

# Church oppression in the first crusade – a failure of christian character



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An extraordinary number of Christians went on the First Crusade (1095-1099), which were armed pilgrimages to conquer and expel Muslims from Jerusalem, the Holy Land. These Christians came from varied backgrounds and social classes. Why so many Christians actually went on the First Crusade seems quite puzzling considering the huge costs and risks involved. In this sense the number of people that joined the crusade speaks of a “success”, however when one digs deeper this success pales in comparison to the overall failure across many factors.

The word “crusade” derives from *cruce signati*, (“those signed by the cross”)[1]. “The Crusades were armed pilgrimages to Jerusalem under the banner of the cross” and an attempt to conquer and expel the Muslims from the Holy Land, ultimately aiming to Christianise its territory[2]. The ‘battle’ in effect was “between two continents and two religions struggling for supremacy – Europe and Asia, Christianity and Mohammedanism”[3].

Western historians generally interpret the Crusades as “missionary wars”, or “converting infidels to Christianity” or “fighting evil things”[4].

From an early period Jerusalem was always the goal of Christian pilgrimage for numerous historical and biblical reasons. To visit Jerusalem and the Holy Land was not only sanctifying but a means of ‘expiation for sins’[5].

Pilgrimages to Jerusalem became the ultimate sojourn, linking European Christians to its most important relic—the land of Jesus’s birth, life, death, and resurrection[6]. These pilgrimages were not initially halted by the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem by Omar in 637 until three centuries later.

Under Hakim (1010) the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was destroyed and “Christians were forced to wear five-pound wooden-crosses around their

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necks”[7]. Furthermore when the Seljukian Turks conquered Jerusalem and most of Palestine in 1076 a sudden check on pilgrims was implemented. The Turks were a ‘rude and savage tribe’ and brought ‘intense fanaticism of new converts, all manner of insults and injuries upon the Christians’[8]. “Many Christians were imprisoned or sold into slavery”, while Islam continued advancing and conquered Antioch in 1086. This arguably began intense resentment of Christians towards Islam and the Mohammedans.

Pope Urban II, a powerful leader of the Christian world, was a key instigator of the first Crusade in 1095[9]. A council was being conveyed when Pope Urban II addressed the multitude which unprecedentedly stirred the feelings of the hearers[10]. He gave a very famous sermon stating essentially two main goals; that they (Christians) as the elect of God are called to liberate the Holy Land (especially Jerusalem), “and the great need for assisting eastern Christians and pilgrims who had been suffering under the Muslim yoke for generations”[11]. He attacked the Turks saying that they are “Persian people, an accursed race” that “devastated the kingdom of God by fire, pillage and the sword”[12]. He assured the Christians that ‘Christ Himself would lead them in their advancement and that a paradise awaited them’[13]. The crowds subsequently responded by declaring, ‘God wills it, God wills it!’ Urban II also emphasised that these words should be the war-cry in the battle. He reiterated that they are soldiers of the cross (Matt 16: 24), and that by wearing the “blood red sign of the cross on their breasts” or shoulders that God’s help will never fail them since they are doing God’s will[14]. The cross itself became the central symbol of the crusade and in fact Urban himself distributed these blood red crosses[15]!

Urban's message was disseminated by the clergy everywhere, and to places which he could not visit in person which clearly helped *market* the Crusade movement[16]. Urban himself marketed the First Crusade by touring and preaching. The bishops spread his appeal, and numerous ' holy men' such as Peter the hermit spread this ' good news'. Urban " stressed the necessity of liberating the oppressed Eastern Christians, ' our Christian brothers'"[17].

The impact of Urban II to help the Christian Emperor of Constantinople against the Turks who had obstructed his Empire; and ultimately to establish a Christian kingdom in Jerusalem inspired tens of thousands of people throughout Europe to take the Cross and make for the Holy Land[18]. Many Christians went on the Crusades, at least " 100, 000 people left their homes in France, Italy and Germany for Jerusalem"[19]. Men (young and old), women and children took up the pledge and headed to the Holy Land[20]. Famous *high-class* men and the lowest elements of European society - including thieves, murderers, peasants and artisans, and the poor and needy joined the Crusade[21].

Suddenly a new era in European history was begun[22]. Both laity and clergy believed they had a new heavenly appointed mission, with all of Europe ' suddenly united in a common and holy cause' and any political differences among the Church were put aside to fight the ' enemies' of the cross in pilgrimage[23]. In this sense this was to be a war for unity, or ' healing war' between the West (Rome) and East (Constantinople), and the Old and New Jerusalem[24]. Pope Urban II seemed to believe that the first Crusade would bring the two churches together " ushering a new age of

unity in Christendom, providing an opportunity to expand papal power once again and thus creating his own *grand* legacy"[25].

Some people viewed that Urban cleverly devised the first Crusade in 1095 to further his own political power and agenda, and is evidence of the Pope's political skill rather than a real threat from the Turks[26]. Others say " that the Crusades were precipitated by Islamic provocation, by centuries of bloody attempts to colonize the West and by sudden new attacks on Christian pilgrims and holy places"[27]. Well before the First Crusade in 1096, Muslims and Christians were at war in Spain. Also Islamic invasions in the ninth and tenth centuries left Western Europe occupied in many aspects[28]. According to Pope Gregory VII since " Christians of the East had suffered significantly at the hands of the Turks it was only fitting that their fellow Christians in the West should help them reclaim their land and property"[29]. Gregory vigorously developed and advocated the " theory and practice of holy war and warriors". Urban continued where his predecessor and mentor Gregory left off giving Gregory's plans more concrete shape.

Thus what were the motivations for so many Christians to go on the Crusades? One could say that there were many and complex reasons developed for the attacks. Primarily the motivation for most was religious piety[30]. " Some went in search of adventure and glory, others went as a means of performing penances for crimes committed, and perhaps a few went in hope of earthly fortune" though it highly debatable if any crusaders actually returned wealthy from expedition[31]. In fact one would find it very challenging to name a single returning Crusader who returned without a financial loss, let alone a profit from the journey[32]. It is important to <https://assignbuster.com/church-oppression-in-the-first-crusade-a-failure-of-christian-character/>

understand the broad context at the time to help explain some of motives of the Crusades.

Christianity in medieval Europe looked considerably different than it does today. Scriptures were not the central focus of the religion because the average eleventh-century European could not read. Rather, Christianity focused on objects and practices that were believed to bring the faithful into contact with the divine and that would help grant salvation[33]. Relics had an extreme 'supernatural' and healing importance, much more than one would expect today[34]. Therefore the desire to regain the most important relic of Christianity—Jerusalem—was very important for future pilgrimages[35].

Motivation was also found by many who went because “this could earn their salvation and if they sent someone to fight in their place, this, too, would earn their salvation”[36]. They believed that they would literally have their sins wiped clean – and were popularly esteemed as martyrs. Men appeared to have “little to lose and everything to gain”, thus it was *win-win* to “piously take the cross and enrich themselves with stolen booty and carve out a new home in a distant land”[37]. If you undertook expedition and survived, “you returned home a hero and were distinguished by special crosses worn on your garments” and even if you died the church promised remission of sins and instant salvation[38]. Interestingly some Crusaders believed that taking expedition “was even a means of salvation parallel to the vocation of the monastic life, which was traditionally considered the highest form of religious devotion”[39].

Another possible, but unlikely motivation appears have been the social and economic miseries at the time. “ The economic and social reasons for seeking an outlet from contemporary miseries – overpopulation, poverty, lack of cultivable land, subjection to oppressive lords, and the general drabness of life- were probably as potent (in gaining popular support for the Crusade) as religious idealism”[40]. This probably was not a primary motive as most sources have the prevailing view that the Crusaders undertook expedition due to *spiritual* reasons.

Once the First Crusade got going peer pressure may have played a significant role. Those who stayed at home were viewed shamefully in contrast to those leaving who were glorified. “ News of the sweeping successes of the First Crusade stirred many thousands of previously hesitant soldiers to take the cross and thereby to share in the glory of the holy expedition”[41]. Tales of crusaders and their miraculous adventures in the Holy Land—depicted in poems, legends and, songs—helped increase religious zeal and assemble groups to participate in the expedition[42]. Additionally ‘ everyone encouraged his neighbour through eager discussions in public places everywhere’[43]. This is probably an exaggeration just like the numerous natural wonders that supposedly occurred confirming that God called this *holy war* [44].

Material privileges might have proved very tempting for many to go on the First Crusade. The Crusaders were, according to Eugenius III, “ placed in the same category as clerics before the courts in the case of most offences”[45].

The Church offered the Crusaders ‘ protection against attack, exemption from tolls and taxes, immunity from arrest, and suspension from any existing

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legal proceedings which attracted a larger group of people to go to war'[46]. One could argue that the Crusaders could literally get away with murder, committing offensive crimes under cover of ecclesiastical protection, as "Many took the cross to elude their creditors"[47].

The preliminary objective of the First Crusade was attained with the conquest of Jerusalem on July 15, 1099 due to the help of an extraordinary number of Christians joining the expedition[48]. Does this demonstrate that the First Crusade was a "success"? First of all what do we define as success? One should question the premise of whether these people were really true Christians This 'success' is a subjective judgment and the context surrounded this conquest will be discussed.

Despite the extreme (and perhaps blind) excitement of the Christian soldiers believing in fulfilling 'God's will' through the guidance of the Spirit and the help of several saints, the initial expeditions to capture Jerusalem were met with extreme defeats and casualties[49]. In fact the preliminary expeditions were catastrophic failures met with ill preparation and incompetent leaders. The precise military objectives were unclear and "there was no clear plan, for example, of what they would do when they reached Jerusalem, nor were there any details about which towns, regions and provinces were to be targeted in their fight against the Turks"[50].

Any successes post first Crusade were short lived. The physical conquest of the Holy Land did not last long nor did the boom in the economy which brought stability and prosperity to the Empire[51].



If one views the 'success' of many Christians joining the Crusade and the actual conquest of Jerusalem, one cannot ignore the subsequent defeats and casualties that occurred. Even if nothing stopped the advancement of the First Crusade in the Holy Land, which it didn't at all, one should not base success on this but judge by the standard of the word of God. Success should not be based on the amount of people that joined, nor on the degree of physical conquest but on applying the standard of biblical teaching.

In the First Crusade the success of the expedition was stunted and its 'glorious victory' decreased by the 'selfish jealousies and alienation of the leaders which culminated in disgraceful conflicts at Antioch'[52]. The 'victory' by conquering Jerusalem came at a huge cost physically, 'tens of thousands of lives were lost', and many being unarmed civilians[53]. Perhaps up to 70000 were murdered in al-Aqsa mosque alone (including scholars and righteous men) while Jews too were massacred in vengeance[54]. Some Jews were slaughtered and forcibly 'baptised'[55]. This slaughtering of the Jews became known as the first holocaust and is quite disturbing[56].

Many Crusaders did not make it home after the first crusade. Although it is difficult to assess the number of casualties during the first Crusade, perhaps as many as three-quarters never made it to the final destination[57]. Many died on the way to Jerusalem in battle or victim of disease, and many deserted.

When one studies the details of what actually happened surrounding the Crusades, one becomes deeply troubled. One can only mention some of the various forms of violence surrounding this period.

The Crusaders' seemingly had an insatiable lust for violence. "Crusaders routinely cut off the heads of their enemies (dead and alive) and hung them from their saddles, distributed them as gifts or launched them back over enemy walls. Some even practiced cannibalism both to satisfy their hunger and to scare their enemies"[58]. The greatest amount of slaughter in fact occurred in the temple enclosure so much so that "the blood of the massacred in the temple area" has been described to reach to the "very knees and bridles of the horses"[59]. Unfortunately it seemed that the hearts of Crusaders were so hardened that the cries of women and the cries of children were in vain to soften the ferocious hearts of the Crusaders. How can this be described as 'successful' even if physical conquest of Jerusalem had been obtained? It was just utter madness!

Some of the Crusaders decided to profit from their conquest by seizing whatever property they wished. Many Crusaders who had previously limited property suddenly occupied houses in the most important city in the Christian world[60]. Those who had motivation for material rewards were clearly in contrast to the primary motivation of religious piety.

Importantly the motivations of the Crusaders seemed to change over time once Muslims took back Jerusalem, and show a great distortion of true Christianity. Some of the later Crusades consisted of Christians undertaking expedition to the Holy Land just to save other Christians who were in a desperate, life-threatening situation[61]. "In fact, in the Fourth Crusade, the participants didn't even make it to the Holy Land, got as far as

Constantinople, seized it, and set up their own kingdom. Tremendous

bloodshed ensued. Western 'Christians' killed Eastern Christians", and this <https://assignbuster.com/church-oppression-in-the-first-crusade-a-failure-of-christian-character/>

shows that the motives for the Crusades became blurred and confused from its original target[62].

It is important to question the premise of whether these people were really demonstrating what true Christian behaviour is, which subsequently questions the validity and success of the First Crusade. If the First Crusade was not led by 'authentic' Christians then this means that there are some things done in the name of Christ which provide fuel for criticism of Christianity in general. In other words even if physical conquest was made of Jerusalem, which in this sense is considered a success in terms of achieving its primary objective, when the expedition separated itself from the teachings of the bible the First Crusade fails overall and cannot be reconciled with the end being greater than the means.

Many people argue "that the general greediness and slaughter associated with the Crusades have created an ugly stain on the reputation of the Christian faith"[63]. Thus when one views this issue from a broader perspective it seems challenging to accept the First Crusade was an overall success.

Critically "criticism of the crusades is not limited to liberal, twenty-first century perspective"[64]. At the simultaneous time of the Crusades the attempted expeditions started to break down and failed to "gain much political and popular support"[65]. The Christians seemed to start realising the "enormous misrepresentation associated with the Crusades"[66]. This misrepresentation between the teachings of the bible and biblical practice "

certainly contributed to the loss of interest or enthusiasm for new crusades"[67].

The Crusades was arguably a regrettable instance of church abuse and violence " by a power-hungry desire to impose its will on others"[68]. Unfortunately, " the Crusades provide a striking example of the link between religious and political power, and exemplify how the Bible has (at times) been employed as an agent of oppression."[69]The brutal bloodbath of the Crusades is offensive and detestable, and exploitive. The distinction between things done in the name of Christ in the Crusades and those things that really represent Jesus' teachings is too great. Again for this it can't be considered an overall success.

Terrible things occurred during the Crusades that should never have been done, especially in the name of Christ. They need to be ' confessed as being totally contrary to the teachings of the one (Christ) the crusaders were supposedly following'[70]. In fact Pope John Paul II courageously acknowledged the dark side of the Crusade era[71]. The actions taken by those Crusaders, " for whatever reasons, greatly strayed from what Christ clearly taught: to love our enemies"[72]. Thus Jesus' teachings are not at fault but the Crusaders who defended a so called *just war*.

The First Crusade was doomed to fail in the end because Christ taught that to transform people it begins with love of God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love their neighbour as themselves. Warfare was condemned from the beginning because of early Christians' abhorrence of violence and bloodshed'[73]. The transformation of men and women is

through the simplicity and beauty of the gospel rather than through war and conquest. Christ never converted people by violence, but by love. In fact St Bernard learned from the failure of the Second Crusade that it is ‘ more important to strive struggling against the sinful lusts of the heart than the struggle to conquer Jerusalem’[74]. Christ’s mission taught that if you want lasting change you have got to transform the hearts of human beings[75]. The Pope and bishops are indeed called upon to make war—but by means of the weapons given them by Christ; that is, “ they are called upon to fight against the devil with the word of God and with prayer, and they would be deserting their calling and office to fight with the sword against flesh and blood. They are not commanded to do this; it is forbidden”[76]

In short most Christians joined the crusade from a simple and sincere love of God believing that “ the cause for which they fight is noble, true, and greater than themselves”[77]. Extraordinarily large numbers of Crusaders undertook expedition due to religious, social, political, and economic reasons previously mentioned.

The First Crusade should not romanticised in any way, such as it has been in several epics and poems, as a victory but a failure. “ Westerners in general (and Catholics in particular) find the Crusades a deeply embarrassing episode in their history”[78]. The Crusades were NOT “ unprovoked campaigns of intolerance preached by deranged churchmen and fought by religious zealots against a sophisticated and peaceful Muslim world”[79]. Yet the Crusader’s goal of ‘ military and political dominance’ was off the mark, even if it was done in the ‘ name of Christ’[80]. The Crusaders entirely

removed the conversion of the Muslims, which should have been the central

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Christian focus, but choose arms, force and hatred “ not as some do, by arms, but by words; not with force, but with reason, not with hatred, but by love. . . . Loving, I write you; writing, I invite you to salvation”[81]. Many today argue that the First Crusade was anything but a success of Christian character even if it achieved what it set out to do, and thus arguably an overall failure.

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[79]“ Inventing the Crusades ” 41.

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