

Assignment One - Morality and Violence

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Q. 'Gods Wills it': to what extent does this represent motives for going on crusade?

In this essay I will explore the role of religious belief in the early medieval period and will limit my discussion by considering the extent that belief played in the motives for going on the first crusade of 1096. I will start by looking at Pope Urban's speech at Clermont and the origin of the phrase "God Wills it" and go on to consider the role and importance of religious belief in the medieval period. I will examine the importance of pilgrimage and the Christian doctrine of Just War. I will then consider the origins of the word "crusade" and briefly examine the historiography of the crusades and its changing perspectives and interpretations and different schools of thought between traditional and pluralist perspectives: with particular focus on Runciman and Tyerman, to seek to answer the question: what extent did religious belief play in motivating individuals going on the first crusade.

It was at the end of the Council of Clermont that Pope Urban 11 proclaimed the First Crusade on the 27th November 1095 to a crowd outside the cathedral in an event that had been carefully stage managed (Tyerman 2004 p1). It had been announced that he would hold a public session and was going to make a "great announcement" (Runciman 1951 p107). This was following a request for military aid from the Byzantine Emperor Alexios 1 against the Seljuk Turks. (Runciman 1951 p107).

In his speech Pope Urban set out two goals. Firstly the need to protect the Christian borders in the East and emphasized Christian fraternity with Eastern Christians. Secondly he married the idea of warfare and pilgrimage in order to liberate Jerusalem, the most holy site in Christendom by referencing the sanctity of the city, the 'navel of the world, fountain of all Christian teaching in which Christ lived and suffered' (Ashbridge 2010 p36). Urban portrayed Muslims as subhuman, detailing the barbaric abuse of Christians, slaughtering and capturing Christians, destroying churches, violation of women, constant persecution and 'laying waste to the kingdom of God'; (Ashbridge 2010 p37). Urban argued this would be a sacred venture and lead to 'the remission of all their sins' (Ashbridge 2010 p.38). Previously war was regarded as sinful but at times justified. Urban went beyond traditional boundaries of a Just War and rationalised a link between warfare and salvation (Ashbridge 2010 p38). The armed

pilgrimage to Jerusalem promised to be 'an experience imbued with overwhelming redemptive potency, functioning as a super penance, capable of scouring the spirit of any transgression' (Ashbridge 2010 p39).



Picture 1. Council of Clermont. en Wikipedia.org

In Robert the Monk's chronicle which was written after the event, reports that at the end of Pope Urban's speech those present all shouted "God wills it, God wills it". He states that this was seen by the Pope as a sign of divine inspiration: "I tell you that God has drawn this response from you to express the feeling which has inspired in your hearts" (Hamilton 2016 p88).

The response to Urban's speech was extraordinary. Although difficult to be precise; It has been estimated that up to 100,000 people responded to Urban's speech (Ashbridge 2010 p.42 and Tyerman 2015 p33). His speech resonated with all classes.

Genuine religious piety and belief was undoubtedly an important motivating factor to its success. The early christian church was strongly pacifist and was based on the teachings of Christ in the New Testament. The theory of just war emerged following the collapse of Rome in 410AD (Keene 1999). St Augustine of Hippo 354-430 in his book "City of God" argued that war could be lawful and justified if fought under certain strict conditions, although still sinful (Keene 1999 and Ashbridge 2010 p15). The theory of Just war continued to be developed especially by Thomas Aquinas but had its roots in the teachings in the Old Testament (Theron and Oliver 2017 p3). St Augustine wrote:



Figure 2. St Augustines Catholic Church (Minster) Ohio. en Wikipedia.org

"we do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace. Be peaceful, therefore, in warfare, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against, and bring them to the prosperity of peace" (St Augustine in St Aquinas).

The theory of just war continued to be refined by theologians and the church and by the millennium it was common for clergy to bless weapons and armour and warrior saints

were also celebrated (Ashbridge 2010 p15). Pope Gregory VII had previously reinterpreted Christian theology to include physical warfare and that the laity 'were soldiers of Christ' and had a duty to defend the Latin Church. He had taken theology to the "brink of holy war". (Ashbridge 2010 p17).

Expressing love via participation in acts of armed force was an element of thinking of senior churchmen. Urban used the phrase "out of love of God" when promising indulgence to those who joined the crusade and also participants expressed their love of god in the way they became soldiers of christ and joined out of love for him (Riley-Smith 1980 p177). The cult of warrior saints was also starting to emerge (MacGregor 2004).

However it was Urban at Clermont who developed and proclaimed a holy war which transcended the limits of just war. This represented:

" a spiritually meritorious, transcendent act of devotion and obedience to divine command, a religious duty, not (as with just war) a legal category mitigating an essential sinful activity...violence was itself a penitential act" (Tyerman 2015 p35).

Urban's idea was so novel that it was not until the 12 Century that the word Crusade was adopted. The chroniclers at the time refer to "iter" - journey or 'pergrinatio' meaning Pilgrimage. (Ashbridge p40).

Christianity of the Latin church was the almost universally accepted faith of Western Europe. In particular the 11th century was profoundly spiritual and Christian doctrine underpinned all aspects of a person's life from birth to death, sleeping, eating, marriage and health. People were able to see God's omnipotence everywhere in miraculous healings and celestial portents e.g. Halley's Comet 1066. It was a society that "understood the world to be God created and divinely ordered" (Tyerman 2015 p10). The fear of the soul being in peril and that every human would have to face a moment of judgement for their sins in a weighing of their Souls was powerfully influential. (Ashbridge 2010). Being pure would bring everlasting reward in heaven while being sinful would result in damnation and torment in hell. The ways to godly existence were strewn with dangers of transgression and sin. People were encouraged to confess their sins and would be offered suitable penance which would cancel out the taint of Sin (Ashbridge 2010 p38). The most common penance was prayer but included giving alms to the poor, making donations to monasteries and religious houses and performing a purgative devotional journey (a pilgrimage) (Ashbridge 2010 p12)

At the time of Urban's speech Pilgrimage had become an extremely important part of Christian life and been a central part of religious belief since the early days of the founding of the Christian church. Individuals often travelled long distances to visit saints shrines and the sites of famous Christian deeds. People undertook Pilgrimage for the good of their Souls, sometimes in order to seek divine intervention from illness and as a penance to atone for their sins. It was a central belief that God looked positively on pilgrims and that an individual who set out on a pilgrimage humbly and faithfully would improve their standing in the eyes of God (Jones 2017 p19).



Figure 3. Pilgrimage in the middle ages (Spartacus-educational.com)

Jerusalem was understood to be where the Heavenly would be made manifest and that the power of prayer would be magnified in the presence of the holy relics and holy sites (Jones 2017 p15). Jerusalem straddled temporal and spiritual space, a goal of pilgrimage, site of Christ's life and death and resurrection. It was both a military destination and a spiritual reward (Tyerman 2015 p31). Urban in his speech in proclaiming an armed pilgrimage, presented it as a Holy war; with Jerusalem as its goal. This resonated with peoples Christian faith and lived experience (Ashbridge 2010).

Although religious belief provided powerful motives for going on crusade it alone is not adequate to fully explain why (Tyerman 2006 p87).

The debate around motives has evolved around material and ideological motives; were the motives worldly or spiritually motivated (Tyerman 2006 p87). In the historiography of the crusade a range of motives have been proposed and include: genuine religious piety, remission of sins, apocalyptic ideas, looking for a better life, colonisation, ambition, feudal obligation, adventure and opportunism. The way in which the crusades have been seen and interpreted has continually evolved and is still evolving and the word crusade still has a rich political potency in modern political discourse. In the 19c the historiography reflected a view of clash of cultures and civilisation echoing in the ideas of colonialism and the rise of medievalism. This has developed in the 20c onwards in pluralist approaches.

Runciman stresses the grimness and insecurity of peasants. Land out of cultivation with dykes broken and less fields under cultivation. Limited protection of the church. Petty civil wars and organisation of the demesne breaking down. Men tied to the land by obligation. Increasing population. Echoing themes in Robert the Monk's chronicle. Recent floods and pestilence in 1094. Drought and famine in 1095 so that emigration seemed attractive. Apocalyptic teaching added to economic incentives. The church teaching that pilgrimage could expiate sin. People convinced the second coming was at hand and the Holy land must be recovered by Christ to come again. Promised a land flowing with milk and honey. The opportunity of younger sons of barons to carve out their own kingdoms. (Runciman 1951 p114/115).

Tyerman sees the debate around material and ideology as a false dichotomy as Urban's speech promised not just spiritual rewards but also material. Tyerman gives the example of Guibeert of Nogent recalling hardships of raising money to go on crusade and having "bought high - sold low" and emphasizes the cost of committing to crusade. Charters also emphasise the burden of sin and indicate that most wished to return and that terrestrial profits were primarily those of honour, prestige and relics. For Tyerman evidence for land hunger is not convincing as there was spare land available to cater for an expanding population and there was no special appeal for younger sons. Perhaps the opposite as whole families departed together motivated by things other than the material. The cultural aspiration was depicted in terms of honour, reputation and family pride and perceived as an honourable duty. It offered the professional and violent classes a new way of earning salvation in a Holy war. Tyerman also references the increased focus on sin and salvation: the supernatural was real and proximate; hell, heaven and purgatory were not abstractions but that ideology was not a sufficient explanation and questions the reductionism implied by the concept of the age of faith. For Tyerman it

was not due to famine or hallucinations but was part revivalism, part politics, part a search for release and personal renewal (Tyerman 2006 p89).

Ashbridge also states that “devotion inspired Europe to crusade” (Ashbridge 2010 p47) but also gives an example of Bohemond of Taranto who was driven by rapacious ambition and “took the cross with at least one eye upon personal advancement ... A Levantine lordship to call his own” (Ashbridge 2010 p. 45).

Riley- Smith in a paper reviewing the motives of the earliest crusaders who stayed on in the holy land found that most who went on the first crusade returned home. Although difficult to get a clear picture there were a few examples who had a clear desire of material gain but the majority of those first crusaders who stayed on did so out of “idealism or of dependence on the close emotional ties binding lord and vassal, patron and clients” (Riley- Smith 1983 p734). That those who came immediately afterwards did so not to settle but to fulfil “temporary pious duty”. (Riley- Smith 1983 p734).

In conclusion, there is a consensus that religious belief was a major motivating force in motivating people to take the cross due to the part that religious faith played in all aspects of people's lives and for all classes of people. Tyerman states we cannot know what the exact motivations for people were. Bull (2005) makes the point that the mindsets of those who were involved in the first crusade were fundamentally different from our own which is the challenge in trying to ascertain exact motivations. Religious faith and piety provided the overarching and main factor with other material factors interplaying with one another. It also seems clear that most planned to return and did return home. Motivational factors would vary between individuals. For some the opportunity for personal gain played a greater part. For others ties of vassalage may have been more important. I agree with Tyerman's view that Urban's speech connected because it linked with people's lived experience of the temporal and spiritual domain and “caught the imagination of a society, socially, psychologically, culturally and materially equipped to answer the call” Tyerman 2015 p89).

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