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Should Obama Have Compared ISIS to the Crusades?

Abstract

"Over a week ago President Obama mentioned the crusades in his remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast. How should one respond to such a statement? Is it valid or not to compare the context of the crusades to the twenty-first century context of ISIS?"

Posting about Obama comparing ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) to the medieval crusades from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/should-obama-have-compared-isis-to-the-crusades>

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

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 [all in allthings.org/should-obama-have-compared-isis-to-the-crusades](http://allthings.org/should-obama-have-compared-isis-to-the-crusades)

Walker Cosgrove

Over a week ago President Obama mentioned the crusades in his [Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast](#). In his talk he commented that, "...during the Crusades and the Inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ." How should one respond to such a statement? Is it valid or not to compare the context of the crusades to the twenty-first century context of ISIS?

A brief history

The best place to start is a simple definition of the crusades, which were wars waged in Christ's name (usually for Jerusalem) for the remission of sins. The crusades were a combination of just war and holy war theories as they developed in Christian thought from Augustine to the eleventh century. Pope Urban II further refined those ideas in making crusade a redemptive activity. In 1095 he preached this novel idea to the knights of Christendom, and proposed that they might earn their salvation by bearing the cross and going to war against Muslims in the east.

The message struck a chord. Knights gathered by the tens of thousands believing it was the will of God. They fought their way to the Levant and against all odds sacked Jerusalem in 1099. The combination of Urban's ideas, the knightly interpretation of those ideas, and the very success of the venture in the end gave birth to the subsequent crusading movement that lasted the next several centuries.

In no sense, however, were the crusades a medieval form of colonialism or imperialism as they are understood today. True, they were concerned with real estate. The crusades were aimed at what was deemed the Holy Land. Medieval Christians believed this land belonged to Christ and that Muslims wrongly took it. In other words, a wrong needed avenging.

But there was no attempt to continue the conquest further afield into the Middle East. Once Christian kingdoms were established in the region, great effort and expense was taken to ensure the defense and welfare of Christians in the east, the safety of western pilgrims, protection of the city Jerusalem, the building up of holy sites and relics such as the Holy Sepulchre, and nothing more.

Twenty-first century Christians and the crusades

What then ought twenty-first century Christians do with the crusades? This is a good question, if only because the crusades are resurrected again and again, not only by American presidents but also by radical communities in the Middle East.¹

While the crusades can certainly be considered an evil perpetuated in the name of Christ, it is important to recognize that they met the standards of conventional and just war in their own historical context. So, unless we are prepared to repent for every war in human history, there is no need to apologize for the crusades as such, even if we are horrified today by some of what occurred during them (imagined asking the president of Iran to apologize for the Greek deaths at Thermopylae!).

While Christians may want to apologize that the crusades were waged in Christ's name (as I'll talk more about below), that evil was waged in the name of Christ does not negate the truth of Christianity or mean that the church has completely lost its prophetic voice. The church still can, and ought to, condemn evil where it is found, including in such groups as ISIS—though, perhaps, with a bit more humility knowing its own checkered past.

The president's conflation of crusade and ISIS

More disturbing than his simple misunderstanding of the crusades is President Obama's implicit connection between the medieval crusades and the actions of ISIS today. No one in the medieval era was fundamentally opposed to the crusades. In fact the greatest medieval saints supported them, figures like St Bernard, St Francis, and St Louis.

It is no secret that Muslims and Christians often did not get along in the medieval era, and neither appreciated the violence perpetrated by the other through jihad or crusade. Both, however, recognized and understood declared, conventional war for their day, and knew its cost and nature. Thus neither would have recognized the "terrible deeds" of the president's sensibilities, even though normal war for the era included massacres, among other things (this offends our modern sensibilities in the same way that wars for nationalism, capitalism, or democracy would have offended medieval sensibilities).

While civilians were definitely harmed and killed during the crusades (as in any war), they were not necessarily targeted like ISIS clearly targets civilians. Its members carry out brutal war through mass murder, beheadings, ethnic cleansing, crucifixions, rape, kidnap, and ultimately selling captured civilians into slavery.

Around the globe Muslims, Christians, Atheists, Americans, Egyptians, Brits, and Jordanians all condemn ISIS as operating fundamentally outside the normal bounds of war and violence for our day. ISIS thus commits "terrible deeds" in a way we just cannot say about the medieval crusaders. In other words, not only are their deeds themselves categorically worse than those of medieval crusaders, they are routinely rejected as evil by all of their contemporaries, Muslim and not.

The nature of religious violence in early Christianity and Islam

The president paints a too simplistic picture when he implicitly suggests that all religious violence is roughly of the same essence, or that violence in the name of Christ in the medieval era is basically the same thing as violence in the name of Islam by ISIS today.

It is no secret that Jesus Christ preached a message of peace, of turning the other cheek, of helping the unlovable neighbor, loving ones enemies, and ultimately that vengeance is his, not the believer's. In conjunction with this, Jesus' repeated message was that his kingdom was not of this world, and that his followers should render unto Caesars what was Caesars.

This concept changed with the conflating the kingdom of God with the kingdom of the world in the Constantinian combination of church and state in the fourth century. Christians were confronted with war and violence in a new way. It was at this time Augustine explored notions of just war and holy war. Over the next six centuries the church began to slowly baptize violence and warfare for its own purposes, culminating in the First Crusade.

It is clear that the crusades were waged in the name of Christ, even if there was no historical context to justify such deeds until more than 300 years after Christ. Thoughtful Christians ought to condemn crusade and holy war as abuse of the very essence of Christianity as it was explored and expanded in its first three centuries of its existence. If an apology is in order, it is for this.

Before discussing the early history of Islam, I want to be clear that the majority of Muslims across the globe denounce ISIS as a distortion of their faith. It would be unfair to condemn all Muslims for the atrocities committed by ISIS and other terrorist groups around the globe, just as Christians do not want to be categorically judged for the crusades.

Unlike Christianity, however, Islam was born in a convergence of the temporal and the spiritual. The Islamic calendar begins with Muhammad's hijrah, or journey from Mecca to Medina, not when he first

preached Islam over a decade earlier. As the Prophet took the political reins of Medina he retained his religious leadership of the Islamic community. Thus from its inception the Islamic community was a religio-political community.

After the formation of this community Muhammad advocated for the use of the sword, for military jihad (in addition to internal, spiritual jihad), and for military expansion throughout Arabia. Upon Muhammad's death the next four caliphs (the Rashidun, a golden age in the history of Islam) continued the Islamic expansion out of Arabia through jihad. By 720 Islam covered a vast territory from the Pyrenees in the west to the Indus in the east. As a religio-political community, this advance through conquest should come as no surprise.

We can debate how much ISIS adheres or strays from the initial vision of Islam it so clearly seeks to emulate, and whether they are more vicious and violent than their forbearers—but perhaps that debate is better left to the Muslim community at large.² It is clear, however, in the Qur'an and the Hadith that the sword is present from the beginning of Islam in a way that is not comparable to Christianity—though it is equally clear that in these early sources jihad is often portrayed as something akin to a Muslim equivalent of just war. This is not to say that Islam is inherently violent, and perhaps moderate Muslims today can theologially wrestle with their religious texts and history in the attempt to present a more peaceful Islam.

That said, there is a historical/political context in Islam as a religio-political entity that can be used to justify military jihad. Groups like ISIS, bent on expansion by the sword, can tap into a historical precedent (as interpreted by themselves) to justify slavery, beheadings, and rape and can be consider a historically justifiable interpretation, albeit radical and extreme, of Islam.

This is not the case for Christianity. There is no seed for crusade or holy war in the first three centuries of the church. The seed only appear after the Constantinian combination of church and state, and that seed only begins to flower several hundred years after that. Thus any attempt to advocate for Christian holy war runs counter to Christ's own teachings about his kingdom and the lived reality of those teachings for the next three hundred years, and as a result can hardly be called Christian.

Dig Deeper

For the best short account of the crusades see Thomas F. Madden, [The Concise History of the Crusades](#) 3d ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

For an excellent account of the religious nature of the First Crusade see Jonathan Riley-Smith, [The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading](#) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).

For a good attempt to clearly define the crusades see Jonathan Riley-Smith, [What Were the Crusades?](#) 3d ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002).

Footnotes

1. For example, see many of the documents in Raymond Ibrahim, ed. and trans., [The Al Qaeda Reader](#) (New York: Broadway Books, 2007). ↩

2. For a recent article exploring ISIS and its connection to the early centuries of Islam see Graeme Wood, ["What ISIS Really Wants,"](#) The Atlantic (March 2015)(accessed on February 17, 2015) ↩