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*War between Islam and the West Then and Now  
Frederick II's Saracens and Today's War in Iraq*

Hannah Popish

I've been intrigued by examining what it takes to make someone propose and enlist in a war. Often individuals seem to use ethics, morality, or religion to bond together and assert their own perspective in a world perceived as devoid of ethics, morality, or the right religion. Looking to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II and his approach to ruling and warring with a religiously different minority and comparing this example with that of the ongoing contentious relationships between Islam and the West as played out by the war in Iraq, provides firm starting grounds for exploring the issues of war, just war, and the ways in which they are influenced by religion and politics. In each example, a key facet includes the necessity of otherizing in order to rationalize fighting. Citing Ibn Khaldun's analysis of war, Christopher Coker notes that social cohesion, often against an outlier, is a requirement for going to war.<sup>1</sup> This cohesion could easily be based on tribal groupings, politics or religious beliefs.

Granted, we see key changes in that Frederick was fighting on behalf of a religious community of believers versus today's fight centered around a geographical polity and its ideologies. Yet, some might argue that the pride in the United States manifested in its political motivation to go to war to preserve the West's model of democracy and freedom in the rest of the world could be perceived as religious. After all, President Bush was quoted as framing the war on terrorism as a crusade.<sup>2</sup>

The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, ruling in the first half of the thirteenth century, is an interesting example of an emperor in his role as an agent of the papacy carrying out a specific agenda. The model of course is that of the transference of worldly, divinely given power from the pope to the emperor. However, Frederick could not do what was expected of him by

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<sup>1</sup> Coker, Christopher. Waging War Without Warriors? The Changing Culture of Military Conflict. Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, London. 2002. Pg. 148.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040920/carroll>

the Pope especially in regard to his interactions with the Saracens, and was thus eventually excommunicated from the Catholic Church. He was criticized for not treating Saracens in his midst harshly enough and not protecting and defending the Church with serious enough measures. "When Frederick created the Saracen colony at Lucera in 1224, Islam moved from the periphery of Christendom to its center."<sup>3</sup> He gave them rights that past emperors had not extended including self-government and a certain degree of religious freedom. Lucera presented a dilemma for Frederick because the Saracens provided needed skills for the Italian economy and thus it was not as simple to ostracize them as Gregory IX might have thought. Frederick was a unique emperor in that he was diplomatic and showed a differing degree of tolerance, certainly more so than the Pope and more so than other Emperors of his time. Yet the chain of command proved difficult for Frederick.

"As the ruler of a population of infidels, Frederick had a canonical obligation to guard the church, the clergy, and the Christian community from them, both physically and spiritually. Frederick also had an obligation to assist in their conversion to Christianity, although he could not actually compel them to accept baptism. However canon law and contemporary canonistic opinion were hardening on this issue, and at least one canonist recommended a strategy that differed little from forced conversion. Moreover, some contemporary canonists had begun to number conversion of the infidels among the purposes of the crusade."<sup>4</sup>

Although he may have appeared more tolerant than other Emperors, he was still not an ideal leader for the Saracens. Van Cleve's text The Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen addresses the fact that Frederick propagated numerous raids and expeditions to continuously regulate the presence of Saracens in

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<sup>3</sup> Tolan, John Victor. Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam. Routledge: New York and London. 1996. Pg. 176.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 178.

the midst of Christians.<sup>5</sup> In addition, when Frederick II was inaugurated in 1215 and there were rumblings of an agenda for taking the cross in the fifth crusade to recapture the Holy Land from the Muslims “Frederick was first to sign himself with the holy emblem.”<sup>6</sup> When it appeared that the fifth crusade was becoming a failure, Frederick also encouraged the Pope to excommunicate the Germans who did not fulfill their vows to take up the cross in the crusading movement.<sup>7</sup> And yet, Frederick initially postponed and failed to take up a crusade in person further angering an already discontent Gregory IX. Frederick eventually set sail for the Holy Land. However, Van Cleve suggests that he did so with insufficient military accompaniment.

Frederick II, while perhaps not as forceful in his approach as other contemporaries, paints a clearer picture of the true challenges posed by his times. He was required to consider the wishes of the church hierarchy, the wishes of the majority of the Italian population with whom he shared religious values, and to determine how to successfully mediate encounters with what were deemed “others.” Here I think moving to the example of the Crusades again and attempting to draw parallels with other bases for war today is instructive. Historically, one might note that “warfare for the principle of governing inferiors – Hellenes over barbarians, as Isocrates (for example) constantly called for – had a moral justification.”<sup>8</sup> In general terms, war was and is almost always a reaction to the infringement of outsiders and their ideologies. As Augustine argued, “the purpose of just war was to preserve a status quo which, though certainly not entirely just, was still more just than any imaginable alternative.”<sup>9</sup>

Thus, we enter into the domain of the “just war” theory. Though the concept has recently received more attention in the

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<sup>5</sup> Van Cleve, Thomas Curtis. The Emperor Frederick II Of Hohenstaufen: *Immutator Mundi*. Oxford University Press: London. 1972. Pgs. 152-153.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 96.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 113.

<sup>8</sup> Tuck, Richard. The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and the International Order From Grotius to Kant. Oxford University Press: Oxford. 1999. Pg. 53.

<sup>9</sup> Munkler, Herfried. The New Wars. Polity Press: Cambridge. 2005. Pg. 63.

aftermath of the Vietnam War, it has its roots in Thomas Aquinas and Augustine. “Thomas Aquinas laid down three criteria for a just war: sovereign authority (*auctoritas principis*), just cause (*causa iusta* – usually punishment of a wrong) and lawful intent (*intentio recta* – that is, war for the sake of peace and without the perpetration of atrocities).<sup>10</sup> Augustine’s perspective was similar to that of Aquinas “except that for him the place of the Roman Empire was taken by the political world of all Christendom and he also added elements of military-humanitarian ethic of intervention.”<sup>11</sup>

Today again we find a country whose citizens are primarily Christians, the United States, warring with a population that has a majority who would call themselves Muslims, Iraq. The reasoning is undeniably different, though perhaps not as divergent as we think from the thinking of four hundred years ago at the time of the fifth crusade. As Herfried Munkler notes, “the theory of just war is intended to empower and bond a superior (or in its own eyes superior) civilization against a ‘savage’ or ‘barbarian’ Other.”<sup>12</sup> Though the United States citizens were originally told that the US was fighting to find alleged weapons of mass destruction, now we are also told that we waged war to overthrow a regime and reinstitute a form of civilized government.

Perhaps the issue lies in the fact that in each case, whether it is the Crusades or bringing freedom and democracy to the Iraqi people, there is an inherent underlying patronization. The dominant group, initiating the conflict in each example, has deemed their ideology as one that needs to be protected and disseminated *ad nauseum*. As Walzer notes in his essay “After 9/11” today Islam and the West are in conflict because there exists an Islamic sentiment that Muslims still do not have control and influence in their own lands and instead it is that of the West that pervades.

Today the matter has become much more complicated because politicians, philosophers, and religious leaders are all

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 62.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 63.

<sup>12</sup> Munkler, Herfried. The New Wars. Polity Press: Cambridge. 2005. Pg. 63.

weighing in on the morality of war as opposed to the theocratic hierarchical rule of the sixteenth century determining the plan of action. What was originally a conflict between religious differences has now seeped into the arena of politics. Yet, I would argue that the malleable encasement of politics does not successfully hide its religious undertones. Though rigid structures such as the Catholic Church and super-powers such as the United States may always be criticized for varying levels of hypocrisy, the issue of war and especially just war highlight that hypocrisy. With new theories on just war, many scholars have given lip service to issues of human rights. Some have argued that, “human rights policy becomes a kind of civil religion of the West, especially the United States.”<sup>13</sup> While each age views itself as more civilized than those that came before, perhaps we would do well to remember that the Crusades and our current wars are no so dissimilar.

“*Just* is a term of art here; it means justifiable, defensible, even morally necessary given the alternatives) – and that is all it means. All of us who argue about the rights and wrongs of war agree that justice in the strong sense, the sense that it has in domestic society and everyday life, is lost as soon as the fighting begins.”<sup>14</sup>

Returning to the idea that we are now mired in the challenge of conflicting ethics, religious leanings, and political agendas, we must begin looking for more solid common ground. How can we continue to grapple with the oft quoted saying “one man’s suicide bomber is another man’s freedom fighter”? War is conceptually older than many phenomena and we would do well, I think, to continue to look to history to learn from its patterns.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 126.

<sup>14</sup> Walzer, Michael. Arguing About War. Yale University Press: New Haven & London. 2004. Pg. x.

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