CONFRONTING THE CRUSADES

HOW THE WEST SAW MEDIEVAL ISLAM

Worlds apart: Christians and pagans point to their respective places of worship in this French illustration to Augustine's *City of God*.

Echoes of the East are seen in the pagans' headdresses and the round roofs of their temple, topped significantly with a naked idol.

Since the Christians are not at peace with the Saracens, O Lord', wrote the Mallorcan Ramon Lull, in his *Book of Contemplation on God* in the early 1270s:

... they dare not hold discussions upon the faith with them as they are among them. But were they at peace together, they could dispute with each other peacefully concerning the faith, and then it would be possible for the Christians to direct and enlighten the Saracens in the way of truth, through the grace of the Holy Spirit and the true reasons that are signified in the perfection of Thy attributes.

Lull was a prolific writer on the subject of Christian relations with the Muslim world; indeed, he can perhaps be seen as the most outstanding of the many crusade theorists who clamoured for attention in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Not only was he the most original writer among them, but he was also the most active, both as author and missionary. It is not surprising to find that such a man did not manage to maintain consistency throughout a long career: in his later life, even he was to regard such peaceful approaches as impractical. Nevertheless, his view encapsulates a basic truth about Christian-Muslim relations during this period. Whatever the personal inclinations, experiences, or education of individuals, the fundamental fact that Western Christendom and Islam were in the state of permanent war which Urban II had inaugurated in 1095 pervaded every Christian perception of Islam throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The First Crusade engendered a mass of writing from both participants and other commentators, who explained how Jerusalem had been captured in 1099 and why, in the years that followed, it had been necessary to establish settlements to protect the holy places. The nature of Islam and the behaviour of its adherents inevitably formed a central feature of such work and, in these circumstances, it can hardly be expected that it would be objective. Albert of Aachen was one of the most important of these commentators. He was a member of the Imperial Collegiate Church in that city and an assiduous collector of stories about the First Crusade and the adventures of the early settlers in Palestine and Syria.

One of Albert's stories concerns the fate of a renowned French knight, Gervase of Bazoches, who had been granted the fief of Galilee by King Baldwin I. In the spring of 1108 Gervase and his men were captured by Toghtekin, Atabeg of Damascus, and then offered to the king in exchange for the cities of Acre, Haifa, and Tiberias. Baldwin told him that he was prepared to pay a large sum of money, but that he had no intention of giving up these cities, even 'if you were holding in chains my own blood-brother and my entire family and all the leaders of the Christian people', much less for the life of a single man. Nevertheless, if Toghtekin did kill Gervase, he must expect the Christians to exact retribution. Consequently, Albert continues, Gervase was brought out into the middle of the city of Damascus and after much mockery, shot to death with arrows:

Sobias, one of the most powerful of the Turks, ordered his head to be cut off, and the skin of his head, with his hair which was white and abundant and had not been cut for a long time, to be pulled off and dried, because it was wonderfully ornamental and so that it might always be borne aloft on the tip of his spear, as a token and memorial of the victory and to stir up the grief of the Christians.

There is no reason to disbelieve Albert's story: there are numerous other examples of similar treatment of prisoners on both sides in the crusader era. This one is not exceptional other than in the rather bizarre way that the Turks chose to mark their victory.
Worthy opponents or agents of Antichrist? Malcolm Barber on how Western Christendom viewed its Muslim adversaries.

The point is that Islam had to be presented as the enemy. Consequently, Muslim belief had to be disproved or mocked, and Muslim social behaviour distorted and denigrated. If the stories could be enlivened by an appeal to listeners' sexual prurience, then so much the better. All Western perceptions were affected by this context; even when a favourable view of specific Muslims appears it is presented in a manner which shows how the individual concerned overcame the disadvantages of such an alien upbringing, sometimes with the help of innate qualities derived from ancestors in which Latin blood could be discerned.

Albert's description of incidents such as the capture of a large number of noblewomen near Mersivan in Northern Asia Minor during the crusade of 1101, offered a golden opportunity for such fantasies. These women, abandoned by most of their male military protectors - who had apparently fled in panic - were either slaughtered (if unattractive) or carried off to harems in Khorasan where they were kept to satisfy the unbridled sexual appetites of the Turks.

In an earlier story, intended to show the extent of the crisis overcome by the armies of the First Crusade at the battle of Dorylaeum of July 1096, Albert presents the 'delicate and very nobly born' girls in the Christian camp as 'hastening to get themselves dressed up' so that the Turks, 'roused and appeased by love of their beautiful appearance', might spare them once the crusaders had been defeated. Two stereotypes - feminine moral weakness and Turkish male libido - are neatly combined here, although the story of the defeat at Mersivan does little to strengthen a third, that of the innate chivalry of the Latin knight.

Although there was a common context, it was evident that an understanding of Islam and the Muslim world could take place at different levels. The anonymous author of the Gesta Francorum, who took part in the First Crusade, and whose text was extensively used by later writers, is among those nearest to popular belief. Most of his picture of Islam is based upon a series of imaginary conversations of Kerbogha, Atabeg of Mosul, who was defeated by the crusaders outside Antioch in June, 1098. Kerbogha, bombastic and overconfident before the battle, is depicted as writing a letter to what the author calls the 'khalif our pope and the lord sultan our king', in which he tells the
Muslims of Khorasan:

Enjoy yourselves, rejoicing with one accord, and fill your bellies, and let commands and injunctions be sent throughout the whole country that all men shall give themselves up to wantonness and lust, and take their pleasure in getting many sons who shall fight bravely against the Christians and defeat them.

The letter concludes:

Moreover, I swear to you by Mohammed and by all the names of our gods that I will not appear again before your face until I have conquered, by the strength of my right arm, the royal city of Antioch and all Syria, Rum, Bulgaria and even as far as Apulia, to the glory of the Gods and of you and of all who are sprung from the race of the Turks.

This author’s creative fantasies about the motivations and attitudes of the Muslims were not unique among the Normans, who appear to have had a penchant for such tales. In August, 1100, Bohemond of Taranto, who had been consolidating his hold on Antioch, seized in the course of the First Crusade, was captured by Malik-Ghazi, a Danishmend Turk who was emir of Sebastea, and imprisoned in the castle of Niksar in north-eastern Anatolia. He was not released until the spring of 1103, when King Baldwin of Jerusalem co-ordinated payment of a ransom of 100,000 besants. However, sometime after 1106, Orderic Vitalis, the chronicler of St Evroult in Normandy, apparently using a contact he had among Bohemond’s followers, wrote up the episode in the form of a romantic story in which Melaz, the beautiful and intelligent daughter of the emir, is presented as instrumental in obtaining Bohemond’s release. No mention is made of any ransom.

According to Orderic, Melaz:

... loved the Franks passionately when she heard of their great feats, and was so eager to enjoy their company that often, after distributing liberal bribes to the guards, she would go down into the dungeon and engage in subtle discourse with the captives about the Christian faith and true religion, learning about it by constant discussion interspersed with deep sighs.

When war broke out between Malik-Ghazi and Kilij Arslan, the Seljuk sultan of Rum, she determined to test out the famed chivalry of the Franks by releasing Bohemond and his companions to fight on her father’s side. Predictably, Bohemond plays a central role in the resulting defeat of Kilij Arslan. He does not, however, use the battle as an opportunity to escape, remaining loyal to his oath, sworn to Melaz, that he will return to the castle, where he is able to protect her from her father’s wrath at what he regards as her treachery. In the key speech, Melaz informs her father that she has become a Christian. ‘For the religion of the Christians is holy and honourable, and your religion is full of vanities and polluted with all filth’. Angry as he is, Malik-Ghazi accepts that he has little alternative but to negotiate, and Richard of the Principate, Bohemond’s cousin, is sent to Antioch for this purpose. Here the situation is reversed. When Richard proposes an exchange of prisoners, the daughter of Yaghi-Siyan, the former governor of Antioch, is distraught. Asked why, she replies that:

It was because in future she would not be able to eat the excellent pork that Christians eat. The Turks and many other Saracen peoples detest the flesh of pigs, although they eat with enjoyment the flesh of dogs and wolves, demonstrating in this way that they hold to the law neither of Moses nor of Christ, and are neither Jews nor Christians.

For her part, Melaz is baptised and marries Roger of Salerno, son of Richard of the Principate. Orderic’s version of this story seems to be the earliest in the medieval Christian West, although the structure owes much to one of the stories in the Arabian Nights. Whatever its origin, thereafter, baptised Muslim princesses, beautiful and noble, and wise enough to see the errors of the society and religion of their birth, become as much part of the popular image of the Muslims as the boastful emir who foolishly relies upon the fickle support of his own false gods.

While such stories have much in common with twelfth-century chansons de geste and it may be that the audience was not expected to take them entirely seriously, they are nevertheless consistent with more educated views which present a more systematic picture of the role of Islam as part of the working out of a divine plan. It was inconceivable that God should actually approve of the possession of the holy places by the Muslims: therefore His purpose must be to activate faithful Christians. Fulcher of Chartres, who was initially attached to the armies led by Stephen of Blois and Robert of Normandy on the First Crusade, may have been present at Clermont. His version of the
speech of Urban II was that it was the duty and obligation of able-bodied Christians to rescue the holy places from desecration and pollution at the hands of barbaric races in the grip of the pernicious teachings of Mohammed. According to him, the pope had taxed his audience with the disgrace which would befall them ‘if a race so despicable, degenerate, and enslaved by demons should thus overcome a people endowed with faith in Almighty God and resplendent in the name of Christ’. God himself would reproach them if they failed to help fellow Christians, now conquered by the ‘vile race’ of the Turks.

Urban presented the Turks as usurpers of what he called ‘our lands’, a belief which Fulcher confirmed from his own experience in Jerusalem where, in what he calls the Temple of the Lord (that is the Dome of the Rock on the Temple platform), the Muslims had ‘preferred to say the prayers of their faith, although such prayers were wasted because offered to an idol set up in the name of Mohammed’. Once in Christian hands however, the Rock – ‘which disfigured the Temple of the Lord’ – was covered over with marble on which the crusaders placed an altar. Fulcher’s view is not an isolated one. All the chroniclers who participated in the First Crusade maintained that Muslim occupation had resulted in the pollution of the holy places and the persecution of God’s faithful.

They’ve got to go: a provocative image from the Livre des Merveilles du Monde purports to show Christian pilgrims paying Muslim gatekeepers an entrance fee to that most sacred of places, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem. Inconceivable that God should actually approve this ‘pollution’ of the holy places, Christians rationalised, His purpose must be to prompt the faithful to action.
Once the news of the capture of Jerusalem reached the West, several monastic writers set themselves the task of explaining what had taken place. Two of them—Guibert, abbot of the small house of Nogent, near Laon, and William, a monk at Malmsbury abbey in Wiltshire—had certainly read Fulcher and were influenced by him, but at the same time they were concerned to place the events in a wider historical perspective, which meant some consideration of the nature of Islam itself. Both tried to research the matter to the best of their ability and resources, although neither could transcend the contemporary context of hostility towards Islam.

Guibert’s work presented a picture of a religion founded by an epileptic, who was exploited by both the devil and by a renegade Christian hermit. Guided by the hermit, Mohammed produced the Koran, the chief message of which was the encouragement of sexual promiscuity. They persuaded the people that the message had come from Heaven, although in fact it had been brought on the horns of a cow, trained for the purpose. Mohammed’s death came about as a result of his epilepsy:

... it happened once, while he was walking about alone, that he was struck by the illness in that place and fell down. While tormented by this suffering, he was found by pigs and so badly torn to pieces that no remains of him were found except his ankles.

William of Malmsbury rejected the popular conception of Muslims as idolaters and, to some extent, succeeded in placing Islam within the context of Jewish and Christian history. In his Commentary on Lamen-

tations (written c.1136), he says that the Slav peoples ‘to this day breathe out only pagan superstitions about all matters’, but that ‘the Saracens and Turks devote themselves to God the Creator, believing Mohammed not to be a God but their prophet’. Moreover, although the Christians, Saracens and Jews have contending opinions about the Son, ‘nevertheless all both believe in the heart and confess in the mouth in God the Father, Creator of things’.

However, William’s grasp of these points did nothing to mitigate the severity of his condemnation of Muslim usurpation of the holy places. In his Deeds of the Kings of England, William’s account of the pope’s speech emphasises the way Muslims insolently controlled most of the world, including Asia, where ‘the shoots of our devotion first sprouted’ and which all but two of the apostles ‘consecrated’ with their deaths. ‘There in our time the Christians, if there are any left, suffering starvation from an impoverished agriculture, pay tribute to these abominable people, and with inward sighs, long for the experience of our liberty, since they have lost their own’. Muslim occupation of Africa was damaging to Christian honour, since it had been the home of St Augustine and other distinguished Church Fathers. Even Europe, ‘the third part of the world’, was under threat, since for 300 years the Muslims had held Spain and the Balearics.

Whatever the level of understanding of individual writers there was no escape from this context of conflict. In this sense there was little change in attitudes until the crises of the late thirteenth century began to encour-

age men like Ramon Lull to consider alternatives to violence, but even he, fighting against the tide of crusading polemic, was unable to sustain this position for very long. This is not surprising. Contemporaneously with William of Malmsbury, the great Bernard of Clairvaux had lent his support to the view that the Muslims had no right to occupy the holy places of the Christians. Those who failed to understand this deserved their fate. In his treatise In Praise of the New Knighthood, he presented the Templars as moved by the example of Christ, who had driven the money-changers out of the Temple:

The devoted army, doubtless judging it far more intolerable for the holy places to be polluted by the infidel than infested by merchants, remain in the holy house with horses and arms, driving forth from this place, as from all holy places, the filthy and tyrannical madness of idolatry.

By the thirteenth century, such perceptions of Islam were being placed within an apocalyptic structure, strengthened in the course of the century by the increasing interest in the prophecies of the eccentric Cistercian abbot, Joachim of Fiore, who had died in 1202. In a striking passage in his crusading bull, Quia Majus (April 1213), Pope Innocent III set Islam within the Christian concept of historical time:

The Christian peoples, in fact, held almost all the Saracen provinces up to the time of Blessed Gregory; but since then a son of perdition has arisen, the false prophet Mohammed, who has seduced many men from the truth by worldly enticements and the pleasures of the flesh. Although his treachery has prevailed up to the present day, we nevertheless put our trust in the Lord who has already given us a sign that good is to come, that the end of this beast is approaching, whose number, according to the Revelation of St John, will end in 666 years, of which already nearly 600 have passed.

In the midst of all this belligerence there were no students of the sociology of comparative religion, but there was one man who made a genuine attempt to understand Islam. This was Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, who, in 1142, in the course of a journey to Spain, commissioned translators to provide him with five important Islamic works, including the Koran. At Nájera he met Robert of Ketton, Hermann of Dalmatia, Peter of Toledo and, said Peter the Venerable, in order that nothing should be omitted or hidden from him, ‘a Saracen’ whose name was Mohammed. These men appear to have begun
work even before Peter had completed his Spanish journey. Among the translations were Ketton’s version of the Koran completed in 1143, and Peter of Toledo’s rendering of an Arabic work, the Apologia for Christianity of al-Kindi, which the abbot said informed him of many things of which he had previously been ignorant.

Armed with these materials, Peter was able to compose both a concise handbook which explained Islamic beliefs as he understood them (Compendium of all the Heresies of the Saracens) and a treatise intended to prove the errors of Islam (Book against the Sect or Heresy of Islam). He hoped (in the end fruitlessly) that Bernard of Clairvaux would take up the cause of refuting what he regarded as the only heresy to which the faithful had not made proper reply, despite the fact that it had brought almost limitless confusion to the human race. Even Peter the Venerable, however, was prepared to give vigorous support to the crusades when the occasion seemed to demand it, so it does appear that the protestations of peaceful intent with which he prefaces his polemic against the Saracens were intended for a Muslim rather than a Christian audience.

If the major formative influence upon the Western views of Islam in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was that of confrontation, both physical and intellectual, it did not always follow that the contact which this brought produced an entirely negative conclusion. Admiration of their fighting qualities and indeed chivalry was not unknown among those who actually did battle with the Turks. Here, there is an interesting contrast between William of Malmesbury, who probably never met a Muslim, and the author of the Gesta Francorum who experienced the bitter years of the First Crusade.

William professed to believe that Urban II had described the Turks as favouring a manner of warfare based upon swift flight, as a consequence of both lack of courage and thinness of blood. It was apparent to William that: ... every race, born in that region, dried out by the excessive heat of the sun, has indeed more discretion but less blood; and thus they retreat from fighting at close quarters, because they know that they do not have enough blood.

Not so the Franks, who as a people originating in the more temperate provinces of the world could afford to be more prodigal of blood. The author of the Gesta was under no
such illusions, however:

What man, however experienced or learned, would dare to write of the skill and prowess of the Turks, who thought that they would strike terror into the Franks, as they had done into the Arabs and Saracens, Armenians, Syrians and Greeks, by the menace of their arrows?

For many crusaders, they were certainly preferable to the Greeks. Odo of Deul, the St Denis chronicler, who blamed the Byzantines for the failure of the Second Crusade, was pleased to draw lessons following a battle with the Turks near Adalia:

By the blood of these soldiers the Turks’ thirst was quenched and the Greeks’ treachery was transformed into violence, for the Turks returned to see the survivors and then gave generous alms to the sick and the poor, but the Greeks forced the stronger Franks into their service and beat them by way of payment.

Far fewer Westerners actually lived in a Muslim society, but one who did was the Dominican missionary, Ricoldo da Monte Croce, who was in Baghdad in 1291 when Acre fell to the Mamluks. The very nature of his profession of course made any religious accommodation impossible, for he shared many of the assumptions of his Christian contemporaries, but he is fulsome in his praise of the personal conduct of the Muslims he met and observed in Baghdad, and does not miss the opportunity to point up Christian moral deficiencies in contrast. Neither the author of the Gesta at the end of the eleventh century, nor Ricoldo da Monte Croce two centuries later, would have conceded that Muslims could in any way be ‘right’, but they do show that even in the midst of the crusades observation sometimes modified stereotyping.

**FOR FURTHER READING:**


The quotations from Albert of Aachen’s *Historia* are from the draft translation by Susan Edgington. The text will be published in the Oxford Medieval Texts series in 1998.

Malcolm Barber is Professor of History at the University of Reading and the author of *The New Knighthood* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). He is currently writing a history of the Cathars.

The complex interweaving of the Muslim threat with Old Testament ideology is evident in this illustration from a vernacular bible produced for St Louis which resonantly adapts the iconography of the *Book of Maccabees*, substituting Mattathias decapitating the idolatrous Jew with a depiction showing him thrusting a sword into a turbaned Arab in the process of idol worship and animal sacrifice.

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