

THE CRUSADES FROM THE VIEW OF AN ARAB CHRISTIAN BELONGING TO THE ORTHODOX FAITH

BACKGROUND OF THE TERM

When the US President George W. Bush in his speech on September 16th 2001 said about terrorism: „This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while”, he caused a big irritation in the Orient. Particularly the Muslims felt attacked by his speech because they thought a crusade will be launched against them – similar to the Middle Ages. What Bush meant politically, I do not know. But from a linguistic point of view, he did not mean this, because the meaning of this term has changed in the course of history. In modern English this term does not necessarily mean a religious war, rather it is usually used in a positive sense as a call for action to do something good. For example: „A crusade to feed the hungry”. But the people who have suffered from the Crusades, have the impression that such a term is something evil or means a war against them personally. And when I speak about these people, I do not only mean the Muslims but also the other inhabitants of the Middle East at that time, such as the Christians and Jews. For at that time all the people in the Middle East have suffered. If Muslims claim, accordingly, that they were the “only” victims of the Crusades, this would be a great distortion of history.

If we study history accurately, we actually can only conclude that the Christians themselves, both in the West and in the East, were the biggest losers in the so-called Christian Crusades. For Muslims to raise the issue of Crusades in recent times more often and remind the Christians of it is due to, in my opinion, their present political situation. This, however, is a result of the Muslim-Ottoman narrow mindedness and has nothing to do with the wars waged in the Middle Ages. At that time the Muslims themselves did not understand the wars as Crusades. The simple proof for this is the fact that in Arabic language this terminology is only about one century old. In (modern) Arabic it is called: „al Hurub al-Salibia”, where (the word) „cross” is used as an adjective and hence „crossly wars” would be a suitable translation.

But in old Arabic manuscripts this term cannot be found at all. At that time it was called “the French wars” and not “the crossly wars” (Crusades). This old designation actually describes more accurately the situation of that time rather than the new one, because it was the Franks who mainly participated in these wars. Even in the West the term “Crusade” started occurring more frequently only from the 13th century and onward. Before that, the wars were

described as armed pilgrimages. And even if religious issues were behind the Crusades, we must never say that this was the only reason. The following are some preliminary remarks in order to understand the background of the Crusades better. In order to understand the Crusades, it is necessary to look into Chivalry (knighthood). Here lies an important aspect for understanding the crusade movement.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE CRUSADES

The „Knight” is a typical European phenomenon of the Middle Ages. He was a fully equipped fighter on horseback. And what was the status of knighthood? The status was simple honesty. In the 9th and 10th century the knights devoted themselves mainly to noble feuds within their own countries, from which population and church had to suffer mainly. Parts of the church, God’s peace movement, tried to restrict the feudal system by assigning Christian values and duties to the knights, for example, to fight the pagans and heretics. So they tried to place these fighters in the service of the church. In the 11th century, for example, French knights participated in recapturing Spain, by fighting against the Muslim heathens of Córdoba.

We often hear from the Council of Clermont in 1095. On 27th November 1095, Pope Urban II gave a speech at the Council of Clermont in which he lamented the devastation of the holy places by the Seljuk Turks and called the European chivalry to help their Christian brothers in the Orient. The effect of the speech was a surprise to all. The people were beside themselves with excitement and shouted: “God

wills it!” A Crusade in its true sense is a war which is issued by the Pope, which requires a vow, granting indulgence and worldly privileges and which - and this seems to be essential - is aimed at obtaining or maintaining a specific geographically clearly defined objective: the Christian rule over the grave of the Lord in Jerusalem.

What, however, was the pre-history? In 1071 the Seljuks entered Palestine and conquered Jerusalem, then a part of the Byzantine Empire. There they founded the Sultanate of Iconium. The Seljuks were a Muslim dynasty of the Turkish tribes of Central Asia. The Byzantine Emperor Alexis I. Comnenus asked the Pope and the Occident for help since he himself was not able to raise enough troops for the fight against the Seljuks. The appeal of Pope Urban II of Clermont had this call as background. The call to the Church for help by the Pope was multiplied throughout all of Europe. The idea to liberate Jerusalem from the Gentiles simply electrified the people. This movement seized Europe for about 300 years and covered all social classes.

But where did the ideology of a „Just War” or a “Crusade” originate from? Already the Church father Augustine spoke of the “Just War”. He meant that it was right to resort to arms when it comes to defending or recovering stolen goods. But what has this to do with Jerusalem? Throughout the entire Middle Ages, people in Europe considered Jerusalem as Christian property. In this sense, the Muslim Seljuks robbed the Christian Jerusalem. The Christian church had always maintained Augustine’s view on the “Just War”. As robbers of European Church property, the Normans, the Saracens

and the Hungarians were always considered as “unbelievers”. So the fight against Gentiles was associated with the term “Just War” from which soon the concept of “Holy War” emerged. This was to be a religious war.

By the way, there were purely religious Christian Wars during the 7th century with the famous Byzantine Emperor Heraclius. He led a big war against the Persians because of the Holy Cross which the Persians took away in 614 when they conquered Jerusalem. If one reads the speeches of the Emperor which he gave in order to encourage his army, then the difference between this (religious) war and the Crusades can be seen. In those days it was purely religious. The church promised an indulgence as a reward for the participation in a crusade. Many believers thought, however, that they would also receive the remission of sins in the afterlife if they would liberate Jerusalem as Crusaders. The church intentionally did not give a promise, leaving people in their wrong belief of indulgence from sins for their life after death.

With this ideology and this reward in mind, the church succeeded at that time --and I clearly mean Rome--, to give to the knights a new field of activity. Now they were able to test their courage and to reap rich spiritual and material reward. For Urban II promised the Crusaders that they could keep the conquered lands for themselves. But we must never forget the economic background aspects.

The main reason for the knights to take up the Cross was mainly of economic and social nature. In northern France, for example, only the eldest

son would inherit the entire inheritance. The others would be left empty-handed. During the Crusades the younger sons could acquire their own economic independence. In southern France and in parts of Germany land was managed collectively. All those present had to subordinate themselves to the head of the family without ever getting their own field. Also in this instance the Crusade offered a solution: to go out into the world, experience adventure, become rich and do much good for one's own salvation. These were prospects which many people could not resist.

Conclusion: The motivation for the Crusades was both of religious and – mostly – economic nature. What was the situation in the Orient before the first Crusade?

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN CONSTANTINOPLE AND ANTIOCH

What happened during the Crusades? Using the example of Antioch, I will try to show how the true behaviour of the Crusaders was against other Christians. In the 7th century, to be exact in 638, the Byzantines had already lost Antioch to the Muslim Arabs, both the city and the region. For decades, the Christians remained under Muslim rule until the Byzantines succeeded to reconquer Antioch and bring it under their control – from 996 to 1084. As already mentioned, the Seljuks succeeded in defeating the Abbasids in 1055. In order to demonstrate to all Muslims how strong the Seljuk tribes are, they started fighting the Byzantines after Arab Muslims had ceased to wage war against the Eastern Roman Empire for many years. The strong and

combative Seljuks achieved important victories very quickly. And thus, strategic parts of the Byzantine Empire came under their control, such as Armenia, Izmir, Ikonian and finally Jerusalem.

Regarding the standards in relation to dealing with „Ahal al-Thuma“, people of the head tax (the Wards – editor’s note), which was set by the Arab caliphs, the Seljuks did not observe them, but rather started to expel the Christians brutally. The Christians under the new rulers suffered much, especially in Jerusalem. In 1084 the Seljuks conquered the city of Antioch. At that time Antioch was a strong ducate (administrative district). After this victory the Muslims began to settle in Antioch but they remained a minority there. So the first Crusade was directed against Antioch. Why? Because when the Byzantines recaptured Antioch (in 996), it was like a rebirth for Antioch. So the Byzantines made it the most important military ducate of the Byzantine Empire. Antioch experienced a boom in every aspect: economic, architectural and even theological.

From an ecclesiastical perspective, Constantinople attempted to exercise its influence upon Antioch. And although the majority of the Antiochenes was Arabic speaking, Byzantine patriarchs who were appointed by the Emperors were placed on the throne of Antioch. Even concerning the liturgy Constantinople imposed itself. This way the old Antiochene Eucharist was replaced by the new Chrysostomos-liturgy which is celebrated until today. Such an offense was new on the part of Constantinople. The Byzantines had never tried to enforce their language or liturgical forms before, as Rome used to do it. Church unity meant for

the Byzantines the unity through faith and not through form. Here, one is reminded of the invention of the Cyrillic alphabet which was invented by two Byzantines in order to translate the Bible into the Slavic language. Greek did not have the same value for the Byzantines as Latin did for Rome. This new behavior of Constantinople can only be understood if one takes into account the whole ecclesiastical situation between East and West, between Rome and Constantinople. Both capitals of the Roman Empire, the old and the new, could never tolerate each other during the course of history. Rome could not realize that it was no longer the only Rome, the true capital of the Roman Empire. Also ecclesiastically the problems between the two churches multiplied and in the second half of the first Christian millennium there were already several divisions between the two patriarchates.

Shortly before the turn of the millennium the atmosphere between the two churches worsened. Therefore, one can reasonably understand the behavior of Constantinople towards Antioch. In the capital they wanted to strengthen the position of the church towards Rome. They thought of implementing the methods used in Rome on the other churches. The Antiochenes themselves did not really have trouble with this new situation. They were rather happy to be under Christian rule again. Moreover, Greek never was a foreign language to them and Antioch was from its inception a multicultural metropolis. Also Greek was part of the Antiochene patriarchate. Therefore, one would not be surprised to read that most of the theological works which appeared between 969 and 1084 in Antioch, were in Arabic

and not in Greek. This was the most productive literary period in the history of Antioch. So there was a connection with Constantinople, but the Antiochenes have never understood this connection as subordination.

This can be clearly seen in the attitude of the Antiochene Patriarch Peter III towards the so-called Schism (division) between the West and the East in 1054. The Arab Peter, who grew up in Constantinople and even served at the court of the Emperor, took a peaceful and conciliatory attitude towards the division, entirely different from the position of the Patriarch Michael I of Constantinople. So Antioch flourished at that time in all aspects, therefore it was natural that the eyes of the Seljuks were focused on that city. And they succeeded, as I said, in defeating the Byzantines at Antioch in 1084. This victory changed the face of the whole region rapidly and Byzantium knew that the fall of the Antiochene Duchy meant a real threat for its existence.

THE CRUSADERS AND ANTIOCH

And here we come to the main cause of the Crusades. Byzantium was in real danger and therefore Emperor Alexis I Komnenos wrote to the kings of the West and to the Pope, promising them rewards if they helped Byzantium. However, what Byzantium wanted was different from what the West was thinking of. Driven by religious emotions and focused on economic profits, the Crusaders came to the East. If we compare religions here, one wonders whether there are points of contact between the religious feeling of the Crusaders and Muslim Jihad. A Jihadist,

who wants to die in combat for God, thinks of one thing: the rewards that he will receive in paradise. Although he knows that he is participating in a religious act and everything is justified for him, however, what ultimately interests him is the honey and milk flowing and the women in the Muslim paradise. A Crusader, in my view, did not think much differently. With God and church by his side, he came to the Orient to wage a "Just War" with the aim of making profits. This concept of a "Just War", which existed already since the 5th century, does not differ essentially from the Muslim Jihad. Although there is a difference between the Christian and the Muslim paradise, nevertheless the worldly wealth, which for the Crusaders was inseparable from the heavenly kingdom, was already in mind. So the Crusaders, in contrast to Muslim Jihadists, did not come to the Orient to die, but rather to win (the war) and make profits.

This became clear when the Crusaders arrived in Constantinople at the beginning of the first Crusade. Their attitude towards the Byzantine Emperor Alexis Komnenos proves that on the one hand they wanted to wage war against the Muslims, however, the burning question for them was: But at what cost? In other words, the Crusaders asked the Emperor: "What will we get if we win?" There are many documents reporting the negotiations between the Crusaders and the Emperor. The Crusaders probably suffered a cultural shock when they saw Constantinople. This wonderful city was a masterpiece of architecture. If you only consider that the Hagia Sophia, the famous church – today Istanbul, Turkey – was already built in the first half of the 6th century whereas the first Gothic church, the

Elisabeth Church in Marburg/Lahn in Germany, was built only in the 13th century, then one can imagine how the Crusaders must have felt. Also, they knew that not only Constantinople was rich and beautiful but also the other Eastern cities, such as Jerusalem and Antioch.

Antioch was the first target of the Crusaders and so the city and then later the region of Antioch were delivered from the Seljuks in 1098. The Crusaders wanted to take the road to Jerusalem which simply runs through Antioch. After the liberation of the city the Crusaders acted aggressively against the Muslims. The Christians, however, mostly Orthodox, were highly pleased to be able to live under Christian rule again. This was not only about religious freedom but also about taxes and money. At that time the Christians had to pay poll taxes. So it is not only about religious freedom but also about poll taxes which non-Muslims had to pay to the Muslim state. But religious freedom was of course extremely important for them, especially because their Bishops and Patriarchs were often sent into exile by the Muslims. Initially, the Crusaders behaved quite peaceful towards other Christians. One should not forget that there were already some divisions between Rome and Constantinople in 1084. Nevertheless, the Crusaders were fair towards the Christians, but only at the beginning. The behaviour of the Crusaders towards the Christians in Antioch will later become the pattern of behaviour in all Christian patriarchates. What happened there? After the death of the Antiochene Patriarch John VII, the Latins respectively the Crusaders chose the new Patriarch.

Latins, by the way, is the Christian-Orthodox-Arab name (for the Roman Catholic Crusaders). But this terminology is not only used in Arabic (Islam). The Crusaders have always been called Latins (by us) because even we ourselves understand that these wars were not necessarily „Hurub al-Salibia“ (against the Muslims only), but also a war against us (the Byzantines), who also use the cross as their symbol. Therefore, it was the war of the Latins (against the entire East), so to speak.

After the death of the Antiochene Patriarch John VII, the Latins, respectively the Crusaders, elected a Latin, respectively Roman Catholic Patriarch called Adimar. He became the first Latin patriarch on the Antiochene chair and the Crusaders refused to recognize the newly elected Antiochian Patriarch John VIII. In addition, the Latin patriarch wanted to enforce the Latin rite in all the churches. And that was different from what Byzantium had done before. Byzantium said it wanted to introduce the Chrysostom liturgy, or the liturgy of the capital, i.e. Constantinople, and it took about 200-250 years until all Orthodox churches in Antioch adopted this liturgy. But the Catholic cardinal or patriarch at that time did not tolerate for any other liturgy to be celebrated. This tipped the emotions among the Christians. The Antiochenes found themselves in a new situation. The new ruler was indeed a Christian but not an Orthodox. There was no way out (of this situation). Also, they could not expect help from the Orthodox Emperor because they knew, firstly, that he depended on the support of the Crusaders and, secondly, that the Crusaders had divided the Antiochian region among themselves and did not hand it over to the Emperor, as they

promised him initially. The only thing the Antiochenes could do now was to hide behind their faith.

THE RIFT BETWEEN ROME AND BYZANTIUM

After the death of Adimar the Crusaders sent a letter to the Pope, requesting him to come to Antioch and take the first throne of Peter. They wrote:

„We have defeated the Turks and pagans - here they clearly meant the Muslims. But the heretics of Greeks or Byzantines, Armenians, Syrians and Jacobites we could not defeat. Beloved Father, Vicar of Peter, we ask you to come here and sit on the Antiochene throne in order to make the right decisions, so that we can root out the heretics, no matter where they are - clearly, here they meant the Christians”.

Indeed, the Crusaders built a church in the city of Antioch which can still be visited today. Interestingly enough, one can read there on a poster the translation of a Latin text which reads: “Here was the first throne of Peter” - i.e. not in Rome!

What happened in Antioch, also took place in other liberated regions, in Jerusalem and later on in Alexandria. Orthodox bishops were replaced by Latin ones, and in each patriarchate there were two patriarchs, who existed at that time, one Orthodox and the other Latin. And this again was a new situation for the church in the Orient. The Christians in the Orient were simply confused, especially after the great massacre which the Crusaders carried out in Jerusalem. After conquering

the city they slaughtered not only the Muslims but also Jews and Christians. After this incident the Christians in the Orient understood that the Crusaders came, not to help them or to free them, but to defeat them.

One should imagine how they must have felt. First they were expelled by the Muslims and then by the Christians. Since that time Christians in the Orient knew that they share the same fate as the other people in the region. That is why the Orthodox are not happy to remember the Crusades, particularly the fourth one. Because the Orthodox will never forget what happened in 1204. The Crusaders were at the gates of Constantinople and wanted to move towards Egypt. Suddenly they attacked Constantinople and plundered the city, robbing the palaces and the treasures and destroyed Orthodox churches in a way which even the non-Christians have never done. After this incident the Orthodox and Catholics did not tolerate each other any more. The schism of 1054, which was only on paper, now revealed its impact. From this time on, we can speak historically of a real separation between Rome and Constantinople. Often we read in history books that the schism between East and West happened in 1054, but this is not true. In fact, this is not true. De facto this happened after this year, 1204. Therefore, when Pope John Paul II visited Greece in 2004, he apologized for the actions of the Latins of 1204 - after 800 years.

To date, this case runs deep in the memory of the Greek Orthodox, and when one visits Mount Athos - I do not know whether Mount Athos is known to you? It is a mountain in Greece where there are only monasteries

and monks and the monks there see themselves as guardians of orthodoxy - so when you visit Athos and talk to a monk there, you will understand how the Orthodox feel when it comes to this event. They just cannot forget it. All this led to the weakening of the Byzantine Empire. We recall that the Crusaders came in order to help the Byzantine emperor, among other things. Instead, he became weaker and weaker. Also the small Christian kingdoms that the Crusaders established for themselves became weak and fell back into the hands of the Muslims. After 1204 there were no major crusades any more, and when the Ottoman Turks stood at the gates of Constantinople in 1453, the Byzantine Emperor was about to ask for help from the West. But he then heard from his people: "Rather the turban of the Turk than the tiara of the Pope!" This sentence is known to most Orthodox in the Orient even to most Orthodox in the world.

We no longer trusted the Western Christians. I mean back then, not now. This shows how deep the rift between Rome and Byzantium was and is until today. And by the way, in case you did not know this: at that time two synods were convened. When the Turks, the Ottomans, stood before Constantinople, there were negotiations between Byzantium and Rome. Then two synods took place, the last one in Ferrara-Florence in 1438 and 1439, and it was about the unity between Byzantium respectively the Orthodox and the Catholics. The Emperor wanted this in order to get help. The first thing Rome demanded at that time was that all Orthodox should be subject to the Pope. However, the Orthodox refused this. And therefore it is said "Rather

the turban of the Turk than the tiara of the Pope".

CONCLUSIONS

The Crusades are a dark page in the history of Christianity. Instead of seeing the cross as a symbol of love and self-sacrifice, it was used to kill. War and church can never be united with each other. The results of the Crusades can be felt until today, however, in the East differently from the West. The fall of Constantinople was not the most important result of the Crusades. Empires rise and disappear, this is not so very important, especially for Christians. More important is that one has killed in the name of God. The reception of the Crusades in the East is felt differently than in the West. For us Oriental Christians co-existence with the Muslims has been destroyed. Many Muslims want to see themselves as the only victims of the Crusades and simply forget the others, the Christians and the Jews. There is no more trust between Christians and Muslims. And for the Muslims in the Orient, the Christians are a burden of the Crusades, or, as they call it literally: The Christians in the Orient are the extended hand of the Europeans or the Christians. This is a catastrophe for us. It means, Christians in the Orient are there only because the Crusaders had brought them along with them. They do not want to recognise that Christians existed before the Muslims in the Orient.

By the way, and this is my own observation and opinion - we can discuss this issue: The worst readers of history are Muslims. They do not like to read history. The worst thing for the

Christians in the Orient is still to be persecuted whenever the political situation shifts between the West and the Muslim world. The current situation in Iraq shows clearly how Christians are persecuted. And if you listen to the speeches of the fundamentalists, the term "Crusader" always occurs. This was the case, by the way, after the speech of (President) Bush. This was a big mistake by his advisors. But at least the fundamentalists use – if you know Arabic and can read the speeches by Ayman al-Zawaheri (strategist of the al-Qaeda-movement) - then it always says: "Crusaders, Crusaders". The fundamentalists do this in order to manipulate the Muslims and to give them the right to kill Christians.

The situation in Lebanon today is not much different. The Christians are not regarded as native inhabitants of the country. And I can say here that there was a huge problem a few years ago between our church – particularly between our patriarch, whose headquarters is in Damascus – and the Syrian government. At some point in a sermon, he said: "You Muslims are our guests. We were here before you." Which is true. This created unrest in Syria. Though we were not persecuted but the Muslims did not like it at all. And that's only history, true history. The West has indeed achieved important economic goals through the Crusades; even scientifically the Europeans came into contact with the important Arab philosophy and science of that time. However, they pay a high price today. In every political event the Muslims remind the Western citizens of their atrocities of the past. This bad conscience will always haunt us Christians. What have we done with the cross of Christ? More important is

the question: Will the Christians ever learn from history and lead a peaceful crusade instead of a military crusade? I think this is the new and great challenge for all Christians.

Thank you.

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***Blessed
are the
peacemakers,
for they
shall be called
children of God.***

(Matth. 5:9)