



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

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An in-depth portrait of the Crusades-era Mediterranean world, and a new understanding of the forces that shaped it.

In *Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors*, the award-winning scholar Brian Catlos puts us on the ground in the Mediterranean world of 1050–1200. We experience the sights and sounds of the region just as enlightened Islamic empires and primitive Christendom began to contest it. We learn about the siege tactics, theological disputes, and poetry of this enthralling time. And we see that people of different faiths coexisted far more frequently than we are commonly told.

Catlos's meticulous reconstruction of the era allows him to stunningly overturn our most basic assumption about it: that it was defined by religious extremism. He brings to light many figures who were accepted as rulers by their ostensible foes. Samuel B. Naghrilla, a self-proclaimed Jewish messiah, became the force behind Muslim Granada. Bahram Pahlavuni, an Armenian Christian, wielded power in an Islamic caliphate. And Philip of Mahdia, a Muslim eunuch, rose to admiral in the service of Roger II, the Christian “King of Africa.”

What their lives reveal is that, then as now, politics were driven by a mix of self-interest, personality, and ideology. Catlos draws a similar lesson from his stirring chapters on the early Crusades, arguing that the notions of crusade and jihad were not causes of war but justifications. He imparts a crucial insight: the violence of the past cannot be blamed primarily on religion.

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

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From Reader Review Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors: Faith, Power, and Violence in the Age of Crusade and Jihad for online ebook

Pat says

A worthwhile read if you wish to understand the period of history which includes the Crusades in the Mediterranean area and gain an understanding of the forces that made these events so much more complex than a simple clash of religions, but incredibly thick with detail and not always engrossing for the casual reader of history. If you are just interested in the bottom line, go to your local library and read the last two chapters!

Mohamad Ballan says

This book is a good, balanced introduction to the Mediterranean world between the 11th and 13th centuries. Prof. Catlos emphasizes the mixed motivations of the various actors, underscoring the importance of realpolitik and pragmatism over the dictates of ideology or theology in influencing the actions of political actors. This is not to say that he ignores the significance of religion and ideology during this period; quite the contrary. He demonstrates that many of the conflicts labeled as religious in nature were often driven largely much by more mundane factors, such as economics, social dynamics, or politics (itself inextricably linked with religion during this period). In underscoring the fluidity of frontiers and identities, Dr. Catlos allows the reader to appreciate the complexity of this period and to understand that the many political actors cannot be reduced to the simple category of "Catholic," "Orthodox," "Christian," "Muslim," "Sunni," "Shi'i," "Crusader," or "mujahid." There was far more at play.

The strongest chapters are 1-6 dealing with Iberia, Sicily and North Africa. This section was enlightening in several ways, especially since it undercuts many of the narratives ("Reconquista" or "Convivencia") that continue to dominate popular (and some academic) understandings of this period of Iberian history. The section on the Fatimids--while very compelling and providing important insights--contained some erroneous statements and mistakes that could have been avoided (eg. the (minor) Occultation of the Twelfth Imam began in 874, not 824; Ibn Khaldun died in 1406, not 1382; and Iran during this period was largely Sunni (Hanafi and Shafi'i), not Shi'i-oriented, although these labels are problematic for the earliest centuries of Islam anyways). The reader could have also been better-served by the inclusion of conventional footnotes/endnotes (although there are references for the main quotations in the back of the book, as well as a useful bibliographical section). However, overall, these are minor flaws in an important, compelling work.

One of the more delightful aspects of the book was the focus on key individuals--Ismail b. Naghrilla, Alfonso VI, Yusuf b. Tashufin, Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar ("El Cid"), Roger II of Sicily, Philip of Mahdia, Bahram Pahlavuni, Alexios Komnenos, Salahuddin/Saladin etc.--who both helped shape the Mediterranean world of the 11th-13th centuries and were themselves products of it. Readers may find the figures of Ismail b. Naghrilla and Bahram Pahlavuni, both non-Muslims operating in Islamic polities, to be of particular interest since they represent both the possibilities and limitations faced by religious minorities in the Mediterranean world. At a time when the Andalusian Muslims of Iberia continue to be referred to (very problematically and inaccurately) as "Moors," Dr. Catlos should be highly commended for his accurate use of terminology and his recognition of the tenuous nature of identity (not least with regard to the issue of

"ethnicity" or "race") during this period. The author, one of the leading scholars in the field of Mediterranean studies, is clearly very well-acquainted with these complexities and ensures that his readers are also aware of them.

All in all, this book is certainly worth reading. It is very well written, tightly-organized and full of great pieces of information that non-specialists, in particular, will find interesting. Dr. Catlos invites the reader to consider important questions such as the interrelationship between politics and religion, the role of ideology (vs. economic/socio-political factors) in conflict, and the relationship between the three Abrahamic faiths, which remain as important today as they were during the Middle Ages.

3.5/5

David Andrews says

Infidel Kings is an enlightening look at the reality on the ground, as it were, of the medieval Mediterranean. Far from being a clear cut battle of religions between Islam and Christianity, things were often complicated, with Jews, Christians, and Muslims all holding high ranking positions within kingdoms of all denominations.

Where I think Infidel Kings falls a little short is the story telling style of the book. It opens with the climax of a story in a sort of flash-forward sequence, then settles into telling the story from the beginning of each interesting, genre-defying character. However, all this does is provide a great summary of interesting characters up front, followed by a lot of detail that is repetitive and uninteresting.

Overall, though, I think it's probably the best book I've read about the medieval Med, simply because it highlights that for a long period of time before the Crusades, and even sometimes during the height of them, pragmatism and politics often outweighed religious zeal and fervor.

Caro says

I must confess that I read only the first two sections, on al-Andalus, before I had to return this. Catlos' take on politics and culture on the Iberian peninsula in the 11th century and onward is that life was not a clash of civilizations or religions, despite the Crusades. Rather, Muslims, Jews and Christians did live together with a certain amount of tolerance, based on social and economic pragmatism more than on religion. A Jew could be the chief administrator of a Muslim kingdom, or a warrior like El Cid could fight for Christians or Muslims, depending on the lay of the land. Fascinating but a bit overwhelming if you are new to all of this, since the very similar names (to those ignorant of Arabic) can seem the same if you're not paying attention. Moving on from here to his newest book.

Robert Enzenauer says

Excellent history. This author has written such readable history that one Amazon reviewer described it as excellent "historical fiction." And the solitary criticism by another Amazon reviewer that suggests this author has a "pro-Islam agenda" made me ponder if we read the same book. The names are indeed "hard to follow", but I didn't find them any harder to follow than some books I have read about Russian history. And I can't

imagine a way a different historian could have kept the persons identified in a better way. This author has debunked the alleged "clash of civilizations" etiology to this religious conflict, and suggests a more Machiavellian construct of power and money, whether describing Jews, Christians, or Islamists. I will certainly go back and read some of this author's other history of this area.

Richard says

An absorbing and fast-paced book, which is quite something for a book that goes into detail about the complex relationships among Muslims, Christian and Jews from about the mid-11th century until the end of the 12th century. It is surprisingly easy to absorb all of the information provided in the book about the myriad of kingdoms, leaders and shifting alliances.

Shane says

A couple of years ago I was in a class called Europe in the Middle Ages I, listening to the discussion taking place between my peers and the professor on the Abbasid Caliphate and the "Islamic Golden Age". The subject had drifted in to Islamic history in general and all my peers and I agreed that this topic of Islamic history was often neglected in the popular discourses on history. This prompted one of my peers to ask, "Are there any good popular history books on Islamic history and society?" Had I been reading Brian Catlos's *Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors*, I would have promptly handed it to him. Brian Catlos is a well-known and respected historian on the Medieval Mediterranean, who has written several books on religious interaction in Medieval Spain and has been featured in the documentary *Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain*. On top of this he is also a travel writer, with a couple of published works on traveling in various regions of Spain. Published in 2014 *Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors: Faith, Power, and Violence in the Age of Crusade and Jihad*, is his latest book and combines these two passions of his. Strong scholarly research and narrative meddles with poetic descriptions and flowing writing, making this book a gem of popular history.

Catlos divides the book into five parts each focusing on a different Mediterranean region along the religious frontier. Kingdoms and principalities in Iberia, Sicily, Egypt, and Palestine are looked at in various chapters in each of these parts. Catlos tries to use the life of a historical figure, such as the Cid in Valencia or Roger II in Norman Sicily to illustrate the dynamic relationship between religion, ethnicity, and power in these regions. At the end of this he has two short tidbits. The first, deals with the dynastic and commercial rivalries that led to the infamous Fourth Crusade and the sacking of Constantinople. It does not really add anything to the book other than give a shockingly brief account of events leading up to the sack of Constantinople. In fact, it feels more like a slap in the face to the most powerful and cosmopolitan empires in Medieval history, who constantly crop up in his chapters, but never really getting into any detail. The second, is an epilogue summarizing his argument that religion was not the only factor that went into holy war and indeed, it was really a minor one. Politics, ethnicity, and class all played a major role in this age of holy war as religion itself did.

This structure is generally a hit or a miss. I feel a lot of this has a lot deal with Catlos's own research interests. His parts dealing with the Iberian Peninsula, his biographies of these characters and their times shine and give rich personality to the historical circumstances of their societies. These parts were the best parts of his book and you could tell he was very passionate about that topic. Once beyond this, however, the other chapters do not have the same zest. His discussion of the religiously ambiguous and multi-ethnic characters of Norman Kingdom of Sicily were lovely, but felt somewhat brief. The parts concerning Fatimid

Egypt and Crusader Levant were muddled. His historical characters would appear and then disappear in the historical narrative while he attempted to set the historical scene. Part of this I believe comes from the lack of source material on the Fatimid Caliphate, another part comes from the fact these two regions are so close to each other and shared close diplomatic ties that it would have been more effective to write them together. Another issue I had was for the most part each of these regions (with the exception perhaps of Iberia) were portrayed as being insulated within themselves. influences from their neighbors be it the Byzantines, the Papacy, or the Seljuks were only mentioned in passing.

That said all these chapters contain great, easily accessible information on the medieval Mediterranean world. On top of this Catlos gives a brief literature review for each part of the book and gives an impressive bibliography. Both are fantastic for those who wish to go into deeper research on anything Catlos talks about. As a book that introduces the Mediterranean in the Early to Middle Medieval era and is so packed with information, Infidel Kings is perfect for those that are new to the subject and those that are seeking an entertaining refresher will perhaps find something new. As a popular history book one can hope that it helps change the widespread perception that Medieval societies were homogenous in color, religion, and ethnicity, to a more factual view of them being diverse societies.

leo says

catlos walks the line pretty well between "happy smily convivencia" and "everyone was relentlessly beating on each other" although he focuses a little too much on individual nobles for my taste (so i am rounding up to 4)

MpaulM says

A great starter book for those interested in the era preceding the crusades and the early crusades themselves. Makes me want to read more on the individuals written about.

Siria says

A decent introduction to the history of the Mediterranean which manages to be informed by the most recent scholarship while still accessible to the interested lay reader, though the prose rarely rises beyond the serviceable. Catlos' thematic approach helps give a sense of the interconnected nature of the medieval world—of ethnic diversity, pragmatism, violence, and cultural innovation—particularly in the chapters on Iberia, which I believe is the author's area of speciality. He emphasises that faith was only one of the factors which drove the Crusades, and perhaps not even one of the primary ones. I could see this being useful as a textbook in an upper-level undergrad seminar on the topic (it's perhaps too dense and dry for lower level general courses.)

Catlos does attempt to incorporate women into the narrative, which I appreciated. Sitt al-Qusur, a twelfth-century Egyptian princess who helped to thwart a palace coup and avenge her brother's murder, was a particularly fascinating individual. However, there were some ways in which Catlos framed women's actions that made me wince, and a couple of spots in which he was flat out wrong, most notably when it comes to assessing the nature of medieval women's power and authority. He writes that "[i]n northern Italy and

southern France, women could inherit noble titles and even rule as countesses and duchesses—the most famous example being Duchess Eleanor of Aquitaine, Crusader and queen consort of France and England" (274) which can surely only result from a lack of familiarity with the past thirty or forty years of work on women's history. The countess Blanche of Champagne would surely beg to differ—as would sisters Jeanne and Marguerite of Flanders, both of whom ruled as countesses, both of whom were known as "of Constantinople" because of their father's brief rule as Latin emperor of that city, and neither of whom are mentioned in this book.

Chris says

I thought I wanted a book on the Crusades, but it turns out what I actually wanted was Catlos' story of how we got the Crusades. His first four chapters, before they kick off, all hold more than enough intrigue for an epic poem or a series of historical romances. In particular, I want an entertainment set in Fatimid Egypt. (Exiles! Betrayals! Multi-generational messianic revenge cults!) The First and Third Crusades are more a capstone, even an epilogue, than the main end of the story.

Throughout, Catlos judiciously illustrates the varieties of war and conflict in these settings, and how religious belief and rhetoric mostly *didn't* decisively influence political and social change. There's a whiff of economic determinism here: On the Crusades, for instance, Catlos argues they were first of all a series of Italian trade wars, which would have happened under some convenient justification or other regardless. He's no doubt right that the Fatimids and Seljuks saw Jerusalem as a backwater on those grounds, but I would have appreciated a bit more respect for why it mattered so much to those crusaders who expended blood and treasure to take it.

As religious history, the book is ... not bad, actually! When it narrates matters where I have specialist knowledge, like the schisms between Latins, Greeks, and Copts, it's actually very good at conveying what the reader needs to know without belaboring inessential points. So I'm inclined to trust its reading of the sociopolitical scene as well. And on that story, it is a very good read, on material I mostly found unfamiliar, and left me wanting more. Sadly, Catlos' notes suggest there isn't a good, recent, general history of Fatimid Egypt; but Ch. 1 reminds me that I've never read *El Cid*, and now it's on the list.

James (JD) Dittes says

Catlos brings light to very dark ages of history in this novel, and through them he offers some fascinating insights that apply to our times.

Catlos uses a very basic structure for each of his sections: he begins with the overthrow of a Christian, Jewish, or Muslim official in a kingdom in which they were not of the same faith as the ruler, then he carefully walks back and shows how the sifting political sands led first to this person's empowerment, then to their comeuppance. What we see throughout is multi-religious, multi-ethnic kingdoms in Spain, Sicily, Egypt and ultimately Palestine, and the way that rulers played groups off against each other rather than resorting to the more modern, barbaric practices of "ethnic cleansing."

A ruler needed someone he could trust to run the treasury, the harem, or the army. And there was such treachery and infighting among the ruling families, that it often made sense to look outside the clique to find

trusted assistants. This is where ambitious Christians, Jews, and Muslims tried to place themselves. If they could prove their loyalty was to the caliph/king alone, they could make themselves rich and serve their own minority communities.

One thing that Catlos points out again and again is exactly how divided the religions were. There are Latin Christians (what we would see today as Roman Catholics), but they weren't natural allies of Armenians, Copts, or Byzantines, even though all groups professed faith in Jesus Christ, they were quickly turned into enemies. The Muslims, divided between Shia, Sunni, Khajarite and Nasiri (Assassins) were also easily turned against each other. It was the search for balance that led these kingdoms to elevate religious minorities and put them in key positions.

There are many applications to today's Middle East where foreign intervention and misplaced democracy have replaced the careful balance of political interests that were so evolved in the 11th & 12th centuries. The nation of Israel could easily empower Palestinian Christians and Muslims to reach long-term stability, but it relies instead on oppression. Iraq's despot was overthrown, but Nuri al-Maliki's ill-conceived Sufi-first governance sent Sunnis welcoming ISIS with open arms and the Kurds and Yazidis using the group as a catalyst for further autonomy.

Catlos saves the story of the 1st-3rd crusades for the end, and what a history it is. The Franks of the First Crusade quickly turn to alliances with local Sunni and Seljuk lords to bring stability, but it is boneheaded politics viz a viz Nur-al-Din and outright stupidity by Reynaud Chatillon that open the way for Sal-al-Din's reconquest of the Holy Land (Saladdin also exploited similar religious missteps in Egypt prior to that.)

A fascinating, relevant book.

Charlie says

One criterion I use in evaluating a book is how much new information I learned. Another is whether the information is significant, shedding light on my other interests. A third is, at the end of the day, did I enjoy reading it? On all three counts, Catlos' work is a resounding success.

This book explores various sites of inter-religious interaction in the Middle Ages, mostly the 10th to 12th centuries. Though it does not offer a systematic treatment of its topic, it performs the equally important service of depicting vividly individuals who exemplified common types of interaction. I think this kind of emblematic storytelling is exactly what most Westerners need. My head is already filled with certain medieval tropes: the friar, the (English or French) king, the pope, the peasant, etc. This filled in for me the crusader, the wazir, the caliph, the Muslim intellectual, etc. I was fascinated by the descriptions of the shining cities of the Arab world—Cordoba, Cairo, Valencia, and others. My ability to imagine this period and its inhabitants was greatly enhanced.

The moral of the story, which Catlos isn't at all shy about repeating, is that once one comes to a detailed understanding of this period of history, the idea of a Christian vs. Muslim clash of civilizations disperses like the foggy thinking it is. We find instead a host of clans, tribes, families, ethnic blocs, and other groups all jammed together, pursuing their own interests as much as possible without ruining life for everyone. Or, occasionally, with ruining life for everyone. Muslim rulers sometimes surrounded themselves with Jewish and Christian subordinates because they would be less likely to pull off a coup. Eastern Christians and Muslims often allied against Orthodox Byzantium. Latin Christian mercenaries could be found in the service

of Arab armies. Thus, Catlos is able to deliver a compelling account of religion's role in the violence of the period. With a few exceptions, it was usually less of a factor than old-fashioned greed, revenge, or the will to power.

Dan says

Really enjoyable book about the incredibly complicated, brutal world of the Mediterranean region during the Crusades era. The time is often generalized as a conflict between religions and nothing more, but the truth is a bit different. Muslim governors had Jewish viziers, Christian knights surrounded themselves with a Muslim court, Armenian mercenaries had huge power in Fatimid Egypt, and so on. It jumps around a bit but the areas it focuses on are Muslim Spain, Norman Sicily, North Africa, and Jerusalem among others. I wasn't really that familiar with this era of history and this book was a great overview that focused on the interactions between the huge patchwork of religions and ethnic groups in an area that was one of the most diverse in world history. Recommend!

Samantha says

Took some time building up, but actually quite interesting. The basic thesis that Christians and Muslims (and to a lesser extent, Jews) were less motivated by existential hatred of one another and more so by more mundane power considerations isn't new or surprising, the depiction of the intersections and commonalities of religious-majority kingdoms alternatively tolerating (however self-interestedly) and scapegoating their minority populations is well depicted. The Middle Ages, however violent and frankly nasty they were, were not so two-dimensional in nature as so often portrayed.
