

Crusades more complex than the Hollywood version

BY RICHARD N. OSTLING
The Associated Press

“Kingdom of Heaven,” the current movie about the medieval Crusades, concludes with the Muslim commander Saladin nobly promising Christian defenders safe passage home to Europe in 1187 when they agreed to surrender Jerusalem.

Well, that’s half true. Saladin did let many Christians escape — but only if they paid ransom. Muslim historians say 15,000 Christians who lacked money were forced into slavery or sexual concubinage.

Historians make various complaints about this politically correct movie, which irritates some Christians and pleases most Muslims due to favorable depictions of their forebears.

The Crusaders had plenty they should have apologized for, but so did Muslims. Michel Coren of Canada’s National Post commented that modern-day “Christian leaders have demonstrated genuine contrition for past wrongs, including aspects of the Crusades. The same spirit and depth has generally not been heard from their Islamic counterparts.”

The reason Christians squirm was summarized by historian Paul Johnson: The spectacle of Crusaders “exercising mass violence against the infidel hardly squared with Scripture.”

Unlike Muslims, the early

Christians were virtual pacifists. But they limited Jesus’ biblical love-your-enemies teaching to personal interactions after they assumed responsibility for government. The church condoned use of force to protect society or wage defensive “just war,” including military action against Muslim invaders.

But was it moral to attack Muslims and regain the formerly Christian Holy Land? In 1095, Pope Urban II said yes and summoned the First Crusade.

The movie gives a mere glimpse of a complex struggle that began when Muslims seized Jerusalem from Christians in 638 and lasted until 1683, when Muslim troops for a second time threatened Vienna while invading Europe’s Christian heartland.

After Muslims had conquered the formerly Christian Mideast they took Spain by 716 and Sicily by 902, which provided a base for raids on the pope’s own Italy. In 846, Muslim brigands attacked Rome, desecrated St. Peter’s basilica and killed many Christians.

Muslim rulers generally treated their Christian subjects more kindly than Christian rulers treated Muslims and Jews, but imposed second-class status.

Jerusalem’s Muslim governor, irritated when the church refused to pay bigger bribes,

instigated anti-Christian riots in 966 that damaged Christendom’s holiest shrine, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. During a worse wave of persecution in 1009, the caliph ordered destruction of all the city’s Christian and Jewish sanctuaries, including Holy Sepulcher. So there were real problems, but Urban’s Crusade call greatly exaggerated them.

Other factors underlying the Crusades: Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem became very popular, pilgrims suffered attacks, the church decided pilgrims could bear arms, and

PLEASE SEE PAGE 12



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Balian played by Orlando Bloom, leads his knights into battle in this scene from the 2005 film “Kingdom of Heaven.”

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