

EMMANUEL SIVAN

## MUSLIM REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CRUSADES

If, as August Nitschke argued, "groups can be understood most clearly when we ask: how do they look at their enemies?"(1) then a good litmus test for Middle Eastern Islamic attitudes with regard to Western Christianity during the Middle Ages should be provided by the Crusades. Were they really that "great debate between East and West" that Edward Gibbon wrote about?

When one begins to peruse the Islamic sources a paradox leaps immediately to the eyes: though the First Crusade was preceded by, generated, and was followed by a powerful outburst of religious enthusiasm (not to say frenzy) on the Christian side, among Muslims one encounters at first very little religious animosity towards the invaders, and certainly no corresponding religious resurgence. Panic, anguish, and hatred were indeed created by this forceful irruption into Syria-Palestine in 1097-1100, yet they lack an Islamic dimension. This is to be explained in part by the fact that the Crusades were viewed by the Syrians as an extension of Byzantine military campaigns aimed at the reconquest of Northern Syria in the tenth and eleventh centuries; campaigns which were on the whole (with one exception, the campaigns of Nicephoros Phocas and John Tzimiskes in the third quarter of the tenth century) devoid of religious characteristics: a war between states, not between inimical religions. Such a perception was rendered plausible by the fact that the Crusaders came to Syria via Constantinople and that Western Europeans (Franks) had been known in the Middle East in the past, especially as mercenaries of the Byzantine Empire (p. ex. during the 1071 battle of Manzikert). Poems written in the immediate wake of the First Crusade indeed call the invaders Rum (Byzantines).(2) Even when, some time later, they began to be dubbed Faranj (Ifranj) – an ethnic term which used to designate the (Frankish) inhabitants of the former Carolingian Empire (3) – the distinction between them and the Byzantines was far from being definite or clear-cut. One would still call them interchangeably Rum or Faranj (4) (and at times, Banu al-Asfar, the blond haired, certainly not a religious designation). This Byzantine "affiliation" of the Crusades was used by contemporary Syrians in order to account for the nature of their invasion – expected to be a short-lived incursion – and to lead them to expect that even if the newcomers might remain for a while on Syrian soil one could develop with them the same kind of symbiotic relationship created in the tenth century between Antioch, reconquered by the Byzantines, and the rest of Northern Syria. As long as the peculiar aim of the Crusades – liberation of the Holy Places and of Oriental Christians – remained unknown to the Muslims, their identification with the Byzantines, a "reasonable" and above all political enemy, could endure. Even poems written by refugees betray no trace of religious animosity towards them. (5)

For the non-refugee Muslim population animosity was to a large extent blunted by the fact that the Franks didn't try to cut off all peaceful relations with residents of Islamic principalities bordering on theirs. During the early decades of the twelfth century an intricate web of human relationships was woven between Franks and Muslims in Syria-Palestine and it persisted in existence at least during the long periods of true or of relative calm which were usually interspersed by only short outbursts of military activity.

The most famous example, well known to English and French readers in translation, are the Memoirs of Usama Ibn Mungidh, a Knight from Shayzar (Cesarea-on-the Orontes). (6). He describes in detail many pleasant encounters outside the battlefield between the Islamic and Frankish elites (including members of the Templar order). Usama surely betrays an acute sense of Islamic intellectual as well as moral superiority, as exemplified in his polite rejection of an offer by a Frankish Knight to take Usama's son to study in France. But the fact that such an offer could be made at all, and that Usama did not fear that his son may be converted, is in itself a telling piece of evidence as to the texture of the relationship. Usama indeed knew the Franks well, entertained them often and visited most of the major Crusader towns. His book – as well as other sources – tell of many other Muslims of lower social status, particularly merchants and artisans, who went regularly into Frankish territory, be it for professional or for personal reasons. Even in local Muslim poetry one finds descriptions of Frankish towns by Arabs who visited them. (7) True, the first

crusade was an atrocious campaign, but the small-time warfare which followed it was no different from the permanent skirmishes which had dominated the Syrian landscape all through the eleventh century and continued, between the Muslims themselves, well into the twelfth century. Beyond the (quite friendly) human relationships, political alliances were maintained for long stretches of time. That between the Emirs Shayzar and the Frankish princes of Antioch is the most celebrated among them, but more important still was the entente between the Atabeks of Damascus and the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, predicated as it was upon a division of zones of influence in the Gilead and the Sawad (1108) and later in Biq'a Valley in Lebanon (1110). Ad hoc military coalition between Frankish and Muslim rulers were a regular phenomenon, and in one case we even have a coalition of Frankish Antioch and Muslim Mosul (in 1107). One could find no better indicator of the Frankish integration into the Syrian political and social landscape with no hint of religious antagonism.

This apparently idyllic situation did not endure. For the Muslims were bound to discover that the Franks were here to stay, were not affiliated with the Byzantines and, above all, were motivated by a vision and an ideology of a novel (and for them most disturbing) character. It is particularly the awareness with regard to the third factor, the Crusade mentalite which tipped the balance among Muslims in favor of a Holy War against the Crusaders. For a while one could still hope for a long term *modus vivendi* with invaders of the Byzantine variety; there was no such perspective if the Crusaders were (and would be) motivated by the ideology the Muslims were slowly beginning to discover during the first two decades of Frankish presence. This discovery was less the result of the First Crusade than of subsequent events. One could perhaps minimise the importance of acts of profanation perpetuated during the 1097- 1100 invasion, and brush them off as an ephemeral phenomenon much like the invasion itself was deemed to be. However, acts of sacrilege did continue in the following years and it is through this "dialogue of actions" rather than by discussing ideology with the Franks, that the Muslims learnt about the specificity of the crusade phenomenon. The acts of sacrilege we refer to were the systematic burning down of mosques in occupied cities or turning them into churches, the huge cross put on top of a few minarets (for example on the main mosque of Aleppo) and/or of citadels of (permanently or temporarily) occupied Syrian cities; the harsh treatment of Muslim pilgrims to Mecca, the deliberate burning of the important library (Dar al-'Ilm) of Tripoli in order to destroy the Korans, etc. (8) Small wonder that the religious sensibility of the Muslims was scandalised and shaken by such acts. Out of this shock the spirit of Jihad was reborn. It is not our intention to survey here the evolution of the Jihad movement, begun by men of religion but soon taken over by the rulers, arriving at its apogee under Nur al-Din and Saladin in the second half of the twelfth century. It would be much more useful to take a look at this movement in its zenith (roughly 1146-1193), and try to ascertain how much, and through what means, did the Muslims ultimately learn about the Crusader phenomenon and what kind of an intellectual debate did evolve between Jihad and Crusade.

Certain aspects of the Crusade phenomenon became evident already by the end of the first decade of their presence in Syria (9) – the cross, the centrality of Jerusalem, the participation of monks and priests in battle etc. But it was merely in the second half of the century (and especially towards 1180) that one finds a broad and rather coherent picture of the enemy and of what makes him

There is unfortunately precious little we know about the sources of information available to the Muslims, but it seems that most of the information came from just observing the Franks and certainly not from reading anything of them or about them. Apart from observation, the Muslims did get some data directly from the Franks, for example during exchanges held in the course of negotiations (mostly verbal exchanges) and in one case we have the text of a letter, in Arabic, written on behalf of Richard Lionheart and elaborating upon Christian demands concerning Jerusalem, the Holy Cross and the Holy Land. (11)

Lesser bits of information came from Frankish prisoners of war such as that only son who told his captors that his own mother had incited him to join the Crusade and sold her home in order to equip him for it; a story reported by the historian Ibn al-Athir so as to illustrate the "spiritual and religious motivation of the Crusaders." (11) On the whole, there is indeed a consensus among

Muslim contemporaries as to the religious motivation of the Crusades, and that, unlike the twentieth century Arab and Islamic historiography which considers religion as an epiphenomenon in the Crusades and looks for ulterior motives (namely, economic, strategic, and political ones, as befits a "proto-imperialist" movement).(12) In the late twelfth century, on the contrary, even the most committed protagonists of Jihad tended to admit that the enemy possess the same religious ardor they call for among their own coreligionists: "In the eyes of the Franks, it costs little to sacrifice their life to defend their religion"; "the sole motivation for their actions and their self-imposed sacrifice is their zeal for He whom they worship and for the glory of their Faith."(13). This zeal is inflamed by a feeling of solidarity vis-a-vis their coreligionists in distress. The Third Crusade is defined, for instance, as the "Infidel West coming to the help of the Infidels of the [Latin Orient]"; and the propagandists of this Crusade are elsewhere said to use the following argument: "The land [conquered by Saladin] is ours, and Islam massacres and exterminates our brothers in Jerusalem."(14).

The aim of the Crusades is well formulated in the above phrase (and in many others); liberation of Jerusalem and of the Holy Land. The reasons for Jerusalem's and the Holy Land's importance for Christianity are elaborated in great detail. In the manner of Greek historiography, a Muslim chronicle puts the following speech in the mouth of the Frankish defenders of besieged Jerusalem in 1187: "Our honor consists in paying homage to this holy city, our salvation depends on hers. If we forsake her we shall be covered with shame... Here in this land lie the Virgin and the Lord, the stable of the Nativity and the arena of Crucifixion of our Messiah, here took place the miracle of the fish. Here our Savior was resurrected, here Man incarnated Divinity...here took place the baptism of a God, here Mary gave birth to the Messiah. We shall fight unto death [for this city and land] before the sepulchre of our Lord.."(15) In like manner, a contemporary poet rejoices, when Jerusalem is reconquered by Saladin, that the Holy Sepulchre – derisively called I-Qumama (garbage dump) instead of al-Qiyama (resurrection) – was purified of Christian presence. Knowledge thus generated empathy not sympathy, and antagonism permeates even factually precise descriptions of the enemy. Cognizant of the subjective importance of these Holy Places – though serenely disdainful of their value – the Muslims would time and time again single out the Qumama and al- Maqbara (the tomb) as prime targets of all incomers from Europe and as a sort of incarnation in stone of the supposed Messiah of the other religion.(16) Dubious Messiah he may well be, but it is admitted that He can inspire people to come from faraway places and die in order to liberate His grave.(17) For that reason Saladin seems to have considered, after the arrival of the Third Crusade, a plan for demolishing the Holy Sepulchre in order to eliminate the very target of the Crusades and, hopefully, put an end to this movement. The plan was opposed by other advisors, with a better grasp of realities, who convinced the Sultan that the object of worship was neither the Church nor the Sepulchre, but Jerusalem. Realism (though not tolerance) finally won the day and the plan was shelved. (18)

The Holy Cross (Salib al-Salbut, the Cross of the Crucifixion) was well known to the Muslims from the time of the Byzantine wars of the tenth-eleventh centuries, but in the second half of the twelfth century it came to symbolise the Crusade in their eyes, and its capture (19) was declared one of the aims of the Jihad. Hence the joy in their camp when this happened at the battle of Hittin (1187), a rejoicing suffused with deep disdain of the underlying Christian beliefs: "It is before this Cross that each and every Christian must prostrate himself in prayer for they allege that it is made of the very wood to which their supposed "Lord" was nailed. They hold it in store for times of danger and for celebration on holidays. Nothing can replace it for them."(20). The Holy Cross was in fact to play a major role during the armistice negotiations with Richard Lionheart.(21).

The Muslims had no doubt that the Crusades, having such motives and such aims, constituted a religious war. The best proof is that they used as a matter of course terms and images related to the Jihad in order to describe the enemy's war. Of Conrad de Montferrat it is said, for instance, that the endeavours were "for the defense of the religion of the Messiah." Saladin's confidante al-Qadi al-Fadil even goes so far as to dub the Crusade "Jihad," though not without some qualification: "Had the Jihad which the Franks want to accomplish been made with the pure intent of sacrificing oneself for a heavenly recompense, nobody would have beaten them in the race to

paradise." Saladin's court biographer, for his part, had no qualms about declaring the two phenomena identical: "Each of the two adversaries [in the battle for Acre] sold his earthly life for the pleasures of the Hereafter, preferring heavenly life to the here and now" (22).

What produces this Christian holy war is, according to the Muslims, a great popular movement: "The Infidels assembled from everywhere, and went on the road out of their own detestable will, without a King's order being necessary"; (23) a matter-of-fact description, but one laden with value judgement.

We see yet again that better knowledge of the Other does not necessarily produce sympathy, it may rather breed contempt. Not that the Muslims were unaware of the institutional aspect of the movement: the Pope's role in proclaiming it, the setting of Jerusalem as supreme goal, the indulgence promised as recompense to those who take part, the propaganda conducted by priests and monks in Europe and their contribution to maintain morale during battles in Syria-Palestine etc. (24). But all this is presented less in order to produce a better understanding of the enemy and more as sort of an example designed to create among Muslims a religious zeal similar to that of their enemies. Thus the role of the Pope is often invoked in Saladin's letters to the Abbasid Caliph, begging him to call upon other Islamic rulers to help the Sultan. Some of the paragons of Jihad would even go so far as to present the Crusaders explicitly as role model (although a note of antagonism always creeps in): "They are imbued with zeal and perseverance in their error unlike the Muslims who are full of lassitude and dodge their military duty"; Western Christianity exhibits solidarity with the Latin East, "infidelity helping infidelity, while the Muslim West [Maghreb] refuses to succor us, Eastern Muslims." (25).

The context is, thence, always that of antagonism and war. One tries to learn about the enemy both for the sake of politico-military intelligence and in order to emulate his better qualities. Yet one is always certain that however much the enemy may resemble oneself, he is misguided, morally inferior and, given his zeal for his own "error", can barely be expected to be converted by reasoned disputation to the superior, i.e. Islamic, viewpoint.

It is this context which explains why all through the two centuries of Crusader presence very little by way of actual disputation between Franks and Muslims took place, due to the mutual disdain in which the adversaries held each other. Indeed, why would the Muslims wish to argue with those they dubbed "children of hell," "the damned," and so forth? (26).

What one finds in Muslim writings of that era, in lieu of actual disputation, are rather one-sided polemics which boil down on the whole to a reiteration of the age-old apples of discord between Islam and Christianity, notably (as we have already seen above) the divinity of Jesus, as well as the issue of the Trinity. Refutation of Christian "erroneous arguments" usually consists just of Koranic verses interspersed with poems, chronicles and epistolary anthologies dealing with the Crusades. The most commonly quoted of these verses are Chapter IV, 169-170: "The Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, was only a Messenger of Allah and His word which He conveyed unto Mary and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers and say not "Thee." Cease! [it is] better for you! Allah is the one God. For it is removed from His transcendent majesty that He should have a son." Based on these verses one speaks about the Crusaders either on an accusatory note ("They have lied by representing their Lord in such a fashion") or in mockery ("How could they hope to get succor from a so-called 'divinity' which they themselves admit had been put to death? How can he save others from what he himself had suffered from?") The arguments are, of course, designated for internal Muslim consumption – to bolster one's sense of one's own righteousness – and do not seek to engage the enemy in a debate. This is why they are particularly common in propaganda tracts in praise of the Holy War (Fada'il al-Jihad) and in booklets on the merits of Jerusalem (Fada'il al-Quds).

We know of just one anti-Christian theological tract written in the course of the Counter-Crusade, In Refutation of the Polytheists, authored by Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Katib, but this tract was unfortunately lost. (27) Anyway, it served, of course, for internal needs only.

Actual, face to face, theological disputations are very rare, almost all of them seem to be due to the personal initiative of Saladin, and were held in private audience with Crusader personalities. Rumor about them was spread by the Sultan's entourage, presumably in order to accentuate the religious character of the war. Saladin thus discussed matters of faith with the Frankish Lord of

Beaufort during the siege of this castle, and when the ambassador of Conrad de Montferrat arrived at his encampment in order to negotiate armistice, the Sultan gave him a detailed lecture on the merits of Islam and offered him, to convert. (28) Those are, however, exceptions. Most theological arguments about the enemy's "misguided notions" were aimed at one's own camp, or were hurled at the enemy in a spirit of animosity and challenge without waiting for pietistic ulama who in order to protest against the entry of Emperor Frederick the Second to Jerusalem (1229) – the city having been returned to Christian rule by an Ayyubid sultan – made a call for prayer from the minaret of the al- Aqsa mosque consisting of two polemical Koranic verses: "Allah hath not chosen a son, nor is there any God along with Him" (XXIII, 93); "Such as Jesus, son of Mary: [this is] a statement of truth concerning which they doubt" (MX, 34) (29).

The absence of real dialogue with the Franks is all the more impressive if we remember that actual theological disputations with native (i.e. Oriental) Christians continued, and were held at times in public, all through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, both before and after actual persecutions of these dhimmis began in the early thirteenth century. (30). The climate of warfare and invective which dominated the relationship between Franks and Muslims was certainly not conducive to dialogue. Frankish notions of superiority (31) were, of course, as much to blame as those harbored by the Muslims. Gibbon's "debate between East and West" has a nice flourish to it, but it has no foundation in fact. Indeed, at least at the theological level, no exchanges of ideas did occur. One should rather speak of a dialogue of the deaf.

#### NOTE

(2) Ibn al-Jawzi, Muntazam (Hyderabad, 1358/59A.H.), vol. 9, p. 128; if. Fada'il al-Quds (Princeton, Garrett 586), f. 25a; Imad al-Din al-Isfahani, Kharidat al-Qasr (Caghdad, 1955), vol. 2, p. 11. Cf. Ibn al-Arabi, Kitab al-Awasim (Constantine, 1928), vol. 2, p. 212-213.

(3) See, for instance, Mas'udi, Muruj al-Dhahab, ed. Barbier de Meynard, vol. 3, p. 66-75.

(4) For instance, Sulami, Kitab al-Jihad (Ms. Zahiriyah, Damascus), ff. 175b, 179a, 179b, 217b, 218a, 221a, 237a (critical ed. hi Journal Asiatique, 1966), p. 211.

(5) Kharidat al-Qasr, vol. 2, p. 129.

(6) The best translation is by P.K. Hitti, An Arab: Syrian Gentleman and Warrior in the Period of the Crusades, (Columbia U.P., 1929).

(7) Apart from Usama, see Ibn al-Qalanisi, Dhayl Ta'rikh Dimashq (Leiden, 1908), p. 236; Ibn al-Adim, Zubdat al-Talab (Damascus, 1954), vol. 2, p. 264; Kharidat al-Qasr, vol. 1, p. 100, 156.

(8) For instance, Ibn Shaddad, al-A'laq al Khatira: Ta'rikh Halab (Damascus, 1954), p. 40-41; Ibn Abi Tayyi, quoted by Ibn Furat, Ta'rikh (Ms. Vienna), vol. 1, f. 38b.

(9) See, for instance, the Sulami treatise (note 4) written towards 1105; Ibn al-Athir, al-Kamil fi-l-Ta'rikh (Cairo, 1303 H.A.H.), vol. 11, p. 137; Abu Shama, Kitab al-Rawdatayn (Cairo, 1287/8), vol. 1, p. 244.

(10) Baha' al-Din, Sirat Salah al-Din (Cairo, 1357 A.H.), p. 187.

(11) Ibn al-Athir, Kamil, vol. 12, p. 13. The author took part in some of Saladin's field operations.

(12) On current Islamic historiography of the Crusades, see my Interpretation of Islam (Princeton, 1985), ch. 1.

(13) Abu Shama, op. cit, vol. 2, p. 148.

(14) Ibid., p. 149, 182.

(15) Imad al-Din al-Isfahani, al-Fath al-Qussi (Leiden, 1888), p. 48.

(16) Abu Shama, op. cit, vol. 2, p. 105, 151, 156, 172; Bah' al-Din, op. cit., p. 120. The term "al-Qumama" dates back to the Muslim conquest in the seventh century.

(17) Imad al-Din, Fath, p. 413; Abu Shama, vol. 2, p. 149, 161.

(18) Reported by historian Sibt Ibn al-Jawzi, a member of his entourage, Mir'at al-Zaman (Ms. Paris 5866), f. 237a.

(19) Imad al-Din al-Isfahani, Nusrat al-Fatra (Ms. Paris 2145), f. 34a; Bundari, Zubdat al-Nusra (Leiden, 1889), p. 39.

(20) Abu Shama, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 278; cf. Al-Qadi al-Fadil, Rasa'il (Ms. Paris 6024), ff. 701, 266, 446.

(21) Al-Fath al-Qussi, p. 371, 373.

(22) Abu Shama, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 105, 107; vol. 1, p. 244; Baha' al-Din, op. cit., p. 152, 226.

(23) Qalqashandi, Subh al-A'sha (Cairo, 1918), vol. 6, p. 28; Abu Shama, vol. 2, p. 168.

(24) Qalqashandi, op. cit., vol. f., p. 127; Ibn al-Athir, op. cit., p. 21, 13; al-Qadi al-Fadil, Rasa'il (Ms. Paris 6024), ff. 446-459.

- (25) Abu Shama, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 171, 148, 162; Imad, al-Fath al-Qussi, p. 205; Qalqashandi, op. cit., vol. f., p. 25.
- (26) Ibn al-Athir, al-Mathal al-Sa'ir (Cairo, 1939), vol. 2, p. 143; al-Fath al-Qussi, p. 163, 103.
- (27) Abu Shama, op. cit, vol. 1, p. 118.
- (28) Baha' al-Din, op. cit., p. 24, 80.
- (29) Sibt Ibn al-Jawzi, Mir'at al-Zaman (Hyderabad, 1959), vol. 8, p. 656; Magrizi, Kitab-al-Suluk (Cairo, 1934), vol. 1, p. 231.
- (30) On disputations, see Steinschneider, Polemische und apologetische Literatur in arabischer Sprache (Leipzig, 1877), p. 17-19, 27-28, 37-41, 49-50, 60, 66, 88, 99, 129. On the worsening of the situation of Oriental Christians, see my "Notes sur la situation des Chretiens sous des Ayyubids," Revue de l'Histoire des Religions CLXII (1967), p. 117-130. These popularly instigated pogroms began in Egypt at the time of the Fifth Crusade (1217/18) when the Copts were accused (wrongly, so it seems) of collaborating with the Frankish invasion of Egypt. These pogroms were condoned by the powers-that-be, but actual persecution by the authorities erupts only under the Mamluks.
- (31) A point made in the by now classical studies of Norman Daniel, R.W. Southern and J. Prawer.