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Hilaire Belloc, *The Crusades*.

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Hilaire Belloc was perhaps the foremost popular historian of the first half of the twentieth century. He was extremely prolific and wrote over a hundred books in his lifetime. They included not only books on history but also works on politics, economics, and military strategy. He wrote hundreds of magazine articles, was a member of parliament, and edited a newspaper. There is no equivalent to him among contemporary British writers.

Belloc’s basic theme in his works was that Christianity, especially the Catholic Church, was responsible for much of the advent of western civilization. It is this theme that prompted the re-release of this book written in 1936 by this publisher that promotes religious themes.

The work concentrates on the period between the Pope’s call for a Holy War in 1095 and the fall of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1187. His contention is that although major crusades occurred for nearly a century after this period, the object of the Crusades had ended with the fall of Jerusalem and the loss of the Holy Sepulcher.

The book’s chapters deal with the issues and causes for the first major crusade, the composition of the crusading armies, the initial conquests, the internal histories of the four Crusader states, and their eventual fall which culminated with the capture of Jerusalem.

Belloc’s major thesis is that the Crusades, after initial military successes, were doomed to fail due to the failure to conquer Damascus. In his opinion, Damascus was the key communications center between Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa and Muslims in Mesopotamia, Persia, and Central Asia. Failure to secure this key point meant that Islamic armies could converge on the Christian enclaves. This situation in conjunction with unreliable military reinforcements meant the enterprise was destined to fail.

The book has its strengths and weaknesses. The chief among the former is its prescient message for a book written in 1936-37 while the latter lies in its tone all too typical of the attitude toward non-westerners during this period.

Even though at this period Muslim states with the exception of Iran and Turkey were under the control of Europeans, Belloc felt that this was meaningless. In his view, Europeans especially western Europeans had lost the spiritual fabric as part of their communal existence. Therefore, supremacy based on money and guns was not permanent but ephemeral without the cohesion that Christian spirituality could give.
In contrast, Islam in spite of its subservient political situation had retained its spiritual soul and because of this constituted a peril to western civilization. When viewed through a contemporary lens of Europe with a declining population and an even greater declining church attendance and observance playing reluctant host to an ever growing Muslim population, these observations (written in 1936-1937) are quite prophetic.

On the negative side some of the comments about “Mongols,” “Turks,” and “Tatars” which are used interchangeably, if not offensive to the modern reader, can be considered “politically incorrect.”

I tell my students that history should avoid antiquarianism as well as presentism. We must not worship works because of antiquity nor should we judge the writings of the past according to present day values. Certainly, describing “Turks” as having “…a lust for cruelty and mere destruction…” and “…they have brought with them nothing constructive only death” is a blanket statement.

Moreover, the Seljuk Turks, the group whose capture of Jerusalem was the reason for the outbreak of the Crusades, were “the latest of the Mongol hordes” who had “least benefited by intermixture with more civilized people.” But “…they were still dwarfish slant-eyed Tatars.”

Ethnographers nowadays routinely differentiate the Turkic peoples from Mongols, as the first are mostly Caucasian and the second Mongoloid. Tatars are a later term for Turks. The three groups had naturally intermarried during the millennium. Also the author mentions the excesses of crusaders, but without the epithets that he employs above as he does not want to detract from his major thematic concern about the key role of Catholicism/Christianity in western civilization.

Overall, we should withhold censure for a book written in the context of its time but rather respect the foresight that the author demonstrated in his understanding of the role that spiritual values can play in the vitality and survival of a civilization.

Norman Rothman