

A brief essay on the Crusades and the long war between Islam and Christendom (excerpted from *War Comes to God's House*)

Let's turn briefly now to another of the headline grabbers of the Middle Ages and one of the clubs Christians are routinely beaten with – guilt over the Crusades. They were once sources of pride, but now they are a deep shame to many in the west. Perhaps they should hold a position somewhere between these extremes. All I can contribute towards that end is to place the Crusades in the context of the times.

In the Seventh Century, Islam swept out of Arabia to conquer an empire greater than that of the Romans. The conquest came, of course, at the expense of other peoples, empires, and religions. The Persian/Parthian Empire that had stalemated Rome for so many centuries was utterly destroyed, along with its religion and culture (save for a tiny remnant that fled to India).

The Eastern Roman Empire was gradually eaten away until little remained. Jerusalem and the rest of the Middle East were taken. Greco-Roman North Africa, the home of Augustine and so many more of the Church Fathers was taken. Islamic invaders took the long Christianized cities of Asia Minor that we read of in the Book of Acts, and everywhere long established Christian communities were persecuted or destroyed.

Islamic Moors from North Africa crossed the Mediterranean and captured most of the Iberian Peninsula, then crossed the Pyrenees Mountains into France until they were stopped by Charlemagne's grandfather.

Islamic invaders captured many of the Mediterranean islands, including Sicily, and shut off most of the Mediterranean Sea to Christian commerce. They made several incursions into the Italian “boot” sacking towns and slaughtering those with no value for rape or slavery. Only a hastily organized defense led by the Pope of the day thwarted an attack on Rome. For a time they captured the passes in the Alps and waylaid commerce there. Ironically, it was the incursions of the recently Christianized Vikings who had settled in Normandy that stopped and eventually reversed the Islamic conquest of southern Europe.

The First Crusade came about in this way. Despite their disagreements, the Eastern Roman Emperor, the Byzantine Emperor if you will, Alexius I Comnenus appealed to Pope Urban II for help to save what little remained of the Eastern Empire by the Eleventh Century. Constantinople had a bull’s eye painted on it. The Koran itself had marked it for destruction and the faithful were anxious to please their prophet.

Time and again they had laid siege to Constantinople (r), but Constantine’s city was protected by the swift flowing



the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara and, eventually, the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas, and by a massive wall and deep moat on the landward side. But the strain was wearing down the ancient city and its little remaining lands to the west.

The Byzantine Emperor reminded his old arch rival, the Pope, that it was the remnant of the old Empire, its navy, and its control of the Bosphorous and Aegean Sea that served as the main bulwark against an all out invasion from the east into the heart of Catholic Europe. That very real threat from growing and aggressive Islam was the genesis of the First Crusade and to greater and lesser degrees the following forays into the lands to the east, whatever lesser and more personal motives the Crusaders may have harbored.

Many Crusaders had the highest of motives, to relieve the suffering of Christians under the cruel tyranny of Islamic conquerors. Others sought adventure and fortune. And, of course, events themselves, as they do in any war, help shape the character of the war. The two centuries of Crusades were to a great extent, military debacles and, rightly or wrongly, today considered a disgrace to Christianity. It was a barbaric period by our standards, to be sure, and the Crusaders were largely Normans, only a few generations removed from Viking raiders; and north Germans, themselves only lately come into western civilization.

The Pope had only nominal control of the forces wearing the Cross. He protested some of the worst atrocities and excommunicated a few malefactors, but it was largely out of his hands. It can be fairly said that although crosses were everywhere in evidence, there was very little evidence of Christ in the hearts of many of the Crusaders. As we see from the early church to the German Church War, it is not the outward trappings of Church that define a Christian.

The Crusades were not entirely a failure however. They did delay the onslaught predicted by the Byzantine Emperor.

In 1453 the Ottoman Turks laid the final siege of Constantinople. Cannons made in Europe breached the thousand-year-old walls. The drums rolled and hordes of the faithful seeking a prophet's paradise surged forward to fill a path across the wide moat with bundles of brush and their own bodies. The first through the breach were the Janissaries, taken as children from Christian homes in the conquered lands (first born sons - one of the special taxes on Christians) and raised as elite warriors, zealous for Sultan and Islam. They finished off the city's last defenders, among them the last Roman/Byzantine Emperor, Constantine XI Palaiologos, and threw the city open for looting and slaughter by the rabble that accompanied them. Scimitar or slavery awaited all who had not fled Constantine's old capitol before the Sultan's methodically laid siege closed in around it.

The remains of the ancient walls of Constantinople (below) show the scars of that fateful attack, but the quite of the ruins belies the struggle still ongoing.



The Church of Sacred Wisdom, Sancta Sophia, the greatest church in Christendom, begun all those centuries ago by Constantine himself, was defiled and turned into a stable. There the last refugees of the fighting had been raped, slaughtered, or taken into slavery as the last of the priests offered sacraments. Today it is a museum, still defiled by Islamic symbols.



I don't know if J.R.R. Tolkien had Constantinople in mind when he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, but many of his readers have thought as much. I cannot read of Gondor and Minas Tirith without thinking of the remnant of the old Empire and its ancient capital Constantinople standing between the burgeoning Islamic world and my world. In Tolkien's fantasy though, the Riders of Rohan were noble allies.

In the unhappy reality, the Crusaders were more despoilers than saviors. It was they who became the first in its long history to capture and sack the old city, a blow from which it never fully recovered. And there was no King Aragorn, calling on the spirits and allegiances of a dead world to come to the rescue at the last moment. Would that there had been!

It was a heart-breaking tragedy all the way around - a tragedy that the Eastern Empire had become so immoral, corrupt and weak that the Turks justified their conquest as wiping a moral blight off the earth; tragic that the western

world, which could have saved their Christian brethren, didn't choose to do so; and tragic that the Islamic world produced, and still produces almost limitless numbers of young men who have no hope but a violent, destructive death. Christ would have been, and could be, their savior. And then why did not Christ save Constantinople?

If we believe in the sovereignty of God, the answer lies, as it did in ancient Israel and Judah, and in Imperial Germany, in the relationship of men and their "Church" to God. I can only speculate that the Byzantine church had put worship of Emperor and state above God, and dead ritual above relationship with the Living God.

Around two and a half millenia ago, the Prophet Habakkuk questioned God's judgment; as bad as Judah was he said, the Chaldeans were worse, so why did you give us over to them? To paraphrase God's answer to Habakkuk: "Nations will rise and fall according to My plan and My time table which you cannot either understand or appreciate; but in the meantime, 'the just shall live by his faith'."

The salvation of the individual for God's Kingdom is His ultimate goal and we can't always judge the accomplishment of that goal by the headlines of history.

The fall of Constantinople did achieve one wide cultural effect however. Before its fall, much of the wealth of learning and civilization of the old world, lost at the time of the "Fall of Rome" in the west but carefully preserved in Constantinople, escaped to the west. Western Europe now became the center of Christendom and of a renewed Christian civilization.

Most historians place the fall of Constantinople as marking the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance in Europe. Let us encroach into the Renaissance a little in this chapter.

The warning of the last Byzantine Emperor's distant predecessor to Pope Urban II proved true over the next few generations. Only a little over a century later in 1571, Europe fought one of its most desperate battles, the naval battle of Lepanto.

As the Turkish Empire gobbled up the Mediterranean, spreading terror and destruction, the Catholic Holy League, consisting of maritime Italian city states and Holy Roman Empire forces, raised a large fleet for a last ditch defense of southern Europe. Though outnumbered in ships and manpower, the Holy League possessed a small flotilla of new ships with vastly superior firepower, fruit of the Renaissance in Europe. And they possessed excellent commanders headed by Don Juan, son the the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V whom we encounter in another field of conflict.

Even so, the battle was hard fought and the victory a close thing with credit given to a merciful God, for the stakes for the Holy League was life itself – life for family, nation, western civilization. Exactly as it was in 1940, and exactly as it is for the western, once Christian, world today.

The main difference in today's western world is that large segments, including most governing classes, don't have any real affinity to its Christian heritage and no real motive to contest the present onslaught of Islam.



Battle of Lepanto *Andries van Eertvelt*

Though temporarily thwarted in the Mediterranean, the Turks spread out through Greece and the Balkans. And up to the gates of Vienna, Austria, home of the Holy Roman Emperor, in 1683, where they were defeated by a combined force from the German states of the Holy Roman Empire and a Polish army all under the command of the Polish king John III Sibeski.

But for the First Crusade, there might have been no modernized fleet from the Christian Italian city states, nor any Christian Polish army. Orthodox Russia could not have fended off the Islamic invader and survive to claim the crown of the old Empire for its Czar (Caesar). The Normans, spreading out from their bases in Normandy and England would not have cleared the Mediterranean for Christian commerce. It is very possible that without the Crusades the world would be Islamic. That is the point of this little discourse on the Crusades. Despite what its enemies think, Christendom had a right, and the Church a duty to defend itself as best it could. And I, for one, have absolutely no doubt we are better off for it.

I only wish there could have been a united Christian front, loyalty to Christ's Kingdom before Church, sect, nation, or king. As it was, Catholic western Europe allowed Orthodox Eastern Europe to fall to the Turks. And internal rivalries fractured the Catholic front – France, in its effort to break the power of the Holy Roman Empire, essentially bribed the Turks to attack Vienna, to name but one particularly shameful incident. War between Protestant and Catholic states, that we will turn to soon, further opened the doorway for Islamic expansion into Europe.