

# Teaching the Crusades: Encountering the Other

A Round Table Discussion for Leeds International Medieval Congress 2010

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A recent report conducted by The Historical Association and funded by the government's Department for Education and Skills found that teachers were 'unwilling to challenge highly contentious or charged versions of history', and at one school they 'deliberately avoided teaching the crusades...because their balanced treatment of the topic would have directly challenged what was taught in some local mosques'. A session on teaching the crusades was organised at the Leeds International Medieval Congress in 2009 in direct response to the report's conclusions. It became clear that teachers within higher and further education establishments likewise faced numerous pedagogical challenges when discussing the concept and practice of medieval holy war. Bringing together an international range of teachers and scholars at various stages of their career, the round table aimed to discuss the challenges faced with and the potential routes to teaching such an 'emotive and controversial' field of history.

Owing to recent, unforeseen circumstances the list of panellists for the round table discussion was slightly different to the one originally envisaged. We were very fortunate in that Professor Tom Madden of St Louis University (USA) agreed to stand in for Professor Jonathan Phillips of Royal Holloway, University of London. Similarly, Benjamin Weber of Université de Pau-Pays de l'Adour (France), who at the time of writing has graduated with a PhD, agreed to talk on the subject of teaching the crusades in secondary schools in France after our proposed panellist from the secondary sector pulled out of the session.

Following initial introductions, Tom Madden was the first contributor to discuss his experience of teaching the crusades and medieval holy war to various audiences in the United States. Tom has vast experience in teaching and supervising undergraduates and post-graduates, although the chief value of Tom's contribution was founded on his familiarity with addressing popular audiences. As Tom pointed out, the 9/11 atrocity caused great public interest in holy war and the crusades, and in particular there was a hunger to discover where lay the (real or imagined) medieval roots of Islamic fundamentalism.

The second speaker, Graham Loud (University of Leeds), was likewise able to draw on his vast experiences of teaching the crusades in the tertiary sector, and his address acted as the ideal foil to the previous talk. Graham agreed that interest in the crusades had expanded greatly since 2001, and he suggested that the greatest pedagogical challenge lay in conveying the concept and practice of medieval holy war to undergraduate audiences who often have pre-conceived notions of what historians mean when they talk of the crusades.

Sini Kangas (University of Helsinki) was next to speak and she chose to concentrate on the challenge of accurately communicating one's knowledge to university audiences given the current austerity measures being undertaken across the European tertiary education sector. She rightly pointed out that in addition to a lecturer's topic knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject, students recognise and appreciate the extensive preparation and organisation needed to teach a largely unfamiliar body of material. The problem, of course, is that European-wide cuts to education funding, which are resulting in increased teaching loads, fewer support staff, etc., etc., are having a detrimental impact on lecturers' capability to teach the crusades to the best of their ability.

Benjamin Weber provided a fascinating insight into how the crusades are taught in the French secondary sector. Teachers are instructed to focus primarily on the peaceful co-existence of Christians and Muslims living in the Levant during the high middle ages. Such an approach, whilst implicitly avoiding some of the problems of teaching the crusades highlighted by The Historical Association, is remarkably similar to that taken by French historians of the crusades writing in the last half of the nineteenth century and before the collapse of the European empires after 1945.

The last contributor was William Purkis of the University of Birmingham. William argued that to garner an understanding of the full scope of the crusade movement, lecturers should be prepared to address medieval ideas and actions that took place outside of the Levant and beyond the high middle ages. He suggested such a 'pluralist' approach to teaching the concept of the crusades would help communicate to students what it meant to engage in holy war in the middle ages, a practice far more complex and geographically and chronologically varied than most students recognise.

The floor was then opened up to the audience for further discussion, and it became clear that members of the audience and the panellists alike could each give an anecdote of encountering a pedagogical challenge when teaching the crusades similar to that recognised by The Historical Association. However, the potential challenge of confronting head-on the spectre of political correctness when teaching holy war in the tertiary sector was not considered a pedagogical predicament. The round table concluded that undergraduates generally do not conflate the subject matter with modern issues and are able to distinguish the voices and actions that underpinned and defined medieval forms of holy war. The collective, spiritual anxiety of medieval Christendom, which largely provided the motor for hundreds of thousands of individuals to engage in the crusade movement, are phenomena that can and should be discussed freely and openly in the tertiary sector and without recourse to the self-censorship often imposed by political correctness.

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