

Religious violence, generational blame, and other reader feedback

Letters & Comments in the [March 2026](#) issue

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Religious violence

I was quite taken aback by Anna Piela and Michael Woolf's article ("[The making of Islamophobia](#)"). I want to address some of its omissions and biases regarding European history.

The First Crusade did not happen in a vacuum, nor was it a culmination of an irrational Islamophobia. It was a response to the destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 1009 and hundreds of other churches, along with the forceful conversion of thousands of Christians and Jews by Caliph al-Hakim into the 1020s. Two hundred years earlier Caliph Harun al-Rashid had ordered the destruction of all churches built after the conquest of Syria and Egypt around 809. Later, in 1154, all Christians and Jews in Tunis were slaughtered without mercy. By the time the Crusaders arrived, Christians and Jews had been reduced to second-class citizens, forced to pay an extortionate protection tax, and forbidden to hold high office. If anything, the Crusades were a Christian mimicry of the Islamic jihad that was unleashed on the Christian world by Caliph Umar.

The Ottoman Empire did not threaten Europe with ideas alone. Until the 1720s regular slave raids emptied the lands of southern Ukraine (then Poland-Lithuania) and today's Romania, and at least 3 million slaves were captured and forcibly converted. For centuries all Turkish sultans were born of women who had been kidnapped and raped. In the same way, until the mid-1600s, most Iranian shahs were born of kidnapped Armenian and Georgian women. Algiers was a major slave center where European (mostly Christian) slaves were sold until 1848.

In other words, until the 18th century in Europe, Islam was not just an imaginary threat of peaceful, tolerant Muslims fueled by some irrational phobia held by backward Christian Europeans—it was a real, existential threat to Christians living on every border with Muslim countries. Irrational hatred of Muslim is a sin that needs to be deplored and called out. But distorting historical facts or glossing over uncomfortable truths so we can be good allies is not the way to do it.

—Kazimierz Bem
Marlborough, MA

Piela and Woolf reply:

“Wrest that land from the wicked race, and subject it to yourselves,” said Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont in 1095. “That land . . . was given by God into the possession of the children of Israel.” Urban was clear that the Crusades were a sacralized project of conquest.

Bringing up Christian suffering caused by Muslims misses the point of the article entirely. We did not aim to explain why certain historical events happened. Rather, we meant to show how Christian violence against Muslims has been narrated in the West: despite evidence such as the above quote, Christians have usually been

cast as righteous defenders and Muslims as barbaric aggressors.

Intellectual honesty requires that we examine the assumption that Christian violence is always morally defensible or that Muslim violence is inherent in Islam. These tropes were used to justify Crusades in the Middle Ages and the later colonial conquests. Today they are used to justify Western incursions that wreak death and destruction in Muslim-majority lands.

We implore Kazimierz Bem not to justify the Crusades by invoking Christian suffering. This kind of thinking fuels Islamophobic discrimination and hate crimes today.

Generational blame

Since I do not know Daniel Pioske beyond what was included about him in this article, it would be unfair of me to criticize his experience (“[Luther Seminary’s death mask](#)”). I wish he had offered the same deference to his previous generations of pastors and church leaders when he wrote, “If we ask what [they have] handed down to us of what was safeguarded for them, the answer appears to be incapacitated institutions, their communities worn thin.” And in addition, this: “My generation has been cast as stewards of decline, our energies and resources used to stay the senescence that has taken hold of the body.”

I would suggest that the generation previous to his—mine—also oversaw what is perhaps the most consequential shift in church life in the shortest period of time ever recorded. Most of us who served in congregational settings were dealing with ever-shifting expectations regarding worship, pastoral care, and parish management, all while facing external challenges such as three distinct global financial crises, two forever wars, a pandemic, and myriad natural disasters, some in our own communities. It was not for negligence nor failing to see what was happening; most of us simply didn’t possess the bandwidth to address all that needed to be addressed.

—Jack Mithelman
Urbandale, IA

When a child preaches

Melissa Florer-Bixler’s January column (“[A preacher at play](#)”) is a must-read for anyone who recoils when they hear the word *sermon*. Her approach—facing her ingrained fears about sharing her pulpit with a child, carefully preparing the child in advance and trusting the innate power of their candor and perspective on the story of Job—is indeed revolutionary. At a time when an exodus from stodgy organized religion and perhaps from faith in general is both palpable and ominous, Florer-Bixler suggests a new paradigm: engage the young. In doing so, she dares to find choice wine to fill ragged wineskins; she proves that in the right hands (here the hands of the smallest ones) the Bible can still be a rich and vital instrument. One that not only speaks to our troubled times but may even be capable of remaking it. And wouldn’t that be good news when most needed?

—R. Jay Allain
Orleans, MA

The rise of sports gambling

Like Peter Marty, I am troubled by the growth of sports betting (“[Playing to lose](#)”). He wonders if “the proposition bet bonanza will eventually permeate every sector of society.” Although his example of a symphony concert may sound ridiculous, it’s not inconceivable. My son has been a high school choir director and tells me that people gamble on the results of show choir contests. The permeation is already happening.

While the destructive effects of gambling on the addicted gambler are certainly a concern, I am also deeply concerned about what it does to the integrity of any activity being gambled on. Marty rightly cites the Black Sox scandal and the case of Pete Rose. With the level of involvement in gambling enterprises found in the sporting industry nowadays, what will stop coaches, players, officials, and others from being paid to affect the outcome to benefit the gambling industry?

—Dale A. Schoening
Madrid, IA

Thank you to Peter Marty for writing this column. I am a recovering alcoholic and have some understanding of the addictive personality. I have been extremely troubled by the rise of sports betting and all the gambling companies’ sponsorships of sports programming. It serves to make betting a mainstream and totally acceptable, even desirable, thing to do.

I worry that we will soon see many more people like the poor soul Marty writes about.

—Patricia Turnbull
Tucson, AZ

Talking about suicide loss

Soul Shop is a great program (“[Training faith leaders to work against suicide](#)”). We lost one of our young adult sons to suicide 17 years ago when I was in seminary. It has been a great privilege to help present Soul Shop workshops in various churches; most church people, like most people in general, are terribly uncomfortable with the topic of suicide loss and find it helpful to learn about it in a congregational setting.

—Mary Robin Craig
Cleveland Heights, OH

Speaking love truthfully

Brandon Ambrosino has written a superb and beautiful column (“[The smoke screen of ‘speaking the truth in love’](#)”). It oozes kindness and generosity—or, as Ambrosino puts it, it speaks love truthfully! I already love Ambrosino, and I have never heard of him before today. He is clearly a gift to the church.

—Cheryl Palmer
Toronto, Canada