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lical scholars speculate whether the resurrection apparitions around the empty tomb in the Gospels did not have early pilgrimage visits to the tomb as their *Sitz im Leben*. At any rate, by the third century we read of Christians going on pilgrimages to the Holy Land. A visit to the holy places connected with Jesus' life was seen as a means of growing in spiritual life and also as a form of reparation for one's sins. But early Christian writers like Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom considered pilgrimages to be irrelevant. They even disapproved of them. On the other hand, Jerome said that it was an act of faith to pray where the feet of Christ had stood. And Jerome's view became more popular with the people (Runciman 1954: 40).

Encouraged by the authorities, pilgrimages multiplied. As a result by the beginning of the fourth century there were said to be already two hundred monasteries and hospices in or around Jerusalem to receive pilgrims. The mid-fifth century saw the height of this early taste for pilgrimage to Jerusalem <sup>3</sup>

The improvement in the conditions of pilgrimage had an effect on western religious thought. It is not sure at what time pilgrimages were first ordered as canonical practices. All the early medieval penitential books recommended a pilgrimage, but usually without giving a specified goal. But the belief was growing that certain holy places possessed a definite spiritual value which affected those that visited them and could even bring about indulgence from sin. From the tenth century onwards Palestine was considered one of the four

holy places to have this gift. The others were Rome, Santiago de Compostela in Spain and Saint Michael at Monte Gargano in Italy (Runciman 1954: 44).

The Cluny monks arranged and popularised pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Thanks to their efforts, an unending stream of pilgrims - men and women of every age and class - went to Jerusalem throughout the eleventh century.

Even as the pilgrimage movement was gaining momentum, the Holy Land itself passed into the hands of the Muslims. In 638 Caliph Omar captured it. But he gave freedom to the Christians to practise their religion and continue their pilgrimages. Conditions remained the same till 1077, when Seljukian Turks captured Jerusalem. They desecrated the holy places, ill-treated the Christians, putting some into prison and killing others. The pilgrims who returned to their homelands spoke of the sad plight of the Christians in the East and how difficult it had become to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Pope Gregory VII and his successor Victor III wanted to launch a crusade to avenge these wrongs against Christians and Christianity. But during those days the secular powers of Christendom were busy with their own affairs and the conflicts among themselves. So they did not pay attention to the wishes of the Pope. Things changed with the arrival of charismatic preachers like Peter the Hermit on the scene. They succeeded in building up popular opinion in favour of a war against Muslims. In this surcharged atmosphere Pope Urban II made an appeal to the Christians to take part in a crusade to

liberate Jerusalem. He made this appeal in November 1095 at the Council of Clermont, in response to the plea for western assistance made a few months earlier by the Byzantine Emperor Alexius II and hoping thus to end the schism between East and West through mutual help to each other. The Pope's appeal met with an enthusiastic response, much beyond what he himself had expected.

### **Helping fellow Christians**

The Pope asked Christians in the West to help their fellow Christians in the East. He told them: "You must carry succour to your brethren dwelling in the East and needing your aid, which they have so often demanded. For the Turks, a Persian people, have attacked them, as many of you know, and have advanced ... occupying more and more the lands of those Christians, have already seven times conquered them in battle, have killed and captured many, have destroyed the churches and devastated the kingdom of God. If you permit them to remain for a time unmolested, they will extend their sway more widely over many faithful servants of the Lord" (Pope Urban II, 1095 edited by Barry 1960: 327-328). Referring to Muslims he urged "men of all ranks, knights and foot-soldiers, rich and poor, to hasten to exterminate this vile race from the lands of our brethren and to bear timely aid to the worshippers of Christ" (Barry 1960: 328). He warned the faithful that "many reproaches will be heaped upon you by the Lord Himself if you do not aid those who like yourselves are counted of the Christian faith" (Barry 1960: 328). He wanted them to stop

fighting among themselves and killing each other and ruining the wealth of nations: "Let those who have formerly been accustomed to contend wickedly in private warfare against the faithful, fight against the infidel and bring to a victorious end the war which ought long since to have been begun. Let those who have formerly contended against their brothers and relatives now fight as they ought against the barbarians" (Barry 1960: 328). He promised that God would lead them in this venture.

### **Crusade – a pilgrimage**

As noted, one of the reasons for the crusade was to enable the Christians to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. And the crusade, started to help the pilgrims, was itself regarded as a form of pilgrimage.<sup>4</sup> The pilgrimage symbol and terminology were used for the crusades and the crusaders. The vows that the crusader took were based on those of the pilgrim. The privileges that the pilgrims enjoyed, especially the protection of themselves, family and property, and indulgences, were also given to the crusaders. "The association of expedition and pilgrimage was at once expressed symbolically, especially in the cloth cross which the knights at Clermont had sewn to their garb; this was the sign of the crusade vow, a religious obligation, and at the same time the military symbol of an army resolved to fight. There also appeared a common battle cry "Deus le volt," and a new ritual blessing, which added the sword to the old pilgrimage symbols that were retained, the staff and wallet" (Kempf 1969: 448-449).

## Crusade Piety

During the period of the crusades, thanks to a greater familiarity with Christian scriptures especially the New Testament, the focus of the sermons preached by the bishops, diocesan clerics and monks began to shift from Jesus Christ the Lord to Jesus of Nazareth – the wandering, suffering, humanly close and redeeming Jesus. This evoked among the laity the desire to lead a life of personal nearness to Jesus who showed the way to salvation. They saw that Jesus Christ had made salvation possible for them and had already shown by his life how to achieve it. “It is no longer surprising that the concrete aspect of this *via salutis* now became the crusade. Accordingly, crusade piety appears as a characteristic form of the Christian’s seeking after salvation, which he found in a threefold union with God in obedient service – “God wills it” – with Christ in a suffering, dying, and triumphing imitation – for Christ and with him – with the Holy Spirit in the enthusiasm of the reorientation, esteemed as a newly experienced Pentecost” (Beck 1970: 87).

The crusaders viewed sufferings and defeats in wars as punishments from God to purify and punish them for disobeying God’s commands and falling into sin. Moreover, suffering during the crusade was seen as integral to the penance they had voluntarily undertaken when they became part of the movement.

The crusaders compared themselves with the Israelites of the First Testament and found in the figures of the First Testament their consolation and

challenge. “In their sufferings they were inspired by the patience of Job; in their march, their hardships and the blessings showered upon them they were like the Israelites journeying from Egypt to the Promised Land, with Adhémer of Le Puy as their Moses; like the Maccabees they fought for Jerusalem, they faced martyrdom, and God’s favour was revealed in miracles” (Riley-Smith 1977 : 91). While the crusaders saw certain similarities between them and those from the First Testament, they were convinced that theirs was superior to that of the Israelites. They saw the crusade as more miraculous than the enterprises of the Israelites and the Maccabees, and the crusaders’ sufferings surpassed those of their ancient exemplars (Riley-Smith 1977 : 91).

## War

Despite the prevalence of these spiritual elements in the crusade movement, the crusades were basically wars waged by the Christians, and Christianity at that point of time officially supported this warfare. For those who are familiar with the Jesus’ Movement in its earliest phase this support for military activity comes as a big surprise. One of the accusations levelled against the early Christians was their refusal to do military service.<sup>5</sup> Christian writers like Tertullian and Origen wrote against military activity. They gave strong pacifist arguments. But already in the fourth century we encounter in Ambrose and Augustine persons who defended just wars (Swift 1983: 27). It is quite strange that a pacifist Church in course of time not only kept silent when some of its members enrolled themselves in the

army and fought wars, but also authorised and defended wars waged in the name of religion. It began to call war a just one and indeed a holy act to be pursued with great vigour and religious fervour!

This eventually led to the appearance of 'military orders'. The monks of these orders took the monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. But they were soldiers who had dedicated their lives to the service of Christ. The more famous among these orders are the Templars and Hospitallers.

### Just war

The just war theory as it developed in Christian circles stipulated that for a war to be called a just one, it must be a defensive one. That is, the war must have been waged merely to defend one's country, or to recover property unlawfully taken by another. This theory was used in favour of the crusade.

The Holy Land was claimed to be the property of the Christians. It had been consecrated by the presence of Jesus Christ. As representative of Christ the Pope was within his right to reassert Christian jurisdiction in Palestine. Therefore, the crusade to the Holy Land was seen as recovering the territory that belonged originally and by right to the Christians. It was not a war of aggression but only a defensive one. As defensive, crusades were shown to conform to the basic principles of just wars. The idea of a just war was also invoked already in the fight against Muslims in Spain and Sicily.

### Holy War

With the crusades the idea of Holy War entered into Christian thinking. Crusades were spoken of as Holy Wars because what was being recovered was what belonged not to any particular country but to Christendom at large, to the Church and to Christ himself. "It was not the property of the Byzantine Empire or of the Kingdom of Jerusalem that was liberated or defended by the crusades to the East, but territory belonging by right to Christendom or to Christ" (Riley-Smith 1977: 29). In the crusade the use of military force was regarded as being not merely justifiable and condoned by God, but positively sanctioned by him. The battle cry of the crusades from the beginning had been *deus le volt* (God wills it).

The prevalent political philosophy of medieval Europe and its understanding of Christendom played an important role in the crusades. In political terms Christendom was seen as a universal state and not merely that of the society of Christians. Christendom was thought of as a monarchy, founded and ruled by Christ. It was seen as transcendental, because it existed at the same time in heaven and on earth. It was seen as the only true sovereign state, because it provided the political context in which human persons could develop their potential for loving God and God's people. Other claimants for kingdoms did not have real political validity. They were at best considered temporal arrangements which could be treated as provinces of Christendom. Christendom had its possessions and its citizens, and any of its possessions which was in the

hands of others should be restored to its rule. Following this trend of thought a crusade was seen as an army fighting for the recovery of its lost property. Calling for a crusade Pope Urban II said: "I pray and exhort, nay not I, but the Lord prays and exhorts you, as heralds of Christ ... I speak to those who are present, I proclaim it to the absent, but Christ commands"<sup>6</sup> (Pope Urban II in Barry 1960: 328). Appeal was made to Christian duty. Christendom was disturbed. So Christians have to fight in the Christian army. Pope Urban hailed the crusaders as "soldiers of Christ." The crusaders on their part called themselves "the army of the Lord." The leaders of the First Crusade spoke of spreading "the kingdom of Christ and the Church." In 622 Heraclius, the Eastern Roman Emperor, had fought against the Persians who had taken over Jerusalem in 614. He "dedicated himself and his army to God and set out as a Christian warrior fighting the powers of darkness. To subsequent generations he figured as the first of the Crusaders," observes Runciman (1954: 11).

To Pope Innocent III the crusade was a venture that was Christ's own and those who helped the Muslims in this war were acting against the "interests of Christ himself and the Christian people" (Riley-Smith 1977: 30). And St Bernard of Clairvaux opined that King Louis VII of France going on a crusade was of importance not only to him "but to the whole Church of God, because now your cause is one with that of all the world." Odo of Châteauroux spoke in the same vein a century later: "But someone says, 'The Muslims have not hurt me at all. Why should I take the

Cross against them?' But if he thought well about it he would understand that the Muslims do great injury to every Christian" (Riley-Smith 1977: 30). So Muslims were presented as the common enemy of all Christians, and not only as enemies of Christians in a particular land. They had become the enemies of Christendom by their illegal occupation of the Holy Land and because of the harsh treatment they were meting out to Christians.

### God with Us

In a despatch of 18 October 1097 Adhémar of Le Puy and the Greek Patriarch spoke about the successes of the crusades in the following words: "We are few in comparison with the pagans. Truly God fights for us" (Hagenmeyer 1901: 142; as cited in Riley-Smith 1986: 91). The crusaders claimed that they were fighting under divine leadership and that they were helped by God's strong right arm. They believed that the hand of the Lord was with them. Therefore, they were convinced that no force could prevail against them. They saw God as their General, co-traveller and co-worker, and attributed the successes of the military to God's favour: "God opened to us the abundance of His blessing and mercy and led us into the city, and delivered the Turks and all of their possessions into our power," wrote Archbishop Daimbert, Duke Godfrey and Count Raymond (Quoted in Barry 1960: 329).

They were convinced that God was on their side to help them when they called on him and instilled in them great courage: "When our army was in sight

of the enemy, upon our knees we invoked the aid of the Lord ... There was no delay; God was present when we cried for His aid, and furnished us with so great boldness, that one who saw us rush upon the enemy would have taken us for a herd of deer hastening to quench their thirst in running water” (Quoted in Barry 1960: 330).

### **Against Enemies of God**

To liberate the Holy Land the crusaders fought with the Muslims. This was not the first time that Christians were fighting against Muslims. Wars had been regularly fought between them in the past. The difference was that earlier they were seen as wars to defend the Empire and thus as something normal that happens between political powers. Though in the past Christian captives were occasionally either forced to apostatise or put to death by a fanatical Muslim ruler (and their martyrdom duly remembered and honoured), such cases were rare. But the crusade against the Muslims in the Holy Land was portrayed as a struggle for the glory of Christendom, for the rescue of its holy places (Runciman 1954: 32).

As said earlier, because of what they did to the Holy Land, Muslims were regarded as enemies of not one nation but of all Christians. Writers at the time of the First Crusade described Muslims as “enemies of God.” They were considered enemies of Christendom and as such were to be treated as enemies of Christ, the God incarnate. Pope Urban II in his speech at Clermont described the Muslims as “a race so despised, degenerate and slave

of the demons” (Quoted in Barry 1960: 328).

### **Authorised by the Pope**

Against these ‘enemies of God’ the crusade as a military expedition was authorised not by any temporal power but by the Pope as head of Christendom and representative of Christ. As a result of this papal initiative the crusades enjoyed certain privileges, particularly indulgences, which only Popes could bestow.

Papal proclamations and encyclicals added weight to the crusade movement. The Popes also asked the bishops, papal legates and specially commissioned crusade preachers like St Bernard, to preach for the crusades. To support the preachers Pope Innocent III and his successors gave indulgences even to those who listened to the sermons irrespective of their joining the crusades or not. Besides these preachers who were controlled by the papacy, there were other popular evangelisers like Peter the Hermit and Nicholas, the boy who led the children’s crusade in 1212.

### **Material Gains**

Ordinary men in medieval Europe were moved by the new concept of knighthood and by the desire to serve Christ by taking up the cross and defending the Church by winning over the land for Christendom. At a period of time when the ideal Christian was a monk and the priesthood was a prestigious and privileged state of life, and the laity only the ‘second best’, an undertaking which could increase the status

of the laity was the crusade. Only the layman was qualified to take part in the crusade. The popes, bishops, priests and monks could only preach. They were not allowed to take up arms. Thus crusade became a fruitful field of action to laymen.

Moreover, crusades were not restricted to any class. Men of all classes took part in the crusades. Even criminals took part in it because their sentences were commuted in return for participating in the crusade. Other laymen also stood to gain. They enjoyed certain privileges: protection of themselves, their families and properties. They were exempted from certain taxes and interest payments. There was also the possibility of getting new kingdoms and fiefdoms. The popular evangelisers dwelt on messianic and visionary themes emphasising the rewards of the poor who take part in the crusades. That kind of language sometimes erupted in migrations towards the Holy Land, which was believed to be a paradise which only the underprivileged could acquire (Riley-Smith 1977: 43).

### **Spiritual Benefits**

Crusaders were assured of many spiritual benefits too. Taking part in the crusade was seen as a means of salvation. They were granted indulgences. Since the fight was for Christ, crusaders who were called soldiers of Christ were destined to receive salvation. "Pope Alexander II's indulgence for the Spanish warriors (1063) marks the date at which the Roman central government formally approved and took under its wing the religious war, born out of the

Spanish struggle for existence against the Moors. In this way, Islam's militant religious spirit entered into Western Christianity as a whole," observes Mirgeler (1964: 114). For those who died in battle Pope Urban II granted absolution and the remission of sins. He promised them that "the sins of those who set out thither, if they lose their lives on the journey, by land or sea, or in fighting against the heathen, shall be remitted in that hour; this I grant to all who go, through the power of God vested in me" (in Barry 1960: 328). He said that life here was miserable and evil, with people preoccupied with various activities leading to the ruin of their bodies and souls. Here they were poor and unhappy. And he promised them that if they go on the crusade they would be joyful and prosperous and become friends of God. Canon 2 of the Council of Clermont declared that "whoever for devotion only, not for honour or financial gain, joins the expedition for the freeing of the Church of God in Jerusalem, can count that journey as a substitute for all penance" (Cited in Riley-Smith 1977: 59). The crusade was portrayed as another penitential act and the performance of this penitential act dispensed the penitent from the penance enjoined on that person for the sins committed. Even as late as the mid-twentieth century a financial contribution to the 'Crusades' could dispense any Christian from most of the rigorous Lenten penances imposed by canonical or liturgical laws.

Crusade was seen not only as a penitential act but also as a positive act of virtue. It was portrayed as a means of grace, an expression of love of God



and of neighbour: Love of God, because out of love for God the crusaders fought. Love of neighbour because the crusaders took up arms to help the Christians in the East (Riley-Smith 1977: 31).

## **Martyrdom**

Already from the ninth century dying in war against Muslims had been spoken of as martyrdom. St Bernard underlined this fact in his sermons. He preached to them: "Go forward then in security, knights, and drive off without fear the enemies of the Cross of Christ, certain that neither death nor life can separate you from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ ... How glorious are those who return victorious from the battle! How happy are those who die as martyrs in the battle! Rejoice, courageous athlete, if you survive and are victor in the Lord; but rejoice and glory the more if you die and are joined to the Lord. For your life is fruitful and your victory glorious. But death ... is more fruitful and more glorious. For if those who die in the Lord are blessed, how much more so are those who die for the Lord" (Riley-Smith 1977: 32)! James of Vitry of the thirteenth century in one of his sermons said: "Crusaders who, truly contrite and confessed, are girded in the service of God and then die in Christ's service are counted truly as martyrs, freed from both venial and mortal sins and from all enjoined penance, absolved from the penalties for sin in this world, from the penalties of purgatory in the next, secure from the torments of Gehenna, crowned with glory and honour in eternal beatitude ... Do not in any way doubt that this pilgrimage will not only earn you remission of

sins and the reward of eternal life, but it will also offer much to wives, sons, parents, living or dead: whatever good you do in this life for them. This is the full and entire Indulgence which the supreme pontiff, according to the keys committed to him by God, conceded to you" (Riley-Smith 1977: 61-62).

## **Lasting effects of crusades**

The crusades lasted for two centuries, from 1099 to 1291. The military successes were small and short-lived compared to the heavy loss in men and money. Commenting on the significance of the crusades Barry writes: "Its original impetus and first reconquests of ancient Christian centers such as Antioch and Jerusalem ... brought forth a spirit of romantic adventure, zeal, literature, and religious idealism among Western Christians. Common effort in a so-called holy cause made real for a short time the ageless Christian dream of unity. The dissipation of the movement, quarrelling and divergent aims of the participants, serious break between East and West, and the reorganization of the united Moslem forces resulted in the eventual loss of the Christian strongholds and states" (Barry 1960: 325).

Despite repeated attempts the Holy Land could not be won over from the Muslims except for a short span of time. The failure of crusades led to apathy and cynicism among the Christians. Doubts were raised about God's will and the papal authority. The gap between the Latin Christians and the Orthodox Christians widened. Despite these negative feelings that the failure of crusades evoked, it is a fact that crusades "stimulated religious enthusiasm on a large

scale and gave Christendom a unifying cause that lasted for centuries” (Froelich 1987: 170).

The idea of the crusade continued to occupy the minds of the Christians in Europe for many centuries to come. The hostility towards Muslims was kept up. A spillover of that attitude was witnessed in India too – in the fight for political and mercantile supremacy in India. One of the reasons for the Portuguese coming to India is that they had heard rumours about the existence of a Christian kingdom in India.<sup>7</sup> They wanted to get their support so that they could make a two-pronged attack on the Muslims and destroy them. But it was not to be.

“In addition to elements of lay piety, the crusades also contained a measure of knightly energy which at times expressed itself in a bloody and un-Christian frenzy which turned the crusades into the most cruel phenomenon

of the Middle Ages,” says Franzen (1965: 193). A false religious fervour coupled with the bitterness of the hardships connected with war led the crusaders to revel in cruelty. Judged by the teachings of Jesus, the violence of the crusades, especially the terrible bloodbath after the capture of Jerusalem in 1099 can never be excused. Whatever may be the arguments that were given in favour of the crusades – just and holy war, fighting for and with God, the promise of material and spiritual rewards – and the crusade piety that emerged, it is still difficult to reconcile the hate-filled crusades with the love commandment of Jesus. A religion like Christianity should have promoted peace and harmony among people of different nations, cultures and religions. But through actively promoting crusades it sowed seeds of hatred that still bear bitter fruits. Christianity failed to be the solution. It became part of the problem.

## Notes

1. The destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya and its aftermath, especially Gujarat.
2. The destruction of the World Trade Centre towers in New York, and Afghan War, the anti-terrorism ‘crusade’ (!) and the Israeli Palestinian conflict.
3. There is an early fifth century travel diary in a Latin dialect, known as Pilgrimage of Egeria (also known as Pilgrimage of Aetheria). From the text we can infer that the author of this diary was a wealthy woman who could spend years on pilgrimage, enjoyed social standing and knew the Bible well. She belonged to a devout sisterhood. In her diary she gives information about liturgical ceremonies in Jerusalem. Besides going on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, she also visited Egypt, Syria and Constantinople. *The Harper Collins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, 1985: 459.
4. Today it is *tourism* and pilgrimage!
5. See the appeal made by Celsus to Christians to become soldiers and fight for the Emperor and thus prove their belongingness to the Empire. *Contra Celsum* 8, 73, 75.
6. When the Portuguese landed in India they realised that there were no Christian kingdoms in India, but only some Christians who lived in India.

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