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Edited by

Margaret Connolly, Justine Firnhaber-Baker,
Ian Johnson, and James Palmer



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DEBATING THE 'CRUSADE' IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

Matthew Gabriele

Contemporary Americans seem, in some ways, quite attuned to the idea of religious violence. This is most likely a by-product of the attacks of 11 September 2001, which left many scrambling to comprehend the attackers' motivations. The consensus of American opinion now holds that, in the minds of Al Qaeda and other 'radical Islamists', the attacks were part of a religious war, a cosmic, manichean struggle that would only end with complete and utter victory of one side over another. This conclusion has only been reinforced by recent analysis of the motivations behind ISIS in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere.¹ Reza Aslan has suggested that, to win this kind of war, the West must refuse to fight it. In other words, the West must resist the temptation to frame the struggle in the same way as its enemies — as 'good' against 'evil' or 'us' against 'them.'²

¹ For example, Wood, 'What ISIS Really Wants.'

² Aslan, *How to Win a Cosmic War*. Much of Aslan's discussion (and modern scholarship on this generally) relies on Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*.

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Abstract: The word 'crusade' is often used in contemporary American culture as if it were unproblematic. It moves freely through time, evoking the medieval past while simultaneously conjuring images of a certain kind of struggle in the present. Deployed by both the political right and left, the term and the historical events it is (sometimes) meant to evoke are in turn defended and condemned. This debate, however, misses the issues inherent in simply using the term itself — an anachronism from its inception, a neologism that obscures more than it clarifies phenomena both historical and contemporary. It is time to move beyond the word 'crusade', to archive it, and find better language to describe the particular types of conflict/struggle of which we speak.

Keywords: Crusade, Historiography, Politics, Religion, Medieval, United States, Virginia Tech, Iraq.

American foreign policy has generally tried to steer this course. President Barack Obama's speech on receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 intelligently separated just wars from holy wars and in so doing, asserted the United States, and the West more generally, was engaging in a just war because it was not fighting against Islam as a whole.³ His remarks since then have been consistent in this regard. In February 2015, President Obama attended the annual National Prayer Breakfast. There he reminded his audience that no religious tradition is immune from violence, specifically mentioning Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. But in exhorting his audience to remember 'that during the Crusades and the Inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ', his remarks ignited a firestorm.⁴

Jim Gilmore, a former Republican governor of Virginia and 2016 candidate for President, stated immediately afterwards that 'the president's comments this morning at the prayer breakfast are the most offensive I've ever heard a president make in my lifetime. He has offended every believing Christian in the United States.'⁵ Jonah Goldberg in *The National Review* called Pres. Obama's remarks 'horse pucky' and Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal opted for sarcasm in his response, saying that the president's invocation of the past was irrelevant as medieval Islam was no longer a threat. Bill O'Reilly confidently declared that the US was engaged in a 'holy war' against ISIS.⁶ This stirring defense of one manifestation of medieval Christianity by the American political right is all the more notable because it stands in such stark contrast to statements made by the Republican President George W. Bush in the wake of 9/11.

President George W. Bush, speaking at the Islamic Center in Washington, DC on 17 September 2001, sought to clearly distinguish the vast majority of the world's Muslims from Al Qaeda and the attacks of the previous week.⁷ But in those remarks President Bush may have been unconsciously atoning for something. Just the day before, on 16 September 2001, President Bush spoke of how the United States would react to the attacks on the World Trade Center

³ Office of the White House Press Secretary, 'Remarks by the President on the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize'.

⁴ Office of the White House Press Secretary, 'Remarks by the President at the 2016 National Prayer Breakfast'.

⁵ Davis, 'Critics Seize on Obama's ISIS Remarks at Prayer Breakfast'.

⁶ Goldberg, 'Horse Pucky from Obama'; Johnson, 'Jindal to Obama: "Medieval Christian Threat under Control"'; Feldman, 'O'Reilly: We Are in a "Holy War" with ISIS'.

⁷ Office of the White House Press Secretary, "Islam is Peace" says President'.

and Pentagon by saying that 'this crusade, this war on terrorism is gonna [*sic*] take awhile. And the American people must be patient'.⁸ A couple of days later, Jonathan Phillips, a Professor of Crusader Studies at the University of London, chastized Bush for his ill-considered words, especially when dealing with the Islamic world.⁹ Indeed, throughout Europe, politicians, political analysts, and religious leaders condemned the President's use of the word 'crusade' and warned of the dangers that could result if the use of that type of language continued.¹⁰ The White House seemed to be listening to some of that pushback. The same day that Phillips' article appeared, President Bush's White House Press Secretary said that the President regretted using the word.¹¹ His visit to the Islamic Center of Washington, DC in the wake of his earlier statement was likely no accident.

But the far right defended the Christian West. Robert Spencer, an old American cold warrior who now set his sights on Islam, argued in his 2005 *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)* that the crusades were an overall boon to Western society, in that they stopped an aggressive Islam from further threatening Christianity and Europe. In fact, Spencer ends with a chapter entitled 'The Crusade We Must Fight Today', which (barely) stops short of calling for the pope to announce a new holy war. Indeed, even President Bush held his ground to a degree. During the 2004 Presidential campaign, President Bush gave at least tacit approval to a Republican fundraising letter that 'praised the president for "leading a global crusade against terrorism"'.¹² On the left, Alexander Cockburn labelled the coalition war in Afghanistan 'The Tenth Crusade', calling Bush and his advisors 'a terrifying alliance of Judaeo-Christian fanatics, conjoined in their dreams of the recovery of the Holy Lands [...] [With the imminent attack upon Iraq, we harken] back to the late thirteenth century, picking up where Prince Edward left off with his ninth crusade after St Louis had died in Tunis with the word Jerusalem on his lips'. Other commentators followed suit.¹³

⁸ Perez-Rivas, 'Bush Vows to Rid the World of "Evil-Doers"'.

⁹ Phillips, 'Why a Crusade Will Lead to a Jihad'.

¹⁰ Ford, 'Europe Cringes at Bush "Crusade" against Terrorists'.

¹¹ White House Press Briefing, 18 September 2001.

¹² Spencer, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)*, pp. 221–32. Douglas and Recio, 'Bush Seems Unwilling to Separate Church and State and War'. Now, also Stark, *God's Battalions*; Peters, 'The Coming Crusade: African Christians vs. Islamists'; Barr, 'Santorium: Left Hates "Christendom"'.

¹³ Cockburn, 'The Tenth Crusade'; Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror*; Pinkerton, 'Century in, Century out — It's Crusade Time'; Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil*; and Carroll, *Crusade*, esp. pp. 24–26.

Though not explicitly political, scholars have recently sought to fill this public hunger for more information about medieval conflict involving Christians and Muslims, wading into the public fray in order to clarify the terms around which much of the debate centres. They have done so on multiple fronts. Philippe Buc's recent academic monograph positions the violence of medieval Christian Europe into the longer arc of violence and religion in the West. Alfred Andrea and Andrew Holt's *Seven Myths of the Crusades* attempts to disassemble some of the cultural superstructure that surrounds the way in which most people look to the period. Others, such as Jonathan Phillips, Thomas Asbridge, and Jay Rubenstein, have taken another tack by producing books intended for a more general audience. For instance, Rubenstein's *Armies of Heaven*, published in 2011, tells a new version of the First Crusade and points suggestively to how his audience could productively think about the thematic (though oftentimes superficial) parallels between medieval and modern 'crusades'. Finally, and most recently, academics have begun to again write directly for public audiences. David Perry's mini-historiography of crusade scholarship after President Obama's 2015 National Prayer Breakfast remarks can in this regard be seen as a model (though he is, of course, not the only one to have done so).¹⁴ In all cases mentioned above (and many others), the move generally is towards a conceptualization of the violence of the Middle Ages as 'holy war', with the 'Crusades' one manifestation of that type — a species within a genus.

This has not, unsurprisingly, settled the issue in the public mind though. Even here, several centuries removed from the European Middle Ages, we can see in the contentious political debates of the twenty-first century that the word 'crusade' makes people bristle. In this article, I will suggest that this modern political argument has to do with the word 'crusade' itself, first as it passed from event to language in the European Middle Ages, but more importantly as its been deployed since 2001. Attempting to define a 'real' medieval Crusade is the same fool's errand as attempting to define which is the 'correct' form of a religious tradition. Understanding these modern political manifestations of the word will then allow us to speak more meaningfully about both what religious violence was, and what religious violence is.

¹⁴ Buc, *Holy War, Martyrdom, and Terror; Seven Myths of the Crusades*, ed. by Andrea and Holt; Phillips, *Holy Warriors*; Asbridge, *The Crusades*; Rubenstein, *Armies of Heaven*; Perry, 'Conservatives Want to Rewrite the History of the Crusades for Modern Political Ends'; and Madden, 'Crusade Myths'.

The events of 1095–99 spawned an outpouring of historical writing, generated by the general Christian euphoria that swept the West after the capture of Jerusalem in 1099, and intended to explain what happened and how it happened. There was little consensus, save that God's hand seemed to have been guiding the actions of those who left Europe in 1095–96.¹⁵ Even today, scholars can be divided into three current schools of thought on how to define 'crusade'.¹⁶ 'Traditionalists' believe that a crusade is a military campaign fought specifically for Jerusalem. This is Christianity against Islam, a struggle that ended with the loss of the final Frankish settlement in the Holy Land. 'Pluralists', the most numerous of scholars today, think of the medieval crusade as a peculiar type of holy war. This definition expands crusading both geographically and chronologically — to Spain, the Baltics, etc., and from 1095 to well into the eighteenth century. Finally, 'generalism', considers crusading to be present wherever war was thought to have been fought on God's behalf.

The uncertainty of definition outlined above likely stems from a more basic problem. As Christopher Tyerman has observed, 'To put it crudely, *we* know there were crusades, *they* [in the twelfth century] did not'.¹⁷ What Tyerman seems to mean here is that although modern scholars almost always begin their histories of the Crusades with Pope Urban II and the Council of Clermont in 1095, neither Urban II nor his successors ever used the word itself. Indeed, no Latin word for 'crusade' ever existed. The word 'crusader' (*crucesignati*, meaning 'signed/ marked by the cross') did not exist until around 1200 CE, about 100 years after the so-called First Crusade. Before then, and more often than not after the new word had been invented, those who fought in God's wars were called *peregrini* ('pilgrims/travellers') or *milites* ('soldiers'), who went on an *iter* ('journey'), *expeditio* ('expedition'), *passagium* ('passage'), or *peregrinatio* ('wandering', and later 'pilgrimage'), in order to conduct *negotium* ('business'), *opus* ('work'), or *bellum* ('war').¹⁸ During the Middle Ages, it did not get more specific than that.

¹⁵ See the foundational Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading*. Almost all modern scholarship on the topic follows from his work. But now see also *Writing the Early Crusades: Text, Transmission, and Memory*, ed. by Bull and Kempf; Rubenstein, *Armies of Heaven*; and Gabriele, *An Empire of Memory*, pp. 129–59.

¹⁶ The schools were defined in Constable, 'The Historiography of the Crusades', pp. 1–22. But now see Housley, *Contesting the Crusades*, pp. 2–13.

¹⁷ Tyerman, 'Were There Any Crusades in the Twelfth Century?', p. 555.

¹⁸ See Tyerman, 'Were There Any Crusades in the Twelfth Century?', pp. 575–76; Markowski, 'Crucesignatus: Its Origins and Early Usage', pp. 157–65; and Housley, *Contesting the Crusades*, p. 7.

Things did not get easier once the word passed out of Latin and into the vernacular. In English, 'crusade' did not become common until the seventeenth century and 'crusader' not until the middle of the eighteenth. Then, over the next 100 years the word began to take on two primary — but interrelated — meanings. It could refer to the activities practiced in medieval Europe, meaning Christian holy wars waged against the enemies of Christ, almost always with papal sanction. But, after the middle of the nineteenth century, the word could also mean a movement directed against anything — person/people, idea, or cause — considered 'evil'. This seemingly more benign usage of the word dates to a moment when progressive Christian groups began to appropriate the term for their nonviolent campaigns of evangelization and reform — most evident, perhaps, in the abolition movement of the first half of the nineteenth century, then reviving again with the Temperance movement in the years surrounding 1900.¹⁹ Indeed, if I can clarify a statement I made at the outset of this article, White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer did not actually retract President Bush's use of 'crusade' in the wake of 9/11. Fleischer said that he felt sorry if people were offended by the President's use of the word but that the meaning of crusade, 'in the traditional English sense of the word', as a 'broad cause', still stood.²⁰ And perhaps that is true. Fleischer was allowing for both meanings simultaneously, diminishing the one that got the President into trouble, while refocusing the public's attention on what most would consider the word's 'positive' connotations.

But for our purposes, it is significant that Fleischer ended up at least tacitly acknowledging that interrelation, acknowledging that that second, progressive, but still Christian, definition of the term is built upon the original. All modern uses of 'crusade' still rest upon an assumption that there existed a great struggle, an apocalyptic conflict between 'good' and 'evil'. We live, even now, in the shadow of a period in which progressive 'crusaders' meant to eradicate slavery or alcohol consumption or unsafe working conditions, and colonialists justified their interventions into North Africa and the Middle East by calling on events from 700 years earlier. No fewer than six books with the word 'crusade' or 'crusader' in the title were published in the wake of General Edmund Allenby's entry

¹⁹ Siberry, *The New Crusaders*, pp. 104–11; Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade*, pp. 88–89, esp. n. 2; and *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*. See also the online Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Collection at Cornell University Libraries. Though unscientific, one can still see clearly via the Google Ngram Viewer the contours of how often the word was used. See <<http://tinyurl.com/Crusade1800>> [accessed 9 February 2015]. My thanks to Zachary W. Dresser for pointing me towards these sources.

²⁰ White House Press Briefing, 18 September 2001.

into Jerusalem in 1917. A cartoon in the popular London magazine *Punch* had Richard the Lionhearted saying 'At last, my dream come true', as he watched the British army enter the city.²¹ The French historian René Grousset would, in 1936, conclude his study of the crusades with these words: 'The Templars only held until 1303 the islet of Ruad, south of Tortosa, from where one day — in 1914 — the "Franks" would again set foot in Syria.'²² The war continued. In all cases here listed, 'crusade' exists as a zero-sum game, one in which there must be a winner and a loser, a right and a wrong, a game that tends to excuse the means in service of the ends.

In the 22 August 2007 *Los Angeles Times*, Michael Weinstein and Reza Aslan published an article lamenting the increasingly cozy relationship between certain Christian evangelical groups and the United States' military. The authors pointed specifically to the actions of a fundamentalist Christian ministry that wanted the Department of Defense to distribute its care packages to US soldiers serving in Iraq. These packages did not contain cookies. They contained 'bibles, proselytizing material in English and Arabic and the apocalyptic computer game "Left Behind: Eternal Forces" (derived from the series of post-Rapture novels), in which "soldiers for Christ" hunt down enemies who look suspiciously like UN peacekeepers'. The Defense Department eventually scrapped the care packages but the ministry still planned to visit U.S. bases in Iraq on a tour called the 'Military Crusade'.²³

Earlier, in 2003, American Lieutenant General 'Jerry' Boykin went, in full uniform, on a preaching tour of American churches. On this tour, he spoke of Muslims worshipping an 'idol' and 'false god' and portraying America's battle against militant Islam as a battle against 'Satan'. The only way these enemies could be defeated, Boykin concluded, was to 'come against them in the name of Jesus'.²⁴ At about the same time, in the midst of America's second war with Iraq, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld prepared PowerPoint presentations for President Bush and the top levels of government. The first slides of these presentations have

²¹ For more on this event, see Bar-Yosef, 'The Last Crusade?', pp. 87–109.

²² Grousset, *Histoire des croisades*, III, 763. English translation from Riley-Smith, 'Islam and the Crusades in History and Imagination', p. 158. For an interesting perspective on the memory of the period in the Middle East, see Abouali, 'Saladin's Legacy', pp. 175–89; and Phillips, 'Before the Kaiser'.

²³ Weinstein and Aslan, 'Not So Fast, Christian Soldiers'.

²⁴ Knowlton, 'General Compares Militants to "Satan"'; and Arkin, 'The Pentagon Unleashes a Holy Warrior'. Boykin has now defended himself in Boykin and Vincent, *Never Surrender*.

biblical quotations overlain upon images of the previous day's events in Iraq. For example, over an image of a M1A1 tank, silhouetted against a desert sunset, we see the text of Ephesians 6. 13 — 'Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand'. Another slide shows an American tank entering the gates of Baghdad beneath Isaiah 26. 2 — 'Open the gates that the righteous nation may enter, the nation that keeps faith'.²⁵ The messages here seem quite clear. God's hand shelters the Americans, who are the new Israel, the righteous nation, the 'nation that keeps faith', the new chosen people.

In May 2009, Jeff Sharlet published 'Jesus killed Mohammed: The Crusade for a Christian Military' in *Harper's*. The investigation discussed the 'takeover' of the military chaplaincy by Pentecostal evangelicals, which began in the 1980s, and the implications of this new breed of chaplains' rise through the ranks. Specifically, Sharlet points to the implicit zero-sum religious struggle that frames the world-view of this type of Christianity. Sharlet offers some instances of U.S. soldiers spray-painting crosses in Iraqi mosques, soldiers 'exorcising' Afghans, and senior Pentagon officials starring in a promotional film for the 'Christian Embassy' (a Washington, DC-based Christian fundamentalist ministry), in which the generals state their goal of helping Jesus 'raise up a godly army' in the form of the American military.²⁶ It is, of course, unclear what was meant by 'godly army', whether the American military is to become more godly or if the American military is to become God's army.²⁷

Certainly, the language of Christian election in the contemporary US, even when attached to the military, may seem non-violent. The care packages and internal ministry, for example, primarily face inward and are not aggressively directed towards non-Christians. Yet, the cycle of sacred history encountered by a chosen people begins with internal purification that leads inevitably to external conquest. The papal bull *Audita tremendi*, issued by Pope Gregory VIII in 1187

²⁵ Draper, 'And He Shall Be Judged'.

²⁶ Sharlet, 'Jesus Killed Mohammed: The Crusade for a Christian Military'.

²⁷ The conception of the United States' military as a 'Christian army' is not a particularly new phenomenon. For instance, during the American Civil War, the rhetoric in both Northern and Southern presses lauded their soldiers as godly armies and the populations of their regions as the new chosen people. This rhetoric was assimilated into a new, collective national identity of the United States as a 'Christian nation' after the war's end in 1865. See Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*; Burton, *The Age of Lincoln; Apocalypse and Millennium in the American Civil War Era*, ed. by Wright and Dresser. See also Collins, *Homeland Mythology*.

after the loss of Jerusalem to Saladin, explicitly blamed the Christians' sins for their defeat. Gregory wrote:

For this reason, everyone must understand and act accordingly, so that by atoning for our sins [...] we may first alter in our lives the evil that we do. Then we can deal with the savagery and malice of our enemies.

The text ended with the call for a new expedition, in this case answered by the three most powerful monarchs in Europe at the time.²⁸ Proselytizing too, with materials distributed by the ministries to American soldiers, can accompany the holy war. Francis of Assisi was a crusader, even if he preached directly to the Sultan al-Kamil while his colleagues conquered Damietta and pushed inland against the Ayyubids.²⁹ And, of course, there is simply violence itself. Gen. Boykin's remarks suggested that Muslims are an enemy to Christ and the American cause, which are here one and the same. Roland's famous exhortation to his army in the famous twelfth-century Oxford poem — 'Pagans are wrong, Christians are right!'³⁰ — can here be elided to the present with little violence to its original meaning. All of the cases here suggest a zero-sum scenario — Christianity (in the guise of the United States) against Islam.

The Department of Defense evoked similar sentiments when they overlaid the verses from Ephesians, and especially that from Isaiah, on images of American troops. This was not, of course, the first time those specific verses had been used to frame a conflict in the Middle East. Bernard of Clairvaux, in his mid-twelfth century letter praising the foundation of the Knights Templar, also transmuted Ephesians and Paul's spiritual armoury into one intended to combat evil in this world (the threat of Islam). In another letter, Bernard invoked Isaiah 26. 2 specifically to look forward to a day when the Holy Land would be cleansed of Islam and the righteous nation would reclaim it.³¹ Perhaps this is why American rifle scopes in Iraq and Afghanistan were inscribed with specially-chosen biblical references intended to literally put the power of Jesus in U.S. soldiers' hands.³²

²⁸ Pope Gregory VIII, *Audita tremendi*, ed. by Bird, Peters, and Powell, p. 7. The idea of sin leading to failure was a key component of expeditions to Jerusalem since the outset. See Siberry, *Criticism of Crusading*, pp. 72–95.

²⁹ Well-told in Tolan, *Saint Francis and the Sultan*.

³⁰ *La chanson de Roland*, ed. by Brault, I, line 1274.

³¹ Tyerman, *God's War*, pp. 250–51; Sommerfeldt, 'The Bernardine Reform and the Crusading Spirit', pp. 574–75.

³² Rhee, Bradley, and Ross, 'U.S. Military Weapons Inscribed with Secret "Jesus" Bible Codes'.

This practice is not at all unlike the frequent citations of Psalm 144. 1 and other Christian inscriptions on medieval swords.³³ And perhaps all of the above is also why Erik Prince and his company, Blackwater, may have specifically sought to recruit ex-soldiers who shared Prince's understanding of the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as Christian wars of extermination against Islam. Even as late as 2015, American ex-military were travelling to Iraq and Syria to join Christian militias and fight against a radical Islam that, in the words of one of the Westerners, lay 'at the root of many problems and had to be contained'.³⁴

The language of 'crusade' so pervades American discourse that its been normalized. We often do not think about religion as a cause to events, instead looking for 'real' meaning in politics or economics — safe, secular spaces.³⁵ On the morning of 16 April 2007, Seung-Hui Cho murdered thirty-two people and wounded seventeen others at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech). The August 2007 report on the event offered by the 'Virginia Tech Review Panel', dwelled on Cho's perceived mental instability as a cause for the shootings, complete with two appendices, both written by a former forensic behavioural scientist with the FBI.³⁶ The apparent penchant for violent imagery Cho displayed in his own writings has been much discussed but little attention has been paid to his religious background and analyses of his writings generally skirt around this issue.³⁷ Richard Engel of NBC News did note similarities

³³ See for example, Wagner and others, 'Medieval Christian Invocations on Sword Blades', pp. 11–52; and for the use of biblical verses as wards or charms see Hawk, 'Staffordshire Hoard Item Number 550, a Ward against Evil', pp. 1–3.

³⁴ The Economist, 'Erik Prince and the Last Crusade'; Scahill, *Blackwater*; and Coles, 'Westerners Join Iraqi Christian Militia to Fight Islamic State'.

³⁵ Most forcefully argued in Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*.

³⁶ Report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel, August 2007, pp. 31–62, Appendix M, and Appendix N. An addendum to this report was released in December 2009 but those changes do not substantially change the fundamental diagnosis of Cho's motivations discussed here. Addendum to the Report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel, November 2009. Journalists reached similar conclusions. For instance, Cho and Gardner, 'An Isolated Boy in a World of Strangers'; Mishra and Bombardieri, 'Closer Look Reveals Cho's Isolation'; and Rucker and Spinner, 'No Abnormalities Found in Cho's Brain'.

³⁷ The play 'Richard McBeef' can be found at <<http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/years/2007/0417071vtech2.html>> [accessed 25 May 2010]. On Cho's writings, see Potter and others, 'Killer's Note: "You Caused Me to Do This"'; Santora and Hauser, 'Anger of Killer Was on Exhibit in Writings'; and Horwitz, 'Paper by Cho Exhibits Disturbing Parallels to Shootings, Sources Say'; Macy, 'Q&A with Virginia Tech Panel Member Diane Strickland'; and Adams, 'Seung-Hui Cho: "There Was Something Evil Aiding Him..."'.

between the images in Cho's manifesto and the videos made by Islamist suicide bombers and a number of right-wing commentators vigorously tried to claim that Cho was a Muslim. He was not.³⁸ Some, including Rev. Dong Cheol Lee, minister of the One Mind Church in Woodbridge, Virginia and pastor to Seung-Hui Cho's mother for a time, suggested that Cho was inspired by the devil, perhaps possessed by demons. Indeed, Lee's sermons are peppered with references to Satan and how the devil's spiritual power over mankind can shape the events here on Earth.³⁹

Regardless of specific inspiration, one cannot deny that the text and images of Seung-Hui Cho's PDF manifesto drip with similar Christian imagery.⁴⁰ In one image from the PDF, Cho's hands are empty, his palms open, his eyes closed, and his head bowed — here, a living crucifix. The text accompanying this image reinforces this point, comparing Cho to Moses, who will lead 'the Weak, the Defenseless, and the Innocent Children of all ages' to freedom. 'Sinners, you Spillers of Blood,' will not stand in his way.⁴¹ The rest of the manifesto's text continues this theme. Cho says that he feels persecuted, and likens his perceived enemies to tyrants, terrorists, sinners, and 'descendants of Satan.'⁴² He likens himself to an anti-terrorist, a martyr, Ishmael, Moses, and Jesus,⁴³ who will 'take up his cross' to protect the 'weak' and 'defenseless' — his 'children.'⁴⁴ His actions

³⁸ See Engel, 'Cho's "Religious" Martyrdom Video'; and Kao, 'Of Tragedy and its Aftermath', pp. 177–93.

³⁹ See Davis, 'Virginia Tech Killer Cho Seung-Hui, Like Jesus Christ or Demon Possessed'; and Green, 'Did the Devil Make Him Do it?'. Sermons available online. They are almost all in Korean. My thanks to Virginia Tech graduate student Jong Min Lee for help in translating these.

⁴⁰ This is a twenty-three-page PDF, with forty-three images, and about 1800 words. A CD-ROM was also included in the package Cho mailed and contained video clips of him reading his manifesto aloud, with some other material. Not all of this video material has been released but what has can be found at <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18185859/>> [accessed 26 May 2010]. A summary can be found in Windrem, 'Va. Tech Killer's Strange "Manifesto"'.
⁴¹ Cho, 'Manifesto', p. 8 (hereafter 'Manifesto'). Two similar images on pp. 9, 12.

⁴² 'Tyrants': 'Manifesto', pp. 2, 3. 'Terrorists': 'Manifesto', pp. 9, 13, 20. 'Sinners': 'Manifesto', pp. 8, 9, 13, 16, 19. 'Satanic': 'Manifesto', pp. 4, 6, 9, 17, 20, 22. Sexual imagery is also strong throughout, with Cho almost constantly talking about being 'fucked' or 'raped'. For example, 'Manifesto', pp. 11, 13.

⁴³ 'Anti-terrorist': 'Manifesto', pp. 10, 11, 20, 22. 'Martyr': 'Manifesto', p. 17. 'Ishmael': 'Manifesto', pp. 15, 20, 22. 'Moses': 'Manifesto', p. 8. 'Jesus': 'Manifesto', pp. 8, 9, 18, 20. On the use of 'Ax Ishmael', see Horwitz, 'Va. Tech Shooter Seen as "Collector of Injustice"'; and Kao, 'Of Tragedy and its Aftermath'.

⁴⁴ 'Manifesto', pp. 8, 9, 12, 13, 15, 16, 20. Cf. Matthew 16. 24, Mark 8. 34, Luke 9. 23.

will bring about a new Easter, a revolution.⁴⁵ There is no space between good and evil here. Cho would protect the weak from the sinners/false Christians and descendants of Satan. He will sacrifice himself like Jesus, leading his people like Moses, violently fighting back against sin and the Devil as a ‘crusader of anti-terrorism.’⁴⁶

It should probably not surprise us that ‘crusader’ appears here. As a ‘crusader of anti-terrorism’, Cho thought he struggled concomitantly against injustice and against the enemies of Christ. He was on the front lines of a great battle between good and evil, one which needed to be fought both physically (with violence) and intellectually (in his various writings).⁴⁷ Cho’s alienation, paranoia, and mental illness mixed with American culture’s obsession with violence and guns helped make him what he’d become. But the potion needed one more reagent. His understanding of, and participation in, a Christian rhetoric of holy violence completed the mixture. God and the devil were at work in the world and it was his duty to protect his fellows, to charge off against the enemies of Christ.⁴⁸ It was his crusade.

When President George W. Bush used the word ‘crusade’ in the wake of 9/11, he likely meant to evoke moral righteousness in the face of a challenge, or perhaps a struggle for liberty and equality. But when President Obama used the word in February 2015, he meant something quite different. Both were correct. ‘Crusade’ is a word that was invented in modernity to describe a medieval phenomenon. Victorians looked back on the Middle Ages and saw a great manichean struggle between Christianity and Islam, between West and East that continued into their own colonial, imperial day. But they simultaneously transmuted it, via alchemical magic, into a more generalized term denoting ‘good’ vs. ‘evil’.

‘Crusade’ even in its most apparently benign usage divides the world into black and white. It implies that the outcome of that struggle has an almost cosmic significance and so cares little for means and everything for ends. The word haunts and is haunted by its previous incarnations, by its family tree that

⁴⁵ ‘Manifesto’, pp. 12, 21.

⁴⁶ ‘Manifesto’, p. 20.

⁴⁷ On Cho’s poem, see Gangloff and Adams, ‘Cho Poem Was Entry in 2006 Virginia Tech Event’. On the letter and class exercise, see Cho, ‘Cho’s Writings’, pp. 10–11, 125–26, respectively.

⁴⁸ Cf. Riley-Smith, ‘Crusading as an Act of Love’, pp. 177–92. See also my preliminary thoughts Gabriele, ‘Cho’s World Was Rooted in a Christian Tradition’.

reaches back through the twentieth century, through the colonialists of the late nineteenth century, through Trent and the Spanish conquest of the Americas, but also through Luther and Calvin, and into the eleventh century. In other words, and no matter how noble our intentions, 'crusade' cannot, can never, be separated from the massacre of Muslims and Jews at Jerusalem in 1099, the beheadings of the captured Christians after the Battle of Hattin in 1187 and of captured Muslims outside Acre in 1191, the attacks on the Jews that accompanied the first three medieval crusades, and the slaughter of the Christian inhabitants of Acre in 1291. But 'crusade' also cannot be disentangled from Kaiser Wilhelm II's visit to Jerusalem, Henri Gouraud's comments upon setting up the French colonial administration in Syria, or the reaction in England to Gen. Allenby's capture of Jerusalem in 1917.⁴⁹

That means that there are consequences — intended and unintended — for the speakers and audiences of that rhetoric, whether coming from a general in the U.S. military or an undergraduate at a university in Virginia. It also means that the word, even as it illustrates this struggle, it effaces the nuance, the grey, in both our modern world and the medieval one it purports to represent. Just as 'crusade' includes all those incidents of violence and colonial subjection I mentioned above, it omits the messiness of everyday life in the spaces in which Muslims and Christians lived side-by-side in the medieval world — tensions, violence, and coexistence captured by Ibn Jubayr, Usama ibn Munqidh, and the Templar of Tyre, among many others.⁵⁰

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice and the Gnat have a conversation about bugs:

'What's the use of them having names', the Gnat said, 'if they won't answer to them?' 'No use to *them*', said Alice, 'but it's useful to the people that name them, I suppose. If not, why do things have names at all?'⁵¹

So, is 'crusade' useful to us, the namers? I'm beginning to think that it isn't. It has become a word that carries its baggage invisibly, a multivalent symbol that obscures rather than clarifies, that stands as a cipher for (almost) everything except an actual medieval phenomenon. Perhaps it is time to stop using 'crusade'

⁴⁹ See respectively Riley-Smith, 'Islam and the Crusades', pp. 151–52; Grousset, *Histoire des croisades*, III, 763; and Bar-Yosef, 'The Last Crusade?', pp. 87–109.

⁵⁰ Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, trans. by Broadhurst; ibn Munqidh, *The Book of Contemplation*, trans. by Cobb; and *The 'Templar of Tyre'*, trans. by Crawford.

⁵¹ Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, p. 181.

altogether — or, better, ‘archive’ the word. Remember its origins, what it has come to mean, and only deploy it sparingly.⁵² Scholars can then focus on the complex, changing relationship between religion and violence across the centuries, free from the baggage the word carries with it, free from the circular logic of arguing the ‘real’ meaning of a symbol.⁵³

⁵² This is similar to what Elizabeth Brown tried to do with ‘feudalism’ and Marcus Bull has recently suggested for ‘the Middle Ages’. See Brown, ‘The Tyranny of a Construct’, pp. 1063–88; and Bull, *Thinking Medieval*, pp. 42–62. My thanks to Ananda Abeysekara for the suggestion.

⁵³ For a similar debate, see Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*.

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