

Crusades revisited: 'Kingdom of Heaven'

by [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [June 14, 2005](#) issue

Thousands of medieval Christians answer the spiritual call of the pope, take up arms, and travel to the Holy Land to defend the faith against a barbaric and militaristic Muslim foe. The war is bloody, and over time Jerusalem is won, then lost again—but the spread of Islam into Christendom is halted.

We all know the story of the Crusades. Or do we?

Ridley Scott's film *Kingdom of Heaven* reverses centuries of popular portrayals of the Crusades. It shows the great Muslim military leader Saladin as articulate and circumspect. Its Christian hero is ruled by a secular conscience rather than by religious convictions. Christians are (at times) duplicitous and faithless, and Muslims are (at times) noble and godly.

Set amid the events surrounding the Muslim siege of Jerusalem in the 1180s, the film (with screenplay by novelist William Monahan) focuses on the story of Balian (Orlando Bloom), a humble blacksmith and illegitimate son of a Christian knight named Godfrey (Liam Neeson). Unlike the Templars and their leader (Brendan Gleeson), who are depicted as seeking confrontation with the Muslims at every turn, Godfrey envisions establishing a "kingdom of heaven" in the Holy Land—a place where peace will reign between Christians and Muslims.

Balian is knighted and eventually finds himself chief defender of Jerusalem, pitted against Saladin (played by Syrian actor Ghasson Massoud). The picture's last third is devoted to the gripping and bloody siege of the city, replete with the proverbial armies of thousands, fiery night scenes, intricate strategies and the director's patented cinematography. (Nothing in Scott's Oscar-winning *Gladiator* matches these epic battle scenes.)

A movie that revisits the most historically significant invasion of Islamic territory by Western military forces and that appears during a time of crisis between the West

and Islam cannot but be controversial. The filmmakers reportedly received death threats from Islamic extremists while the movie was being shot in Morocco. Cambridge University scholar Jonathan Riley-Smith has allegedly criticized the film's script as "Osama bin Laden's version of history." The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) has called the film "a balanced and positive depiction of Islamic culture during the Crusades," but UCLA law professor Khaled Abou El Fadl has asserted, "There is no doubt in my mind people are going to come out of this movie disliking Muslims and Arabs more than they already dislike them." The conflicting reactions may be testimony to the film's evenhandedness.

Western scholars have become increasingly sensitive to the fact that there is a Muslim side to the story—a side that contradicts the depictions handed down by much of Christian history. At the outset of the Crusades, Muslims were not waging war against Christianity. Syrian Muslims, among the first to be attacked, thought they were being subjected to yet another incursion by Byzantines. Upon realizing that their foes came from Western Europe rather than Byzantium, the Muslims referred to their attackers as "Franks," not "crusaders" or "Christians."

Muslims were not uncultured barbarians. Medieval Islam supported some of the greatest libraries of the day—preserving writings of Aristotle which had long been banned, even destroyed, in Christendom. Muslim minds were producing sublime works of architecture and making philosophical, mathematical and astronomical discoveries which, by some measures, outpaced those of medieval Europe. The crusading Christians, while at times motivated by deep religious conviction, were often opportunistic. They were commonly illiterate. They at times committed incredible acts of cruelty. But then again, so did their Muslim foes.

Given these facts, it's hard to imagine any filmmaker producing a movie about the Crusades that would please everyone—especially when the conflict between Islam and Christianity is fraught with contemporary meaning and emotion. Nor would such an unambiguous film be desirable. The history of the Crusades, like all history (and perhaps more so than most of it), is complex, messy and conflicted. At times Scott's film presents aspects of the conflict in inexcusably simplistic fashion (all priests are cowards and fools, all Templars are warmongers), but its cumulative effect is anything but simple-minded. In portraying events as full of ambiguity, it leaves audiences with the right questions about the uneasy but seemingly inescapable relationship between war and religion.