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Brian Catlos 'Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors'



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Brian Catlos uses narrative snapshots of key figures in era of Crusades, jihad.

By Michael Langan

News Book Reviewer

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Is anyone eager to understand ancient grudges – and some surprisingly neighborly accommodations - in the Middle East during the Age of Crusade and Jihad (c. 1050 to 1200)?

In fact, the answer is yes. Some scholars, such as Brian A. Catlos, see such insights into that “... era as one of enlightenment and convivencia, in which Christians, Muslims and Jews strove to construct a rational world of peace and harmony...”

Is this effort today merely an academic diversion? Can such an explanation help suffering people in this strife-torn region? There is a world sated with visions of bombings, beheadings, treachery, graft, friends-turned-enemies, and sand, always sand.

Where is T.E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, when we need him? Or, for that matter, the revered British diplomat and spy in early 20th century Iraq, Gertrude Bell, less well-known. She set the boundaries of modern Iraq after World War I.

Into the breach instead comes Catlos, professor of religious studies at the University of Colorado and a research associate at the University of California, Santa Cruz, with "Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors." Catlos, a scholar of the Middle Ages, is also the author of "The Muslims of Medieval Latin Christendom, c. 1050–1614."

His new book offers wonderful insight into this period. His argument is that politics in the past was driven by "self-interest, personality and ideology." He makes the argument that "notions of crusade and jihad did not cause wars but were justifications, noting that "violence of the past cannot be blamed primarily on religion."

"Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors" tells us that interfaith relations of an earlier time were not "dominated by diametric forces of religious extremism ... showing that we cannot blame religion for the violence of the past."

In fact, Catlos writes that "the worst tensions and violence tended to crop up among those of the same faith: Latin Christians crusaded against the Greek Orthodox, and Sunni Muslim rulers proclaimed jihad against Shi's rivals in that early period.

The book focuses on the Mediterranean region beginning about 1050. By this time our author says, the Mediterranean Sea and the lands surrounding it, "populous, diverse, and dynamic," were at the center of the Western world. It was the meeting point of Europe, Africa and Western Asia. It was the cradle of the Abrahamic religions and cultures, of Persian and Hellenistic philosophy and science, and of Roman institutions.

Against this backdrop, the present "intractable struggles between Christians, Muslims, and Jews" appear constant and depressing, problems without end.

This present perception of violence is an extension, according to Catlos, of the world view of Henri Pirenne, an early 20th century Belgian historian. Pirenne's view was that Islamic and Christian worlds were linked in a relationship that was "one of aggression and opposition."

Catlos uses what his publisher refers to as "fascinating narrative snapshots" to demonstrate that the age of the Crusade and jihad weren't as bad as we might think. He starts with the story of Isma'il ibn Naghrilla, a Jewish bureaucrat, poet and soldier who rose all the way to prime minister of Muslim Granada, and his son, Yusuf, "who nearly became king."

He gives us other "success" stories of the earlier era, such as that of Cid, the Castilian nobleman and military leader; Salah al-Din, known as Saladin, who became Sultan of Egypt and Syria; and of Bahram Pahlavuni, an Armenian Christian, who wielded power in an Islamic caliphate.

Today, in some countries of the Middle East, social, educational and political infrastructures have been partially or completely destroyed as a result of war. Large numbers of people are fleeing for their lives; many end up in refugee camps, existing under dire conditions.

Knowledge, understanding, charity and diplomacy don't seem to spark any magic solutions when brokering self-interests of tribes, caliphates and local warlords that are so far apart.

About this global breakdown, Strobe Talbott, president of the Brookings Institution, commented recently: "We have an overall contagion of diffusion ... of power from states to non-state forces, the rapid spread of technology and the rise of Islamic extremism ... All this make it much harder to advance the cause of regional and global governance."

It is, as Catlos writes, "the collaboration and integration of the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian peoples of the Mediterranean that laid the foundations for today's globalized world." This is the value of "Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors" for us today.

After retiring from the U. S. Treasury Department, Michael D. Langan served as a senior expert with the United Nations dealing with al Qaeda and Taliban issues after 9/11.

Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors: Faith, Power and Violence in the Age of Crusade and Jihad

Brian A. Catlos

Farrar, Straus Giroux

390 pages, \$28

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