

How the Media Misconstrue Jihad and the Crusades

By Timothy Furnish

Mr. Furnish, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor, World History, Georgia Perimeter Collge.

It's axiomatic among historians that winners write (or sometimes rewrite) history. How strange it is, then, that on the topic of Jihads and their Western analog [equivalent], the Crusades, the losers in the post-1492 struggle for world mastery (the Islamic world) and their willing spinmeisters (academics and media pundits) are currently foisting their ahistorical [non-historical] views on the rest of us.

That view, a two-sided coin of deceit, consists of the following contentions:

- i) that jihad almost always means "moral self-improvement in order to please God" and, on the rare occasion that it does take martial form, it only does so as a desperate defensive measure against the Christian West; and
- ii) that the history of Christian-Muslim interaction is almost entirely one of invasion and exploitation of the latter by the former, exemplified by the Crusades.

As examples, consider these recent propaganda gems:

1) MSNBC, in a segment discussing the new PBS [Public Broadcast Service] video "Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet" (Dec. 18, 2002), runs a graphic explaining that the true definition of jihad is **"the struggle to please God."**

2) History Channel/A & E's recent (summer 2002) "Inside Islam" special presents the Crusades as the **first** violent struggle between Christendom and the Islamic world.

3) *U.S. News and World Report's* cover story **"The First Holy War"** (April 8, 2002) does likewise, claiming that "during the Crusades, East and West **first** met--on the battlefield."

4) History Channel/A & E's (otherwise fine) 1995 video series "The Crusades" (hosted by former Monty Python member Terry Jones) has Salah al-Din, the Kurdish Muslim leader who retook Jerusalem from the Crusaders, telling Richard the Lion Heart that "this land has always been ours" and it also avers [asserts] that **jihad only developed as a response to the rapacious Crusades.**

5) The PBS video "Islam: Empire of Faith" (2001) presents **Islamic military expansion, both pre-modern and Ottoman, as natural and understandable and never calls it by its true name: jihad.**

Such examples could be multiplied many fold, if every self-styled expert on Islam who has been interviewed by any American newspaper since 9/11 were adduced [listed]. But sticking with the five aforementioned contentions, what is wrong with each of them?

Re: 1) As Daniel Pipes and Douglas Streusand so convincingly point out, **jihad does NOT mean primarily "the struggle to please God"** but indeed--as both Islamic doctrinal writings (especially al-Bukhari's ninth c. CE [AD] collection of Hadith, or traditions) and Islamic history demonstrate-- **"holy war."**

The so-called "greater jihad," which emphasizes conquering one's sins, is actually a minority Sufi (Islamic mystic) view that is based on an untrustworthy, probably forged, tradition. Throughout most of Islamic history most Muslims, lay and scholar alike, have understood "jihad" in its Arabic dictionary--and the Bin Ladin--sense of "holy war." (a)

Re: 2) & 3) As Vincent Carroll so eloquently explains, only a historical ignoramus--or, I would add at the risk of redundancy, a tendentious PBS editor --could produce the claptrap statement that the Crusades marked the first time Islam and the West met on the battlefield. Islam began with one man in Mecca and, within less than two centuries, encompassed territory from the Iberian Peninsula to the Hindu Kush. This expansion did not happen peacefully.

The Arab Muslim armies attacked and conquered Byzantine Christian territories in Syria and Egypt and, a bit later, Arab-Berber Muslim forces conquered the formerly Roman, but still Christian, cities and towns across North Africa and into what is now Spain and Portugal, ruling there for seven centuries.

Muslim armies invaded the Frankish Kingdom, later to become France. In 732 they were defeated by Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles Martel.

Over the next three centuries the Sunni Muslim Seljuq Turks further dissected the Byzantine Empire, beginning a process that would be completed by their cousins the Ottomans, who conquered Constantinople in 1453 and ruled southeastern Europe for centuries.(b)

So **the Crusades**, far from being the first time Muslims and Christians fought, **were** actually merely **the first time that Christians**, after four centuries of defeats, really **fought BACK**.(c)

Re: 4) Salah al-Din's quote -- "this land has always been ours" -- seems almost an Islamic version of the old Soviet Brezhnev Doctrine: once you go Communist--you cannot go back.

"This land has always been ours?!" That would have been news to the two major erstwhile denizens [inhabitants at the time] and rulers of the Holy Land, Jews and Christians (not to mention Romans, Persians, Assyrians, Philistines, Canaanites, etc.).

Muslims didn't conquer what is now Israel/Palestine until the mid-7th c. CE. And, as mentioned earlier, jihad existed in Islamic theory and practice long before the Crusaders showed up in the Middle East. The reason it took so long (almost two centuries) for the Muslim world to expel the Crusaders was NOT lack of a militant ideology but rather lack of a sufficiently strong and determined state--a deficiency which the Egyptian Mamluks rectified in the 13th c. CE.

Re: 5) The Ottomans had as one of their long-term, explicit goals the complete conquest of Europe and often declared jihads in order to further this agenda. In 1529 and 1683 their holy wars took them to the gates of Vienna. In 1828 they declared an (unsuccessful) jihad against the Greeks' attempt to gain independence.

The Crimean War of 1854 prompted a jihad against Russia. The Ottomans fought World War I as an openly-trumpeted holy war against the British, French, Russians and (later) Americans. Now, one might argue that by the 19th century Ottoman jihads were merely a cynical, defensive propaganda ploy by the leadership of a tottering Islamic empire.

Perhaps. But when the leading political (sultan-caliph) and religious (shaykh al-Islam) figures of the planet's most powerful Islamic state call something a jihad, should we not take them at their word? Furthermore, it is worthy of note that far more people (mainly Armenians) died as part of that last Ottoman jihad against the Russians than died in all of the Crusades combined.(d)

Two questions, to conclude: Why are influential segments of the American media perpetuating and, indeed, promoting, historically inaccurate views of two major post-9/11 issues: Jihad and the Crusades? And, more importantly, why does it matter?

To answer the second question first: it matters because peoples' view of history shapes their cultural and political views. We Americans are constantly reminded to pay attention to the "Muslim street," [Muslim opinion] lest we callously provoke those millions for whom, allegedly, the Crusades of almost a millennium ago are still festering wounds.

Yet, as Carroll observes, "if the impact of the Crusades 'created a historical memory' for Muslims, why isn't the historical memory created among Christians by the Muslims conquests of the previous five centuries worth mentioning?" To that could be added: why aren't the Ottoman conquests and jihads of the subsequent six centuries worthy of report?

Indeed, for centuries Christian Europe lived in fear of "the Turk" and Luther even had a prayer specifically asking for deliverance from the Ottomans. 1683 is a lot nearer to our time than 1099. Attacks have not been all from West to (Middle) East, and it is high time the "Muslim street" received the solid food of historically accurate teaching rather than the milk of Islamic propaganda.

This is not merely a *tu quoque* spat [*you also* outburst] but a matter of accurately and fairly addressing the issues that divide the civilizations produced by the world's two largest faiths, Christianity and Islam.(e)

Ultimately, of course, modern Americans are in reality no more responsible for the Crusades than, say, modern Mongolians are for the Eurasian depredations of their ancestor Genghis Khan; less so, in fact (since many Americans are descended from societies which had nothing to do with the Crusades).

What prevents this argument from becoming much ado about nothing are two things:

- 1). that Osamah bin Ladin and his ilk have been playing the "Crusades" card for a decade now, to no small effect; and, what's almost as disturbing,
- 2). many American college students have internalized the neo-Marxist, "blame the West first" attitude, presented in high school history classes, along with the requisite guilt. Garbage in, garbage out then holds sway.

Regarding the Jihads of the last 14 centuries, the useful idiots at PBS and MSNBC also present an ahistorical view but take the opposite tack from that vis-à-vis the Crusades: rather than maintaining that the majority's erroneous view is accurate, in the case of the Jihads the apologists claim that the majority view of jihad as "holy war" is not the real one and that a minority, suspect view is to be preferred.

Once again Islamic history is whitewashed and the hundreds of Muslim attacks upon, and conquests of, Christians and Christian territory are unquestioned or even glorified. Once again, Muslims and non-Muslims are force fed a false view of history, from which they then construct a false view of reality: one in which the Christian West has always been the aggressor and the Islamic world the supine [peaceful, passive] victim.

Why? Why do educated, allegedly objective members of the media attempt to inculcate such distorted views of history in Americans' minds? Several theories come to mind. One is that the leftward tilt of the media predisposes them to a critical view of the West, in particular in the realm of religious matters. Many in the media being themselves irreligious, are appalled by putative [supposed to be] Christians fighting a holy war like the Crusades.

And being critical of Western civilization, they automatically defer to non-Westerners when it comes to defining their own concepts, such as "jihad." Most journalists are rather ignorant of history but they do have some vague idea that European-American civilization has oppressed and exploited the rest of the world, particularly Muslims; this makes media types sympathetic to non-Westerners.

None of this, of course, excuses such drivel as PBS, A & E and *U.S. News* have produced lately. And in fact "it would be funny, this journalistic malpractice, if it didn't buttress the convictions of the natics...." And, I might add, reinforce the anti-Western prejudices of our own young people.

(a) Daniel Pipes, "Jihad and the Professors," *Commentary* (November 2002). Douglas Streusand, "What Does Jihad Mean?" *Middle East Quarterly* (September 1997).

(b) Vincent Corroll, "Myths of the Crusades Hard to Kill," *Rocky Mountain News* (April 6, 2002). For a complete listing of Islamic conquests, see Paul Fregosi, *Jihad in the West: Muslim Conquests from the 7th to the 21st Centuries* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998).

(c) Thomas Madden, "Crusade Propaganda," *National Review Online* (November 2, 2001).

(d) Efraim Karsh and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East 1789-1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Rudolph Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1996), especially chapter 6, "Jihad and War Propaganda: The Ottoman Jihad Fatwa of November 11, 1914"), pp. 55-57.

(e) For examples in the immediate wake of 9/11, see Alan Philips, "Ill-chosen Word [Crusade] Fuels Claims of Intent to Wage War on Islam," *Daily Telegraph* (London) (September 18, 2001); Eric Black, "Christian Crusades are Bitter Chapters in History of Islam," *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis) (October 21, 2001); Jonathon Phillips, "Why a Crusade Will Lead to a Jihad," *Independent* (London) (September 18, 2001).

(6) Quoting Carroll, "Myths of the Crusades Hard to Kill."

This article has been resourced from History News Network, article 1178. Highlighting and notes indicated by [] added by CIHIC.

HNN is produced by: *Centre for History and News* based at George Mason University, U.S.A. It's site is to be found at: <http://hnn.us>

-----0-----

This version by; www.churchinhistory.org 6th July 2008