Rethinking the Crusades [*Perspectives*, Newsletter of the AHA]

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It may be a commonplace to say that interpretations of historical events often tell us as much about the historian's own era as about the age that is supposedly being described, but it is at best only partly true. Sometimes there is a certain inertia in interpretations, a rigor mortis grip by the dead hand of the past. This seems to be especially true regarding the Crusades, one of the greatest adventures of Western civilization, fraught as they were by impressive feats of arms and spectacular defeats. Today's historians have been slow to see connections between medieval efforts to protect commerce, ensure access to holy places, and build coalitions that could give potential aggressors pause, and modern international peacekeeping operations. Instead, historians continue to emphasize aspects of the crusading experience that apply better to the first decade of our century than to the last.

Just as great books go out of print, so stimulating theories go out of date. Teachers may find it harder to buy legal-sized yellow note pads, but the harried lecturer recycling outdated material will exist forever. Instant updates are possible only in Orwell's *1984*. In the case of the medievalist, there are good reasons for a time lag: not only is there an age difference between lecturer and audience, but in the age of specialization, faculty have more incentive to publish for their peers than to address their students or the educated general public. This observation, crudely put, is more subtle than it might appear; issues that seem burning bright in the ivory tower are, for average citizens, hazy faraway flashes from the lighthouses of the mind. Students and educated laity expect to see the *relevance* of anything they read or watch. As Jonathan Riley-Smith noted in *The Crusades: A Short History* (1987), "history is a reconciliation of the past with the present; otherwise it would be incomprehensible to those for whom it is written. And since the present is always in a state of flux it follows that interpretations and judgments alter with time" (256). Our current interpretations of the Crusades, powerful though they were in their day and capable as they still remain of providing important insights into their motivations and outcomes, are at least a generation out of date.

Current Textbook Interpretations

Many textbooks present the still dominant view that the Crusades were a form of European colonialism. To cite from one of the better textbooks, Robert Lerner, Standish Meacham, and Edward Burns, *Western Civilizations: Their History and Their Culture* (13th edition. New York: Norton, 1998), "The rise and fall of the crusading movement was closely related to the fortunes of the high-medieval papal monarchy.Š Thus, the Crusades can be seen as part of a chapter in papal and religious history. In addition, the Crusades opened the first chapter in the history of western colonialism" (322-3). They conclude, "Western colonialism in the Holy Land was only the beginning of a long history of colonialism that has continued until modern times" (329). The understandable modern Arab nationalist version is that Israel is the new crusader state, a military/religious embodiment of European colonialism; this finds increasing support on American campuses even though more than half of the Hebrew-speaking population of Israel is descended from Near Eastern Jews (inaccurately referred to as Sephardic) and, therefore, fits poorly into the stereotypical view of the Israeli citizen as a Zionist, an escapee from the Holocaust, or an emigrant from Russia. The crusader states, too, had Near Eastern roots in the Armenian and Arab Christian communities, with whom the Franks occasionally intermarried, and in their frequent alliances with Moslem states.

A subtheme to colonialism emphasizes Realpolitik, power politics, and Christian fanaticism. To give but two examples from good textbooks: John McKay, Bennett Hill, and John Buckler, in *A History of Western Society* (1995), 282-6, emphasize the role of the papacy in secular affairs in Europe and in religious leadership over the Orthodox Church: "the papacy claimed to be outraged that the holy city was in the hands of unbelievers" and "the papacy actually feared that the Seljuk Turks would be less accommodating to Christian pilgrims than the Muslims had been" (*sic*, 282). "Crusades were also mounted against groups perceived as Christian Europe's social enemies. In 1208, Pope Innocent III proclaimed a Crusade against the Albigensians, a heretical sect" (284). Lynn Hunt, Thomas Martin, R. Po-chia Hsia, and Bonnie Smith in their *Challenge of the West* (1995) also emphasize the papacy's desire to lead and quote the pope's admonition to "wrest that land from the wicked race, and subject it to yourselves" (355). They use this latter point to summarize the goals of the First Crusade (357). The later Crusades are in the section subtitled "European Aggression Within and Without" (401-5). All this surely reflects our mistrust of authority figures, the secularization of modern society (by which all religious motivation is suspect), and the attractions of socialism, pacifism, and nonviolence. The story we tell about the Crusades is that of ambitious nobles and merchants; intolerant Christians who kill innocent Jews, peaceful Arabs, and nonconventional Christians (heretics); and scheming popes. Most of these villains are half-competent fools and knaves who enrich themselves through taxes and trade, excusing their excesses through pious hypocrisy.

In these stories the Turks are somehow forgotten, as though they were not a
dangerous enemy at that time, or are confused with Arabs, while the Armenians, Byzantines, and other Near Eastern Christians are ignored for lack of time and space to discuss them. What is emphasized most strongly is the moral superiority of "natives," non-Christians, and nontraditional Christians. Secondly, the victimization of culturally superior Moslems by ethnocentric Westerners whose crudeness is equaled only by their love of violence and cunning. Lastly, any questioning of this thesis is dismissed as racism.

Anticolonialism and Political Correctness

In short, an aging collection of anticolonial sentiments has merged with mild political correctness (opposition to violence, skepticism toward Western religious traditions and practices, concern for social issues reflecting race, gender, class, and ethnicity) to dominate current historiography of the Crusades.

This is prominently reflected in the film media, most notably in Kevin Costner's *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves* and Terry Jones's *History of the Crusades.*1 It is also somewhat out of touch with Generation X. My students prefer Errol Flynn's Robin Hood to Costner's and enjoy *Men in Tights*. Jones's much better but strongly antiwar BBC series praised Baibar's use of slave troops against the crusaders. What would he have said if crusaders had adopted that practice? On the whole, Jones is far the better scholar (and arguably the better actor), but he remains a child of the sixties--like so many of us who are active teachers today.2

Not that political correctness is completely wrong; by one definition, it is simply good manners taken to extremes. Moreover, it has deep roots in our religious and moral heritage. The Crusades, however, are unlike other areas of history, especially American history, where differing interpretations relevant to contemporary life can be easily found to present to students. Is there a widely distributed right-wing interpretation of the Crusades? Certainly not in the high-quality institutions of higher education on the American continent; certainly not in meetings of the professional associations of medievalists. Not that we need extremist views, but Western Civ and World Civ instructors (ever more often graduate students or adjunct faculty) often have only a scanty background in medieval studies and, although the Web provides many sites on the Crusades that reflect a wide variety of interpretations, we may expect that for a while yet most instructors will continue to rely heavily on textbooks.

Not that comparing the Crusades to European expansion in early modern times or 19th-century colonialism was ever fully satisfactory, but the concept did fit well with the historians' 20th-century worldview until quite recently, and even the worldview of those who disagreed strongly with Marxist theories about colonialism and neocolonialism. It had the advantage of retaining some connection with the previous generation's emphasis on the struggle between church and state while turning upside down those historians' beliefs as to what the holy wars were all about. Medieval colonialism was once a new and exciting idea, even a provocative one; moreover, it supported the perceived duty of socially involved scholars to challenge or even overturn some of the foundational beliefs of traditional Western society. By such reasoning historians could use the Crusades as another example of Western civilization run amok; they could even explain the Vietnam War. Since modern historians of the Crusades were better trained than their predecessors and had access to more materials, they could write better histories; that made it all the easier to dismiss the work of past generations as inconsequential.

Overlooked in this was the awkward fact that until the 1700s there *was* a desperate struggle between Christendom and Islam. As the West gained the upper hand in the 1800s, the way was opened for Romanticists to emphasize individual heroism--Walter Scott's Richard and Saladin--and exotic climes and self-
sacrificing idealism--Kipling's India and the White Man's Burden. Without doubt, 19th-century imperialism benefited from the widespread belief that European civilization must be defended and extended. European states cooperated in the war against slavery in Africa and Asia, against banditry in Central America, and in defense of the rights of Christian minorities and Christian missionaries in China and Africa. Perhaps no single episode pulled all these themes together as well as "Chinese" Gordon's doomed enterprise at Khartoum. The British public was divided over the wisdom of becoming involved in the Sudanese wars, but within a few years Britain's traditional pro-Turkish policy was reversed, and in 1918 the public celebrated Allenby's capture of Jerusalem, a feat that had eluded even Richard the Lionheart.

Once the French and British divided up the Near East between them (with a few scraps for Italy), the parallels of this undeniably crass imperialism to the medieval crusader states seemed very clear to interwar scholars. Add to this the rise of pacifism, socialism, and communism, all of which were popular in the universities of the thirties, and it was inevitable that a message would go out that the elimination of Western colonialism (later, neocolonialism) was a necessary step toward the Future's triumph over the Past. One did not have to be a Leninist to see the germ of truth in this argument and its effectiveness in getting a student audience's attention. In the sixties a rebirth of pacifism, the nuclear stalemate, and Vietnam caused many to question whether any war was ever worth fighting. The last moral credibility of the Crusades vanished. The Cold War persuaded some that calls to serve a higher purpose were only pretexts, and others began to believe that even the best of intentions will go astray.

The Contemporaneity of the Crusades

The late 1980s should have been a watershed for this dour view of the ways that modern politics intersect with the history of the Crusades. Pope John Paul II became an active and effective force against communism, not just in his support of Solidarity in Poland, but in his insistence on emphasizing the moral aspect of commonly accepted practices (abortion, for example) and traditional beliefs against utilitarian and progressive philosophies. This raised the struggle of systems above the pettiness of power politics. It should have suggested that the Crusades might have been more than efforts to profit from international trade.

My own eyes were opened at two historical conferences held under papal authorization in Rome in 1986 and 1987. The conferences were ostensibly on the conversion of the Baltic peoples, discussions of the church's role in crusades against paganism and Orthodoxy, but the real purpose was to remind modern Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians that the church had not forgotten them. (For months after each conference Radio Moscow had regular tirades about the church's interference with internal Soviet policies, and the Soviet Union's 1986 traveling trade show included a huge exhibit showing how happy Estonians were and how their culture was being protected and preserved.) As a historian specializing in the Baltic, I found this interplay of history and modern politics fascinating; as a non-Catholic I found the spectacular Mass conducted by Lithuanian bishops not only uplifting but also a reminder that the Soviet empire was held together by ties less secure than those invisible ones connecting subject peoples to the church.

About this same time I was becoming aware that the terms "imperialism" and "neoimperialism" increasingly failed to explain satisfactorily why some postcolonial states were unable to get organized; that intellectuals once unable to see the evil side of communism had begun to realize that something was rotten east of Denmark; and that the rise of religious fundamentalism in the Islamic world and the wackiness of New Age paganism might cast doubt on the belief that non-Christian religions and nontraditional Christianity were always benign.

Meanwhile, the United Nations was becoming more active. Sudan and Somalia revealed that aid and police-force actions without the will to use military power must fail. Bosnia suggested that diplomatic offers to host peace talks and declarations of arms embargoes were not much more useful in the 1990s than they had been 60 years earlier in Ethiopia and Spain. Rwanda showed that peoples few had heard of could kill unimaginable numbers of tribal enemies without resort to modern weaponry; Cambodia demonstrated that peoples could kill their own kind with equal ferocity. The international community found itself in an awkward position, trying to think of ways to stop genocide, terrorism, intolerance, even the slave trade, without sending in military forces. Moreover, the international community was being asked to protect the environment, secure greater access to good water, prevent overfishing and protect the rain forest, dispose of existing nuclear bombs and biological agents, and to save the world economy from dictators like Iraq's Saddam Hussein, who portrayed himself as the champion of Islam against the West. Surely, I thought, these challenges will affect what we choose to teach about the past, especially about the Crusades.

I began to ask my students why we refer to some of our national movements as crusades. Their responses were interesting. No answer at first, of course, since there seemed to be little connection between Innocent III and Carry Nation, but once the hurdle of the irrelevant example was overcome, they showed that they understood why the term is so attractive. There are, in fact, four characteristics of movements we call crusades: (1) a moral cause, often based on Christian principles; (2) a long-term commitment to the cause by a dedicated minority; (3) victory achieved only by suffering and struggle against determined, entrenched enemies who have powerful belief systems of their own; and (4) results that are not always what the crusaders expected--the law of unexpected consequences coming into play.

My own classroom experience further suggests that today's students are not terribly excited about discussions of imperialism and power politics. Those topics may yet be powerful at institutions where a strong Marxist presence is traditional; but by and large, students from Middle America do not conjure up visions of fat capitalists wearing striped pants and smoking cigars. Their mental image is Bill Gates, Ted Turner and Jane Fonda, and Donald Trump and IBM, Coca-Cola, and other multinational corporations, many foreign-owned. They see offsetting efforts by labor unions, nongovernmental organizations, mafias, and terrorist organizations. In short, as far as their very practical minds are concerned, the reality of today's world has worn down the imperialist and power politics interpretation on one side; ethnic and gender politics have eroded them down elsewhere. I have learned that students are interested in practical historiography: how current political, religious, and social concerns affect the way they have been taught to see the past. Most do not want to be told that their high school teacher was wrong (God forbid that they should be confused) and many have a keen eye for bias (though they are not always sufficiently knowledgeable or sophisticated to understand its full implications), but they all appreciate being enabled to see better what messages are being sent. History is a bit like advertising, it seems: if students like the sales pitch, they may buy it, but they like to see inside the package first. Alumni tell me that they have found it useful to know that historical interpretations have changed and will always be subject to change, and to understand that whatever we teach as "the latest thing" now will be a decade out of touch in 10 years. They appreciate having been given as much original material as possible, because those do not change as rapidly or thoroughly.

If, as most historians believe, historical interpretations often reflect current concerns, what does this suggest that future interpretations of the Crusades will be? When medieval popes, monarchs, and common laity realized that the Holy Land could not be defended without warriors and the West was too far away to send timely help in the form of volunteer armies, those individuals created crusading orders. In the past few years we have sent international peacekeeping forces to Kuwait, Bosnia, and Liberia; we are organizing rapid-response units that when deployed consist of real warriors, not merely observers and potential hostages. We are coming to understand that, individually, nation states are unable to provide protection for commerce, tourism, religious pilgrims, or even national borders; only international efforts can be effective against religious fanaticism, organized criminality, and political radicalism. Nevertheless, as in the Middle Ages, when Christian alliances with Moslems against coalitions of Moslems and Christians existed, today we are occasionally frustrated and often confused by the intricacies of local politics, and our best efforts are handicapped by the lack of resources and resolve.

A Time for Reassessment

This suggests that the time is ripe for a reassessment of the Crusades in light of our present concerns. There are four plausible directions this reassessment will take.

The present interpretations will persist as long as instructors order traditional textbooks and continue to repeat unthinkingly in lectures the concepts they themselves were taught in college years ago. Although campus culture wars suggest that "conservative" values are already widespread among today's students, years will pass before many of them join tomorrow's faculty, years more before they teach the graduate school seminars. Even then, this interpretation will probably not die out because there are aspects of the Crusades which were imperialistic, and because power politics were undoubtedly important.

Present trends in multiculturalism and "history from below" might result in less and less textbook space being given to the Crusades; if so, the events themselves, as well as the comments about morality, may slowly vanish into the footnotes.

If Islamic fundamentalism becomes a serious threat, this will be reflected in our classrooms and textbooks by giving the Crusades more prominence and more favorable interpretations. I remember well the student reactions during the Iranian hostage crisis: If Urban the instructor had followed the example of Urban II, my campus might have been less safe for our Moslem students; fortunately, no one contemplated blaming people they knew for events far away. It may well be that some extremely astute professors have been well aware of this danger all along and, therefore, have retained the old interpretations out of fear of what new ones might bring.

The least contentious likelihood, the one suggested in this essay, is to look for connections between our efforts to resolve today's most difficult international problems and the crusaders' experiences as medieval peacekeepers. This would not completely supplant the older tradition, but would certainly complement it. The risk is small, that of complicating an already long and complex episode in world history, an episode too burdened with details to be made easily comprehensible, too loaded with outdated political baggage to interest many students, and so foreign to the world of today that Hollywood can pass off its version of the events as reality. But, if we take a sufficiently broad view of those events, tie them to what students who read newspapers read daily, historians may find more justification for the crusaders' efforts, be less inclined to mock their motivations, and even perhaps express regret that their high ideals resulted in such demoralizing failure. The study of the Crusades may actually create more sympathy for our own moral dilemmas, lack of unity, and mistakes.

It is not that we need a definitive interpretation of the Crusades. That is a mirage that will disappear before we can reach it. But the more we understand how our present interpretations have come about, the more we will have the context in which to do our own thinking. The more this makes the past relevant to the present, the more likely students are to remember what we say and to think about it. We encourage our students to venture beyond the memorization of facts and concepts. We should do the same by periodically rethinking the meaning of critical moments in the past.

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Notes

1. Teaching through movies (as opposed to the study of film) has become practical only recently. Consequently, it is only recently that articles on movies have appeared in the pages of the *American Historical Review* and *Perspectives*. See Lorraine Attreed and James Powers, "Lessons in the Dark: Teaching the Middle Ages with Film," *Perspectives* (January 1997): 11-16. Libby Haight O'Connell, "The History Channel and History Education," *Perspectives* (October 1995): pp. 15, 22, reported that the History Channel will allow free copying of Terry Jones's *History of the Crusades,* and also that Theodore Rabb, then president of the National Council for History Education, had authorized production of teaching materials for this series that will be distributed free of charge to 20,000 teachers.

2. Though better known as a member of Monty Python's Flying Circus, Jones has written *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* (London: Methuen, 1980).